
Introduction

What Was Postmodernism?

1. Changing Tenses

... you've arrived too late, we are already beyond postmodernism, it's dead, dead and gone, don't you know, it's been buried, where have you been ... (Federman, 2001, 245; my ellipses)

What was postmodernism? It's the purpose of this book to answer that question as concretely and circumstantially as possible, but for now, just to get us started, a colorless and somewhat noncommittal answer will serve. Let's say, then, that postmodernism was the dominant cultural tendency (it might be safer to say *a* dominant tendency) during the second half of the twentieth century in the advanced industrial societies of the West, spreading eventually to other regions of the globe.

When future cultural historians look back on our era – provided that human beings even *have* a long-term future on this planet – it's not inevitable that they will identify late twentieth-century culture as “postmodern.” Perhaps they will call it “Cold War culture,” to capture the tension and turmoil that the global standoff of the period 1947–91 transmitted to contemporary cultural expression, or perhaps they will call it “neoliberal culture,” to reflect the new global economic order that emerged in the seventies (see Chapter 3). Neither of these periodizing terms exactly corresponds to the temporal scope of “postmodern culture,” however, which seems to predate neoliberalism and to persist beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989–91 (see Chapter 4). Maybe future historians will make do with the rather drab and inexpressive “Postwar,” or maybe they will follow Fredric Jameson, for whom postmodernism is “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson, 1991), and call it “late-capitalist culture.”

Who and what were they, these postmoderns? It is tempting just to compile a list, and many have done so, the eclectic catalogue itself being a characteristically postmodern form. “Eclecticism,” writes the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard mordantly, “is the degree zero of contemporary

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general culture: you listen to reggae; you watch a western; you eat McDonald's at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong; knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows" (Lyotard, 1993, 8).

Thus, Jameson (1991, 1–2) lists Andy Warhol and pop art; photorealist and "Neo-Expressionist" painting; the composers John Cage, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley; punk and New Wave music; the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and other cinema and video experimentalists (but also certain commercial movies, the ones that pastiche earlier cinematic styles); the writers William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, and Ishmael Reed; the French New Novelists (*nouveaux romanciers*) and their successors; the new kinds of literary criticism grouped under the category of "Theory" (see Chapter 3); and the postmodern architecture that derives from the theory and practice of Robert Venturi. Todd Gitlin, who is darkly skeptical of such lists ("as if culture were a garage sale"), nevertheless mentions, among many other things, "Disneyland, Las Vegas, suburban strips, shopping malls, mirror-glass building façades . . . the Kronos Quartet, Frederick Barthelme, MTV, 'Miami Vice,' David Letterman, Laurie Anderson, Anselm Kiefer, Paul Auster, the Pompidou Center, the Hyatt Regency" (Gitlin, 1988, 35, quoted in Frow, 1997, 27–8).

Most of the figures on these two lists appear in this book. So do many others. Writers who appear here include Kathy Acker, J. G. Ballard, John Barth, Christine Brooke-Rose, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, Philip K. Dick, Umberto Eco, William Gibson, Allen Ginsberg, Sarah Kane, Tony Kushner, Cormac McCarthy, James Merrill, Toni Morrison, Haruki Murakami, Gloria Naylor, Georges Perec, Richard Powers, Salman Rushdie, W. G. Sebald, Zadie Smith, Art Spiegelman, Ron Sukenick, David Foster Wallace, Marina Warner, Colson Whitehead, John Edgar Wideman, and "Araki Yasusada." Also making appearances are the pop musicians Bob Dylan, The Beatles, The Velvet Underground, Jefferson Airplane, David Bowie, Patti Smith, and R.E.M.; the avant-garde composers and performers Laurie Anderson, David Del Tredici and John Zorn; the architects Frank Gehry, Charles Moore, and Aldo Rossi; the theorists Jean Baudrillard, Francis Fukuyama, Donna Haraway, George Landow, Larry McCaffery, and Michel Serres; the visual artists Matthew Barney, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Nan Goldin, William Kentridge, Alexis Rockman, David Salle, Sarah Sze, Camilo José Vergara, and Robert Yarber; and the film directors Kathryn Bigelow, Derek Jarman, Aki Kaurismäki, David Lynch, and Wim Wenders.

Among the schools, movements, and genres featured in this book are surfiction, metafiction, magical realism, the OuLiPo, Avant-Pop, cyberpunk

science fiction in print and on the screen, graphic narrative, hypertext fiction, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing, the Young British Artists (YBAs), the SoHo scene, Afrofuturism, Conceptual Writing, and Flarf. Some of these figures and tendencies are “postmodernist” in the fullest sense, while others, less fully postmodernist, nevertheless belong to the postmodern era, contributing to the dense weave of postmodern culture. If you connected up all these figures, as in a connect-the-dots puzzle, would a picture of the era’s culture emerge? It is the hope of this book that it will.

... now that postmodernism is dead, writers don’t know how to replace it, the disappearance of postmodernism was devastating for the writers, but it was not surprising, it was expected to happen for some time, the last gasp happened the day Samuel Beckett changed tense and joined the angels, I can give you an exact date if you want to, postmodernism died because Godot never came ... (Federman, 2001, 245; first ellipsis is mine, second one is Federman’s)

The term “postmodernism,” which for a while – let’s say, from the mid-seventies to the mid-nineties, at least – seemed indispensable for identifying contemporary culture, today seems increasingly irrelevant. For the sake of argument, let’s assume along with Raymond Federman, from whom I have been quoting, that postmodernism itself, like Samuel Beckett, has “changed tense.” The date on which Beckett himself “changed tense and joined the angels” – December 22, 1989, little more than a month after the fall of the Berlin Wall – seems too early, but never mind. Once, not so long ago, it seemed urgent to ask the question in the present tense, as the architecture critic Charles Jencks was still doing in 1986: *What Is Post-Modernism?* But by 1990, when John Frow first asked his version of the question, the tense had already changed: “What Was Postmodernism?”

It’s a trick question. It has been asked before, about modernism, not postmodernism. The comparative literature scholar, Harry Levin, asked in 1960, “What Was Modernism?” Levin looks backward from the perspective of 1960 to the accomplishments of modernist writing around 1922, the year when Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* were all published. Nineteen twenty-two was the year of Brecht’s first play and the year that Proust died, leaving behind the manuscripts of the remaining unpublished volumes of his huge novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. Nineteen twenty-two, in other words, was something like the high-water mark of literary modernism. In characterizing the modernism of 1922, Levin signals that modernism belongs to history; it is no longer “now,” no longer contemporary. He *periodizes* modernism, turning it into one period among others in

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the historical sequence. For Levin, writing in 1960, modernism has changed tense. Notable here is the forty-year time lag between modernism's peak moment and this moment of retrospective periodization: modernism can "appear" as a period only forty years after the fact, around 1960.

Now fast-forward thirty years to John Frow's essay, "What Was Postmodernism?" (1990, republished 1997). For Frow, the changed tense indicates not that postmodernism is "dead and gone," over and done with, but that it continues to obey the modernist logic of innovation and obsolescence. Postmodernism, in his view, is "precisely a moment of the modern" (1997, 36). Modernism is driven by the imperative to innovate, and every innovation is rendered obsolete by the next one, so that modernism is constantly distancing itself from its own most recent manifestation, which then "slides into the past" (1997, 31). Eventually, this relentless logic of *superceding oneself* requires that modernism itself becomes obsolete, necessitating a successor – a *postmodernism*.

If postmodernism is modernism's successor, made necessary by the very logic of modernism, then how does it differentiate itself from its predecessor? Since modernism's determining feature, according to Frow, is its form of temporality – its ever-renewing newness and "nextness" – then postmodernism can only differentiate itself by adopting a *different* temporality from modernism's (1997, 36). One option might be to adopt a temporality of *stasis* in contradistinction to modernism's dynamism – either in the form of a static neoclassicism (a version favored by Charles Jencks in his various accounts of postmodern architecture; see Chapter 1), or in the form of apocalypse and the end of history (see Chapter 5 and "Ruins"). Alternatively, postmodernism might attempt to outstrip modernism by adopting an even more frantic pace of innovation and obsolescence, speeding up the cycle until it approached the seasonal rhythm of fashion (Frow, 1997, 38).

There is evidence of *all* of these temporalities in postmodernist practice: stasis, apocalypse, speed. However, there is also compelling evidence of yet another alternative, that of multiple and uneven times, or nonsynchronicity (Frow, 1997, 9, 42). Despite being each other's contemporaries in the everyday sense, not everyone who lived during the postmodern decades were fully postmoderns; some were, but others were moderns or premoderns, or some combination of these. Modernisms, postmodernisms, premodernisms, perhaps para-modernisms all coexisted. This approach sharply contradicts certain formidable theorists of postmodernism, including Jencks, but especially Jameson, who holds the view that postmodernism is a sort of blanket *condition*, that it constitutes a really "big tent," extending right across the whole culture, covering all genres and media, all disciplines of thought, all

forms of practice and behavior. However, this seems not to have been the case; rather, the culture of the late twentieth century appears in hindsight to have been *unevenly* postmodern.

The logic of “uneven development” implies that just as the world’s regions are in some respects out of synch with each other, so too are different cultural domains even within the same region. Not every domain “postmodernizes” itself, and even the ones that do, don’t all do it at the same time or in the same way. Some fields postmodernize sooner, others later, after a lag, others not at all. There is no *a priori* reason to assume that “postmodernism” means the same thing from one domain to the next, that it is one and the same everywhere. This is because, even if it is driven by the (presumably uniform) “cultural logic” of a historical moment or economic system, cultural change is *also* driven by the internal dynamics of specific fields, differing from field to field. Pursuing this unevenly distributed postmodernism, the present book ranges freely across many fields of postmodern culture – including the visual arts, architecture, film, and television, music, popular culture, digital media, and “theory.” It remains grounded, however, in imaginative literature, where my expertise is strongest, and where (arguably) the distinctiveness of postmodernism is most readily demonstrated and grasped. Its center of gravity is the Anglophone world, but it will also look further afield to forms of postmodern cultural expression elsewhere.

It was sad to see postmodernism disappear before we could explain it, I kind of liked postmodernism, I was happy in the postmodern condition, as happy if not happier than in the previous condition, I don’t remember what that was called but I was glad to get out of it, and now here we are again faced with a dilemma, what shall we call this new thing towards which we are going, this new thing I haven’t seen yet
(Federman, 2011, 245; my ellipsis)

The term and concept “postmodernism” began to lose traction around the beginning of the new millennium – which doesn’t imply that until then it was accepted without question; far from it. Everything pertaining to postmodernism – its scope, its provenance, its onset, its seriousness and value, its politics, its very existence – had been a matter of fierce controversy throughout the three or four decades during which the term flourished. Ironically, perhaps the only consensus that has ever been reached about postmodernism has to do with its *end*: postmodernism, it is generally agreed, is now “over.” This means that we are now, perhaps for the first time, in a position to *periodize* postmodernism in something like the way that Harry Levin and others were able to

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periodize modernism around the year 1960. Jeffrey Nealon reminds us that Fredric Jameson's seminal essay "Periodizing the 60s" dates from the year 1984,

suggest[ing] that only from after the end of an epoch can one begin to size the era up historically or begin to "periodize" it It is precisely from the boundary of a historical period, from inside its continuing end or closure, that one might hold out some retroactive or retrospective hope of naming what happened there. (Nealon, 2010, 10)

That is the hope of this book: that now finally, some thirty years later, we are distant enough from the peak years of postmodernism to undertake a retrospective synthesis of that era and its products – something like a comprehensive introduction to postmodernism.

2. Coming Attractions

The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism is structured around a fundamental distinction between historical *breaks* and *continuities* – between sub-periods and period-straddling developments. This distinction, or something like it, is basic to all periodization, indeed to all historical reflection (see Jameson, 2002, 24, 33). On the one hand, to identify a period is to posit one or more historical discontinuities, breaks from what came before and from what comes after. On the other hand, not only does the integrity of a period depend on continuities right across the period, but no period is airtight or freestanding, and continuities can always be identified with periods that precede and follow, and even with periods quite distant in time. These basic conditions of all periodization are acutely heightened in the case of postmodernism, where the dialectic of break and continuity is inscribed in the term itself: *postmodernism*, that is, a break from the modernism of the preceding era, but also *postmodernism*, that is, somehow continuous with modernism after all – more-modernism, Modernism 2.0.

Reflecting this dialectic of break and continuity, each of the *Introduction's* main chapters comprises two parts, one of them addressing a particular historical *moment*, *phase*, or *episode* in the development of postmodernism, emphasizing its differences from what came before and after, the other addressing a particular *continuity* across this phase, connecting it with prior and subsequent phases, and even with historically more distant eras.

Chapter 1, "Before Postmodernism," addresses postmodernism's precursors, both distant and more immediate. The four main chapters each key on one of the four successive phases that I discern in postmodernism. Chapter 2,

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“Big Bang, 1966,” explores the onset phase, which I date from the mid-sixties. Postmodernism’s major or “peak” phase, 1973–89, is the subject of Chapter 3. Next follows an “interregnum” or “in-between” phase of uncertainty and reorientation, roughly coinciding with the nineties, the subject of Chapter 4. I conclude with a coda that addresses the immediate aftermath of postmodernism, a phase dating from about 2001.

Juxtaposed with each of these subperiods, or moments of break, is a period-straddling development of longer duration. Each of these developments comes into its own in the particular moment with which it is juxtaposed, or otherwise reflects or typifies that moment. Thus, postmodernism’s onset in the mid-sixties is juxtaposed with a survey of late-twentieth-century versions and remediations of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, which undergo a surprising revival and reorientation around the year 1966, and then persist as a presence in postmodern culture right down to the present. The phase of “peak” postmodernism in the seventies and eighties is coupled with an account of the changing fortunes of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which by the end of the eighties would become something like a hallmark or yardstick of literary and cinematic postmodernism. Coupled with the “interregnum” phase will be the perennial figure of the angel, which achieves an unprecedented degree of cultural penetration and ubiquity in the nineties. Finally, paired with the aftermath phase will be the imagery of ruins, a venerable motif newly reimagined and reinterpreted in the post–September 11 era.

Chapter 1

Before Postmodernism

1. Postmodernism and Its Precursors

What was new about postmodernism? How new was it? In the days when postmodernism was still controversial, one frequently heard objections along the lines of, “Postmodernism – it’s all been done before” or “It all derives from [fill in the blank].” A favorite candidate for filling in that blank was Friedrich Nietzsche, the late-nineteenth-century German philosopher whose radical skepticism certainly informed the poststructuralist theories of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and many others from the sixties on (McGowan, 1987, 70–88). But the hypothesis of a Nietzschean origin, or any other philosophical origin for that matter, rests on the assumption that postmodernism is essentially a philosophical tendency, identifiable with what would come to be called “Theory.” This assumption is at odds with my own sense of postmodernism as essentially an aesthetic and cultural tendency, of which the emergence of Theory is just one indicator among others (see Chapter 3).

As for the objection that “it’s all been done before,” here the objectors were abetted by the *retro* orientation of some varieties of postmodernism, manifested in the recycling, rewriting, pastiching, or parodying of historical styles, genres, or even specific texts (see “Alice” and “Prospero’s Books”). Further corroboration could be found in postmodern architecture’s revival of certain features of classical style, typically with an ironic twist. Classical architecture’s “universal grammar and syntax” of columns, arches, domes, and decoration (Jencks, 1984, 147) was a conspicuous feature of such characteristic postmodern buildings as Michael Graves’s Portland Public Services Building (1980–82), James Stirling’s Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (1977–84) and Charles Moore’s Piazza d’Italia in New Orleans (1976–79) (see “Ruins”). But ironic neoclassicism was only one strain of postmodern architecture, “one style among several: not the sole approach but the most public one” (Jencks, 1984, 164), and it played little role outside architecture.

A favorite case in point, among those who contended that it has all been done before, was Lawrence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67). Metafiction (reflection on the text's fictional status), critifiction (writing about novel writing in a novel), breaking through the "fourth wall" to address the reader, fragmentation and lack of closure, encyclopedic scope, unstable irony, manipulation of the material resources of the printed book (typography and spacing, diagrams, blank, black and marbled pages) – it's all here in this eighteenth-century novel, 200 years before anybody ever called anything *postmodernist*. What's new in postmodernism if Sterne already did it all? Doesn't postmodernism just *repeat* *Tristram Shandy*, and other books like it (Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, etc.)?

Yes, but.

Viktor Shklovsky once provocatively claimed that *Tristram Shandy* was "the most typical novel in world literature" (Shklovsky, 1990 [1929], 170), but of course the point of his provocation was that it is *not* typical at all, from the point of view of canonical literary history. Perhaps it *ought* to be regarded as "most typical" because of the way it exposes the conventions and devices of the novel genre, laying them bare for our inspection, but in fact it stands well off to one side of the literary-historical mainstream – marginal, eccentric, a special case. Try this thought experiment: what would the history of the novel look like if *Tristram Shandy* really *were* regarded as typical – if its place were securely in the middle of the mainstream, instead of being relegated to one of the side channels? That would be literary history as seen from the perspective of postmodernism.

The logic here is that of a celebrated essay by the twentieth-century Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Borges, a seminal figure for postmodernism, claims in "Kafka and His Precursors" (1952) to have detected a series of precursors for the deeply paradoxical writings of Franz Kafka. But what a strange genealogy he traces: from Zeno's paradox to a text by a ninth-century Chinese writer to a pair of parables by Kierkegaard and a poem by Robert Browning to a story by the French novelist Léon Bloy and another by the British fantasy writer Lord Dunsany. These heterogeneous texts, spread across centuries, have little in common with each other, but each has something in common with Kafka: "Kafka's idiosyncrasy, in greater or lesser degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist" (Borges, 1964, 108). Reading *backward* from Kafka, we detect a Kafkan strain in these precursor texts that would not be visible *without* the perspective afforded by Kafka. That is the meaning behind the ordering of the nouns in Borges's title: Kafka first, then

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his precursors afterwards. “Each writer *creates* his precursors,” Borges concludes. “His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (Borges, 1964, 108).

Tristram Shandy is a precursor of postmodernism – postmodern “before the fact,” as we sometimes say. However, if postmodernism had never emerged, would we be able to detect the precocious postmodernism of Laurence Sterne? Or is Sterne’s precociousness actually a *product* of the postmodernism that he supposedly prefigures and preempts?

Granted, this is a strange way to write literary history: in reverse, backward. Nevertheless, the principle of reverse-genealogy proves to be a powerful tool for reimagining precursor works in light of the postmodern present, as in projects such as the academic volume *Postmodernism Across the Ages* (Readings and Schaber, 1993) – the title alone signals historical paradox – or Steven Moore’s alternative history of the novel (Moore, 2010, 2013). Moore, a scholar of twentieth-century literature, ranges backward in time as far as the novel’s origins in the ancient world, and finds everywhere the traces of a tradition different from and parallel to the canonical story of the “rise of the (realist) novel” in eighteenth-century bourgeois culture. Apuleius, author of *The Golden Ass* (2nd century B.C.E.), is “a postmodernist *avant la lettre*” (Moore, 2010, 109); the eleventh-century Japanese novelist Lady Murasaki, author of *The Tale of Genji*, exhibits an “attitude toward fiction [that] sounds positively postmodern” (2010, 552); Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771) is “more like a postmodern novel than a premodern one” (Moore, 2013, 866). The German novelist Grimmelshausen’s character Simplicius (1668) reminds Moore of Slothrop in Thomas Pynchon’s postmodern novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), while Charles Sorel’s *L’anti-roman* (*The Anti-Novel*, 1633–34) reminds him of the postmodern fiction of Gilbert Sorrentino (Moore, 2013, 66, 191). Voltaire anticipates Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (2013, 363), the seventeenth-century Chinese masterpiece *The Tower of Myriad Mirrors* anticipates “[Lewis] Carroll, Freud, Kafka, Jung, and Borges” ([CE] Moore, 2013, 450), and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) anticipates William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959), Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) (2013, 694). *Don Quixote* introduces metafiction (Moore, 2010, 5) and Samuel Richardson, among others, practices it (2013, 713). Henry Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, and many others in Britain in the eighteenth century practice criticism (2013, 758, 774), but so does at least one Japanese novelist around the year 1200 (2010, 580).

And so on, across the ages and around the world. This is, in one sense, sheer, irresponsible anachronism, but in another sense, Moore is reverse-engineering