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Introduction

“Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished,” Clov promises himself at the beginning of Beckett’s *Endgame*.¹ Surely, the first thing to be said about postmodernism, at this hour, after three decades of furious business and ringing tills, is that it must be nearly at an end. But in chess, from which Beckett’s play takes its title, the endgame is not the end of the game, but the game of ending that forms part of it and may be looked towards from the beginning. Playing the game may become identical with playing the game out. There are strategies for managing the end of the game, including ways of deferring that ending, which come not after the game but in the thick of it. One is compelled to begin almost any synoptic account of postmodernism with such sunset thoughts, even as, in the very midst of one’s good riddance, one senses that the sweet sorrow of taking leave of postmodernism may be prolonged for some time yet.

For postmodernism has indeed shown an extraordinary capacity to renew itself in the conflagration of its demise. One might almost say that the derivative character of postmodernism, the name of which indicates that it comes after something else – modernism, modernity, or the modern – guarantees it an extended tenure that the naming of itself as an *ex nihilo* beginning might not. You can credibly inaugurate a new beginning only for a short so long, whereas you can carry on succeeding upon something almost indefinitely, catching continuing success from your predecessor’s surcease. Like Shelley’s famous fading coal of inspiration, the weakening of postmodernism itself can be turned into the same kind of regenerative resource as the weakening of modernism itself. Might postmodernism have solved the problem of eternal life? We should remember from Swift’s *Struldbrugs* that eternal life is a monstrosity without the promise of eternal youth.

I will here distinguish four different stages in the development of postmodernism: accumulation; synthesis; autonomy; and dissipation. In the first stage, which extends through the 1970s and the early part of the 1980s, the hypothesis of postmodernism was under development on a number of

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different fronts. Daniel Bell and Jean Baudrillard were offering new accounts of consumer society, Jean-François Lyotard was formulating his views about the waning of metanarratives, Charles Jencks was issuing his powerful manifestos on behalf of architectural postmodernism, and Ihab Hassan was characterizing a new sensibility in postwar writing, all of them, apart from Baudrillard, more or less programmatically employing the rubric “postmodernism.” I will not consume the limited space I have at my disposal here in trying to characterize their ideas and arguments in detail, especially since so many serviceable introductions to their work already exist.²

At this stage, it was a genuine puzzle for anyone trying to get a secure fix on the term “postmodern” to make the different sorts of argument applied to different kinds of object line up. Perhaps the principal problem was how to synchronize the arguments of those who claimed that the societies of the advanced West had undergone fundamental changes in their organization, and who therefore seemed to be characterizing a shift from modernity to postmodernity, with the arguments of those who thought that they discerned a shift in the arts and culture of these societies from a distinctively modernist phase to a distinctively – or indistinctly – postmodernist phase.

From the middle of the 1980s onwards, these separate accounts began to be clustered together – most notably in the superb synopsis and synthesis provided in Fredric Jameson’s landmark essay “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.”³ Gradually, what came to seem important was not so much the aptness of the explanations of particular varieties of postmodernism as the increasingly powerful rhymes that different accounts of the postmodern formed with each other. Indeed, it seemed to be a feature of the postmodern itself that parallelism became more important and interesting than causation. This was also the period of the most vigorous syncretism in thinking of the postmodern. Jameson’s essay opened the way for a number of synthesizing guides and introductions, which were followed in the early 1990s by a wave of anthologies of postmodern writing.⁴

The effect of this was that, by the beginning of the 1990s, the concept of the “postmodern” was ceasing to be used principally in the analysis of particular objects or cultural areas and had become a general horizon or hypothesis. I was an amateur astronomer as a boy and I remember being told that the way to make out the elusive color of a faint star was not to look directly at it, but to look just to its side, since this allowed the image to fall on a part of the retina that is more sensitive to color. I don’t know if this is true of star-observation (it certainly never worked for me), but it seems to have begun to be true for spotters of the postmodern during this second period, when it seemed that, if one wanted to pin down the postmodernist features of some unlikely object of analysis – war, say, or prostitution, or circus – the thing to do was to look

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directly not at your target but at what lay in its periphery. Postmodernism was the practice of critical distraction (literally being “drawn aside”). Postmodernism arose from the amalgamation of these many deflections or diagonal gazes. It evoked a horizontal lattice-work of connections between different postmodernisms, rather than a discontinuous series of “vertical” diagnoses of specific postmodernisms. As kinship patterns among postmodernists became more important than patterns of descent, “analogical” postmodernism took the place of “genealogical” postmodernisms.⁵

But synthesis brought its own problems. Postmodernist theory responded to the sense that important changes had taken place in politics, economics, and social life, changes that could broadly be characterized by the two words *delegitimation* and *dedifferentiation*. Authority and legitimacy were no longer so powerfully concentrated in the centers they had previously occupied; and the differentiations – for example, those between what had been called “centers” and “margins,” but also between classes, regions, and cultural levels (high culture and low culture) – were being eroded or complicated. Centrist or absolutist notions of the state, nourished by the idea of the uniform movement of history towards a single outcome, were beginning to weaken. It was no longer clear who had the authority to speak on behalf of history. The rise of an economy driven from its peripheries by patterns of consumption rather than from its center by the needs of production generated much more volatile and unstable economic conditions. These erosions of authority were accompanied by a breakdown of the hitherto unbridgeable distinctions between centers and peripheries, between classes and countries. Given these changes, it seemed to many reasonable to assume that equivalent changes would take place in the spheres of art and culture.

The problem was that this very assumption drew from a model in which there was enough of a difference between the spheres of politics, economics, and society on the one hand and art and culture on the other for the spark of a specifiable relation to be able to jump between them. During the early twentieth century, relations between the two spheres were thought of as tense, if not downright antagonistic, with many assuming that art and culture needed to be protected from the “culture industry,” and both traditional and Marxist critics agreeing on the need for art to maintain an antagonistic distance from the market and prevailing norms.

Some accounts of postmodernism depended on the argument that not only had the conditions of social and economic organization changed, but so, as an effect of those changes, had the relations between the social and economic and the artistic-cultural. Drawing on the early work of Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson saw that, rather than subsisting in a state of fidgety internal exile, the sphere of culture was in fact undergoing a prodigious expansion in an

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economy driven by sign, style, and spectacle rather than by the production of goods. The plucky attempts of commentators to legislate terminologically between these realms, insisting, as I myself attempted to do in my book *Postmodernist Culture*, on the difference between “postmodernity” on the one hand and “postmodernism” on the other, were in fact mistakenly tidy-minded responses to a more fundamental coalescence, in which politics and economy had become culturized, art and culture sociologized, and postmodernity had itself become postmodernist. It is perhaps for this reason that the 1980s saw such a proliferation of variants in the words used to describe the phenomena under discussion. How one capitalized or hyphenated – “post-modern,” “Post-Modern,” “postmodern,” or “Postmodern” – seemed to many to matter a great deal, along with whether one chose to refer to “postmodernism,” “postmodernity,” or simply “the postmodern.”

During this second, syncretic phase, another subtle shift began to take place in the word “postmodernism.” This word was now a name not only for the way in which new attitudes and practices had evolved in particular areas of society and culture – in architecture, in literature, in patterns of economic or political organization – but also for the characteristic discourse in which such things were discussed. “Postmodernism” named all those writers who gave house-room to the postmodern hypothesis and all the writing they did about it. At this period, it did not seem possible even to discuss the existence of the postmodern without being drawn into its discourse. Genealogies of specific postmodernisms in politics, society, and the arts were followed by genealogies of the discourse of postmodernism, such as Hans Bertens’s *The Idea of the Postmodern* (1995).⁶

By the middle of the 1990s, a third stage had evolved, as the “post” idea had achieved a kind of autonomy from its objects. At this point, the argument about whether there really was such a thing as postmodernism, which had driven earlier discussions of the subject, started to evaporate, since the mere fact that there was discourse at all about the subject was now sufficient proof of the existence of postmodernism – but as idiom rather than actuality. Postmodernism became the name for the activity of writing about postmodernism. John Frow declared roundly in 1997 that the word “postmodernism” “can be taken as nothing more and nothing less than a genre of theoretical writing.”⁷ The postmodern became a kind of data-cloud, a fog of discourse, that showed up on the radar even more conspicuously than what it was supposed to be about. Thus postmodernism had passed from the stage of accumulation into its more autonomous phase. No longer a form of cultural barometer, postmodernism had itself become an entire climate.

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Having expanded its range and dominion hugely during the first period of separate accumulation in the 1970s and the syncretic period of the 1980s, the idea of the postmodern began for the first time to slow its rate of expansion during the 1990s. In this decade, “postmodernism” slowly but inexorably ceased to be a condition of things in the world, whether the world of art, culture, economics, politics, religion, or war, and became a philosophical disposition, an all-too-easily recognizable (and increasingly dismissable) style of thought and talk. By this time, “postmodernism” had also entered the popular lexicon to signify a loose, sometimes dangerously loose, relativism. Now, its dominant associations were with postcolonialism, multiculturalism and identity politics. So, whereas postmodernism had expanded its reach in academic discussion, it had shrunk down into a casual term of abuse in more popular discourse. Postmodernism had become autonomous from its objects.

So far, I have been describing postmodernism as though it were itself merely a descriptive project, the attempt simply to get the measure of the new prevailing conditions in art, society, and culture. But, from its beginning, postmodernism has always been more than a cartographic enterprise; it has also been a *project*, an effort of renewal and transformation. The questions raised by postmodernism were always questions of value.

One of the earliest commentators on postmodernism, Daniel Bell, made the suggestion that something like a postmodern condition arose when the utopian ideals and lifestyles associated with modern artists began to be diffused among populations as fashion, lifestyle and consumer “choice.” It is common to construe some kinds of artistic postmodernism as a reaction against the canonization of modernism, in institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York. There were many in the 1980s who welcomed the loosening of the grip of modernism in favor of a more popular sensibility, and for a period postmodernism was strongly identified with what were thought of as the leveling tendencies of cultural studies, with its emphasis on popular culture. This was in conflict with the view held by many early formulators of postmodernism. Rather, they were inclined to emphasize the difficulty, the challenge, and the provocation of postmodernist art. Lyotard’s argument that the postmodern represented the acknowledgment of unrepresentability without the retreat into the consolation of form could easily be read as a confirmation of modernist principles. Indeed, Lyotard was inclined to see postmodernism as the reactivation of principles that had flared up first in modernism.

The well-known tendency of many of the thinkers and theorists associated with postmodernism to focus on modernists (Lacan on Joyce, Derrida on Mallarmé, Foucault on Roussel) might have offered support for the view

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that early postmodernist formulations were attempting to reinstate something like the heroic refusal of modern life that constituted artistic modernism. Whereas the modernity refused by modernists was the modernity of urban transformation, mass production, and speed of transport and communications, the modernity refused by postmodernists was that of consumer capitalism, in which the world, forcibly wrenched into new material forms by modernity, was being transformed by being immaterialized, transformed into various kinds of spectacle.

As postmodern studies began to proliferate, more complex relations began to arise between description and allegiance, or between postmodernism conceived as a condition and postmodernism conceived as a project. During the 1980s, it was still possible to separate out the question of whether there was such a thing as postmodernism from the question of whether one was or was not generally for it. The work of Fredric Jameson may be seen as maintaining the fragile equilibrium between description and recommendation, which is why that work has been read in so many different ways: as a stern critique of postmodernism; as a subtle preservation of the project of the modern through strategic accommodation to the postmodern; and as a full-scale capitulation to postmodernism.

Fredric Jameson once amused himself and his readers with a diagram that permuted the ways in which being pro- or anti-modernism could be combined with being pro- or anti-postmodernist.⁸ One might adopt his strategy here and permute the possibilities according to which the credence and approval accorded to the idea of the postmodern can be combined. The range of possibilities would be as follows. (1) One could believe in postmodernism and be all for it. This was the position adopted by propagandists for postmodernism, such as Charles Jencks and Jean-François Lyotard. In fact, most of those who wrote about postmodern condition in the 1970s were broadly in favor of it, or at least saw the postmodern as an irresistible necessity. (2) One could believe in postmodernism but nevertheless recoil from or be opposed to it. This was the position influentially dramatized in David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1980)⁹ and carried forward recently by critics such as Paul Virilio. (3) One could not believe in postmodernism and (one supposes for that very reason) not be for it. This was the position occupied by most of the early critics of the "postmodern turn," as well as of Marxist cultural critics who believed that postmodernism was a snare and a delusion that mystified the real bases of domination and gave up prematurely on modernity, identified as this latter can be with the project inaugurated in the Enlightenment of human emancipation from error and oppression. The most influential proponent of this view was Jürgen Habermas, in his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987).¹⁰

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An interesting feature of such permutations is that they often generate a seemingly abstract possibility, which is required for the logical integrity of the model but cannot reasonably be expected to have any real-world existence – a sort of $\sqrt{-1}$ or similar mathematical fiction. In the case of this model, the phantom position is that which would both dispute the possibility of postmodernism and yet be in favor of it. But even this Carrollian contortion seems to have found an exponent. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that modernity, which he prefers to call “The Modern Constitution,”¹¹ arises from the coordination of two absolutisms: (1) the absolute separation of human culture from nonhuman nature, and (2) the absolute separation of present from past. The Modern Constitution arises out of the sense of the sharp separation of nature and culture, and out of the forms of knowledge they produce and are addressed by. Nature produces science, the knowledge of how things are in themselves. Culture (language, society, politics) produces the social sciences and the discourses of morality, politics, psychology, etc. Modernity is characterized by the belief that there is no relation between these two kinds of object or between these two kinds of knowledge; indeed, by the requirement that they should be kept rigorously distinct. Modernity thus “invents a separation between the scientific power charged with representing things and the political power charged with representing subjects” (p. 29). We might recognize here a version of the distinction between the spheres marked out earlier, albeit unreliably, as modernity and modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism.

The originality of Latour’s argument is that the very moment at which modernity invents this distinction and starts to hold itself in being by means of it (the beginning of the “scientific revolution” in the seventeenth century) is the moment at which the middle ground – of objects and forms and ideas and practices, lying between the inhuman realm of nature and the human realm of culture – begins to proliferate. More and more “things” get drawn into social life, which will become more and more dependent upon and liable to be transformed by what it draws from and does with nature. Whereas modernity supposes a stark division between subjects and objects, cultures and natures, Latour proposes that we pay attention to what (borrowing a phrase from Michel Serres) he calls “quasi-objects,” which crowd into, and then start to crowd out, the space between nonhuman nature and human culture.

Latour then re-angles his argument to address the question of temporality. He shows that the first absolutism, the absolute separation between inhuman things and human cultures, is mapped on to a second, the absolute temporal distinction between past and present. “*The asymmetry between nature and culture then becomes an asymmetry between past and future. The past was*

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the confusion of things and men; the future is what will no longer confuse them" (p. 71, italics original). Despite their many antagonisms, modernism (let's say, free love and free indirect style) and modernization (telegrams and tanks) depend upon two principles: the sense of the uniform passing of time and the sense of the homogeneity of the present moment, or the self-identity of the "now." "Modernizing progress is thinkable only on condition that all the elements that are contemporary according to the calendar belong to the same time" (p. 73), Latour declares.

But the multiplication of quasi-objects produces a temporal turbulence, a multiplication of times:

No one can now categorize actors that belong to the "same time" in a single coherent group. No one knows any longer whether the reintroduction of the bear in Pyrenees, kolkhozes, aerosols, the Green Revolution, the anti-smallpox vaccine, Star Wars, the Muslim religion, partridge hunting, the French Revolution, service industries, labour unions, cold fusion, Bolshevism, relativity, Slovak nationalism, commercial sailboats, and so on, are outmoded, up to date, futuristic, atemporal, nonexistent, or permanent . . . (p. 74)

Latour's argument is that, since modern society has not in fact purified itself of nature, but implicated itself ever more deeply within it, there is no distinction to be made between modern and premodern cultures. Indeed, there is no such thing as a "culture": "the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures" (p. 104). Furthermore, there never have been any cultures in the sense of wholly self-inventing, non-natural phenomena. Hence, since the idea of the modern depends upon the claim that we have freed ourselves, or will free ourselves, from nature, "we have never been modern." Postmodernism apprehends the unevenness of times, the mingling of old and new that belongs to the premodern or amodern apprehension, but, clinging to the habits of modern thinking, sees it as a new development in the flow of time, a new kind of "now." Our present condition does not represent a postmodern break with ideas of progress. Latour acknowledges that his own "amodernist" attitudes overlap considerably with those of "the postmoderns" (they are clearly supposed to know who they are as well as Latour does), but attempts also to distance himself from them.

The postmoderns are right about the dispersion; every contemporary assembly is polytemporal. But they are wrong to retain the framework and to keep on believing in the requirement of continual novelty that modernism demanded. By mixing elements of the past together in the form of collages and citations, the postmoderns recognize to what extent these citations are truly outdated.

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Moreover, it is because they are outmoded that the postmoderns dig them up, in order to shock the former “modernist” avant-gardes who no longer know at what altar to worship. But it is a long way from a provocative quotation extracted out of a truly finished past to a reprise, repetition or revisiting of a past that has never disappeared. (p. 74)

Latour’s objection to postmodernism is that it turns the standing impossibility of being modern into a postmodern value. This is perhaps the most lasting problem of postmodernism. The more compelling postmodernism seems as an hypothesis, the more it seems that it might be a condition rather than an imperative, and the more beside the point seems the question of how or whether one chooses to be postmodernist. Choosing to be postmodernist then starts to look like choosing to embrace contingency, when the point about contingency is that it chooses you, for its own (non)reasons.

The most striking difference between modernism and postmodernism is that, though both depend upon forms of publicity, few guides or introductions to modernism appeared until it was felt to be over. Modernism was built out of prophecy rather than retrospect. What the incendiary manifesto was to modernism, the firefighting “guide” or “introduction” has been to postmodernism. The guide appears more democratic than the manifesto, in that it attempts to meet the reader on his or her own ground; but, in the pedagogic relation it assumes and establishes, it can also work to maintain a privative distinction between those in the know and those not yet so. The structure of books such as my own *Postmodernist Culture* (1989, 1996), which tracked the emergence of different kinds of postmodernism from different kinds of modernism, encouraged readers to feel that, in order to understand and participate in the postmodernist break, it was necessary for them to undergo a kind of apprenticeship in modernism. The seemingly paradoxical fact that the affirmation of the postmodern break required such extensive reprise of modernism does not seem so paradoxical after all, if postmodernist theory is seen as having the same uneasy relation to its public as modernism did to its public, and if postmodernism is seen as driven by some of the same resentful desire for privilege as modernism. It should therefore not seem so surprising that the postmodernist transformation should have brought about so remarkable and extensive a revival of interest and research in modernism on all fronts.

Modernism had shocked sensibilities and assaulted senses with sex, speed, noise, and nonsense. Postmodernist artists have carried on relentlessly shocking and assaulting and provoking, as they had done for nearly a century, but they added to their repertoire the kinds of defensive attack represented by postmodernist theory. Modernist work was shock requiring later analysis.

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As T. S. Eliot wrote, referring to something else altogether: “We had the experience but missed the meaning.”¹² Postmodernist work attempts to draw experience and meaning, shock, and analysis into synchrony. Being modernist always meant not quite realizing that you were so. Being postmodernist always involved the awareness that you were so.

But, if Bell is right when he says that modernism is surpassed by being diffused, so postmodernism may also be suffering the same fate. We have reached a situation in which the idea of postmodernism has both broadened and become simplified. The late 1990s were characterized by a different kind of guide, which pays attention to postmodernism as a general and popular sensibility. A recent example might be Ziauddin Sardar’s *A – Z of Postmodern Life* (2002).¹³ Christopher Nash’s *The Unravelling of the Postmodern Mind* (2002), though much less of a pop guide, nevertheless assumes that postmodernism is a sensibility or state of mind, rather than the result of rigorous philosophical or cultural-political deliberation.¹⁴

As postmodernism became generalized during its third phase in the 1990s, so the force of postmodernism as an ideal, or a necessary premonition of the good, seems also to have begun to dissipate. Perhaps the very acceptance, grudging or resigned, of the existence of a widespread postmodern condition in society, culture, and politics and a postmodern disposition in the arts and culture has meant that it has become more difficult to see postmodernism as something to be invented, or as a project towards which one must bend one’s best efforts. We can now, it seems, be postmodernist without knowing it, and without ever having had to get good grades in modernism.

Postmodernism shares with modernism a kind of presentism. Other literary-cultural periods in the past have come about when cultures have looked elsewhere, with a renewing attention to other periods, other cultures: the Renaissance and antiquity, Romanticism with its native archaisms and exoticisms, even modernism with its strange mixture of primitivism and zippy contemporaneity. Postmodernism, by contrast, is concerned almost exclusively with the nature of its own presentness. Indeed, one definition of postmodernism might be: that condition in which for the first time, and as a result of technologies that allow large-scale storage, access, and reproduction of records of the past, the past appears to be included in the present, or at the present’s disposal, and in which the ratio between present and past has therefore changed.

Of course, postmodernism shares with modernism its concern with the present, as well as its sense of the long or enduring present. But modernism’s present was undefinable, a vertigo or velocity rather than a habitat. The presentness to which modernism was drawn was a hair-tigger affair, always on the brink of futurity. By contrast, the perpetual present of postmodernism is