Since the release in 1968 of the double album *The Beatles* (immediately and persistently referred to as the *White Album*), fans and critics have tended to regard it as something of a failure, lacking as it does the cohesion and unity that characterize *Sgt Pepper* and other of the group's albums. Many lament what the album could have been had the Beatles worked a structure into it. Doney believes: 'It could have been a great record ... It was tragic ... but it could have worked had the Beatles been able to blend as a unit ... all these [songs] are fragments. The album was a collection of bits and pieces' (1981: 88–9); Robertson claims: 'It lacks the formal unity of *Sgt Pepper* and *Abbey Road*’ (1990: 91); O’Grady complains that ‘there is little in this collection of songs to suggest either literary or musical unity ... the album fails to demonstrate any particular theme or conceptual reference point’ (1983: 150); Salewicz calls the *White Album* ‘something of a failure. In the main, it consisted of rough sketches of songs that sounded as though they had been conceived for separate solo records’ (1986: 204); and Coleman concludes: ‘The impression of all the songs on the album is that they are fragments which developed into finished songs at the last moment ... the songs are scraps of paper ... sometimes throwaway and disposable’ (1984: 450).

When viewed within conventional aesthetic boundaries, these critiques are wholly justified. But seen through the theoretical lens of postmodernism, it becomes clearer that the *White Album* depends on these ‘failings’ to be an effective postmodern text. The *White Album* uses fragmentation, genre mixing, and other postmodern aesthetic techniques which, instead of spelling out what the album should mean, create a zone where meaning can be opened and where readers can participate in the discussion of what this album – and by extension all pop music – does in contemporary society.

The ideas and theories grouped under the heading of ‘postmodernism’ all have in common a tendency to re-evaluate the modern desires for unity, objectivity, enlightenment and progress, and the associated modernist theories which assume a single, unified direc-
tion towards emancipation, salvation, and the liberation of the human race – what Lyotard calls a *master narrative*: ‘This idea of a possible, probable, or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge, and freedoms would benefit humanity as a whole’ (1992b: 77). The modern ideal, Lyotard explains, is ‘the progressive realization of social and individual emancipation encompassing all humanity’ (Ibid.: 76). But the postmodern complaint is that ‘no single theory or paradigm can encompass the whole of human experience’ (Arnowitz 1994: 41). In place of the monolithic, totalizing instinct of modernism, the paradigm of postmodernism contains ‘a multiplicity of arguments never arriving at agreement’ (Docker 1994: 109); postmodern theories thus organize the world according to plural perspectives, based on multiple narratives which are often contradictory and paradoxical.

For Lyotard, the postmodern ‘abandon[s] a global reconstruction of the space of human habitation’ in favour of a de-centred, contradictory worldview with ‘no ... horizon of universality’ (1992b: 76). Within the world of cultural theory, the shift from modernism to postmodernism involves the privileging of ‘margins versus centres, circularity versus linearity, fragments versus wholes, decentred verses stable selves, subjectivity versus objectivity, the reflexive versus the referential’ (Wilde 1989: 137). Postmodernism questions and re-examines traditional ideas, and then critiques those very doubting conclusions:

Postmodernism cannot be an affirmative culture. It is condemned to subvert traditions, to recast their forms, to decentre and recombine art, politics, and theory in ways that defile their pristine expression ... Its primary activity is to delegitimate the norms and values of the prevailing order by showing that they are the ideology of a particular group, rather than objective ‘truth’. (Arnowitz 1994: 42–3)

As an aesthetic of disturbance which seeks to disrupt the presupposed expectations between reader and text, postmodern art requires us to re-examine our assumptions about art and its role in society. Postmodern art causes this disruption in order to generate discourse between the reader and the text, because when a text does not explicitly spell out its meaning, a place develops for the reader to contribute to the production of meaning. The goal of postmodern art is not to resolve those issues, but to clear a space where that discourse between reader and text can exist; this is precisely what the *White Album* accomplishes for discussions about the nature and place of pop music.