

THE REVENANT

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- **ABSTRACT:** Despite constant announcements of its death, postmodernism will not be finally laid to rest until we pass beyond late capitalism. Postmodernism is best understood in the plural, as comprising all the various and competing discursive and artistic responses to postmodernity. Postmodernity is the social and cultural situation and structure of experience and feeling characteristic of late capitalist life in the highly developed post-imperial countries and regions (especially the USA, western Europe, and Japan). Major categories of response to it include postmodernisms of play and resistance, as well as anti-postmodern postmodernism. This essay describes late capitalism and postmodernity and anatomizes and contrasts the three kinds of postmodernism. The postmodernism of play or “high” postmodernism includes such phenomena as deconstruction and skepticism toward grand narratives; metafiction; pop art; the pastiche architecture of Michael Graves; films by Spike Jonze and Baz Luhrmann. Postmodernism of resistance is that of the post-1968 Left and of historiography and criticism, art and literature that seek to dismantle official histories and canons and recover the stories of previously erased minorities. Anti-postmodern postmodernisms include discourses ranging across the political and artistic spectrum that favor a return to modernism or to traditional metanarratives in response to postmodernity.
- **KEYWORDS:** Postmodernism. Postmodernity. Late capitalism.

What was postmodernism, and what is it still? I believe it is a revenant, the
return of the irrepressible; every time we are rid of it, its ghost rises back.
And like a ghost, it eludes definition.
– Ihab Hassan (2001, p.1)

On January 28, 2012, *Irish Times* drama critic Fintan O’Toole stated that postmodernism “died on November 11, 2011.” However, the date of its demise is a matter of some contention. Novelist Edward Docx had already announced in July 2011 that “Postmodernism is dead,” or at least that it would be as of 24 September

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2011, with the opening of the Victoria and Albert's Museum "Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990." Designer Massimo Vignelli (2010) had declared its death more than a year earlier on the *big think* website, following the declaration with the comment "Thank God." Massimo in his turn had been anticipated by "Altermodern," the 2009 Tate Triennial (SEARLE, 2012). All of the above, however, had come quite late to the wake. In 2002 Linda Hutcheon, who made her reputation largely by writing about postmodernism, published her own retrospective, "Postmodern Afterthoughts," the first line of which refers to the question "What Was Postmodernism?" posed by "the prescient John Frow" as early as 1990¹.

Such uncertainty as to the date, or even the decade, of its demise might lead one to suspect that rumors of postmodernism's death are exaggerated. Try as they might, commentators have had more than a little difficulty driving the wooden stake through its virtual heart. In my view their urge to do so is misguided; it stems from a common misconception or misdefinition, whereby postmodernism is identified in the singular, as a particular theory or style (or a narrow range of these), and commonly also identified with a single generation. I intend to argue instead, unabashedly, for a periodizing definition of postmodernity as a larger (continuing) social era – that of late capitalism – and then for postmodernism_S, emphasizing the plural, as a range of interacting and competing responses to postmodernity. By this definition, many of the various tendencies seen as successors to postmodernism ("altermodernism," "the new authenticity," etc.) become simply theoretical, aesthetic, or generational alternatives within that larger category.

I make this argument partly because even among those who say that postmodernism is dead, there is no clear consensus as to what period or what theoretical and stylistic movements might have superseded it². More importantly, though, I make it because I still believe generally in the relation of cultural theory and practice to both the social organization and the economic order of their time and place – and hence specifically in the intimate relation of both postmodernity

¹ Ihab Hassan also begins his "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context" with a section title that repeats Frow's essay's title. These are just a small sampling of such utterances; indeed a Google search of the phrase "postmodernism is dead" *in quotation marks* yields 38,000 hits. It is also worth noting that two years after Frow placed postmodernism in the past, Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner (1991, p. ix, emphasis added) claimed that "contemporary postmodern controversies can ... be explained in part by an ongoing and intense series of crises concerned with the breaking up of the 'modern' modes of social organization and the advent of a new, as yet barely charted, 'postmodern' terrain".

² Some, though by no means all, of those who proclaim its end with such determination are people who wish it had never happened, because they never got it or liked it. Generally their hope is that we have "gotten over it" and gone back to earlier modes of discourse. Particularly common in the field of journalism, these anti-postmodernists are of the same ilk as those who despise developments in the philosophical, literary, artistic, and cultural discourses that are commonly known as "theory." For a notorious example of the latter sort of thing, see Jonathan Kandell's (2004) reprehensible *New York Times* obituary for Jacques Derrida. For more on the anti-postmodern, see the notes that follow.

and postmodernisms to late capitalism. If one accepts this relation, it should remain useful to discuss varieties and generations of postmodernism until late capitalism as we know it is superseded by something else – perhaps, for instance, by the complete collapse of the western economies, or at least the total eclipse of the U.S. and Western Europe by China and India.

Of course to pair postmodernism and late capitalism invokes Fredric Jameson (1991), and it is done so here with great appreciation. Nonetheless, Jameson's monumental essay on postmodernism as the "Cultural Logic" of late capitalism may need amendment on three particular counts: first, Jameson conflates postmodernity and postmodernism, failing to distinguish between a condition of social life and a set of discursive and artistic responses to it. Discourses that do make this distinction seem capable of more fine-grained descriptions of these matters. Second, Jameson fails to distinguish among competing versions or tendencies of postmodernism – competing postmodernisms; to suggest a tentative typology of some of these will be the most important project of what follows. Third, and perhaps most importantly, while late capitalism is a more or less global condition, both Jameson and Ihab Hassan err in failing to recognize that postmodernity is not (for Hassan, see "From Postmodernism" on this point). Rather, postmodernity is the dominant socio-cultural condition of the most economically and technologically developed countries and regions, most notably the USA, Western Europe, and Japan.

But much of the world simply does not live according to the cultural logic Jameson describes. Indeed, almost all of the global south, and many other places as well, live in historical conditions that might better be identified as postcolonialities (were that term itself not so vexed) rather than postmodernity. Unlike Hassan (2001), who in "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity" rather glibly collapses these terms ("postmodernity refers to the geopolitical scheme ... sometimes called postcolonialism"), I claim that as modernity was the condition of life in the industrial and imperial powers, so postmodernity is their condition of life in a new order that includes not only a postindustrial economic structure but a post- (and neo-) imperial structuring of their relation to the former colonies. Late capitalism is indeed to all intents and purposes ubiquitous – a global phenomenon. But it affects people differently, according to their different historical positions and different relations to wealth, technology, development, and so on. Development remains wildly uneven. China, Brazil, and Nigeria, for instance, are all in their different ways far from post-industrial, and there is no reason to believe that they should be postmodern. If one of the characteristics of late capitalism is a global movement of production from some locations to others, both the departure and destination locations are part of late capitalism. But if one is losing manufacturing and the other is gaining it, it is unreasonable to suggest that the descriptions of social organization and structure of

feeling in the former will apply accurately to the latter. Thus, too, it is one thing to be a “nomadic” subject because one is, say, George Clooney’s business executive character in *Up in the Air*, who makes a lot of money flying around the U.S. firing people from their jobs, and quite another to be nomadic because one is from Palestine or has fled Myanmar or Somalia³. To apply any of the common descriptions of postmodernity globally is once again to erase difference and the histories of difference in favor of projecting a basically northern, western, and “first-world” set of properties as universal.

That postmodernisms are less ubiquitous than Jameson’s title seems to allow does not mean that the term is not useful. To raise the question of its uselessness, however, perhaps makes this the moment for a disclaimer about periodization. To assert, as I do, that there is a relation of postmodernity to late capitalism is to suggest that periodizing is not completely arbitrary or groundless, and for that reason the disclaimer is somewhat halfhearted. Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons, both of a general theoretical sort and of a specific, more or less “empirical” cast, for not reifying one’s periodizing constructs. Every periodization is always already flawed, just as every generalization (even, perhaps, this one) fails to do justice to the multiplicities and differences of particulars. But this does not mean that we can keep from generalizing, or even that we should wish or strive to keep from it. When we periodize, we are *bricoleurs*, using a concept that is, in Derrida’s sense, more or less “ruined” – but one that is nonetheless a useful tool at hand (DERRIDA, 1978, p.285). We need constantly to be critiquing our generalizations, and at the same time to be multiplying the axes along which we make them. We should view them skeptically, trying to make them as accurate as possible – or at least wrong in as useful a way as possible. Still, though periodizations may be fictions, it is facile to pretend that we can do without them, or that we would want to⁴.

Two final caveats: the descriptions offered here for late capitalism and postmodernity follow the lines of many earlier ones, and hence they will be elaborated in somewhat less detail than the typology of postmodernisms. Also, throughout what follows, categories overlap somewhat, and some characteristic elements belong in more than one category. Now, at last, for some key terms.

“Late capitalism” is the economic dominant of our time. Fredric Jameson (1991, p.xix) identified many of its elements three decades ago:

³ For that matter it is one thing to live in St. Germain or the Marais, and another to live in the *banlieues*; indeed the great metropolises these days are palimpsests of postmodern and post-colonial cities, effectively two different urban spaces overlaid on one another. Stephen Frears’ *Dirty, Pretty Things* and, more darkly, Michael Haneke’s *Caché* are two very interesting films about this state of things.

⁴ This paragraph has been a very difficult one to write, and it still demands a supplement. I am aware that it is loaded with qualifications, hesitations, and even, potentially, contradictions. My ambivalence reflects the tension between, and at times within, postmodernisms of play and of resistance (both defined later in this essay) with regard to the grounds, or groundlessness, of historical accounts. This tension in turn symptomatizes the twin impossibilities of defending the notion of truth and of dispensing with it.

Besides the forms of transnational business . . . , its features include the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale.

There are, of course, some notable changes since Jameson (1991) wrote: in particular, the “enormous . . . debt” to which he refers is by no means confined to the “second and third world.” Rather it is part of the frightening crisis of first-world economies today. Also, even though Jameson mentions computers, he wrote this passage before the internet had become ubiquitous and both work and leisure had become transformed by it.

In addition, we might add the following to Jameson’s list of features: 1) the ever-accelerating movement of information and capital; 2) the shift from production to consumption as the most important economic role played by the subjects of the most highly developed regions in the world economy; 3) the explosive increase in development of new technologies of information, entertainment, health and medicine, as well as other cybernetic and cyborg technologies – such that these technologies and the information they deploy are currently perhaps the most important products of the U. S. and western Europe; 4) the paradoxical proliferation of information sources and concentration of information control in mega-corporations⁵; 5) a growing gap between rich and poor, both in the US and around the world; 6) fluid boundaries, for both capital and people; 7) weakening of nations as units of organizing power, in favor of multinational corporations as well as institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the EU. Or, the blending of nations and corporate entities, as with the US and Wall Street⁶. 8) the promulgation of an entrepreneurial ideology, even for salaried employees, particularly among the professional-managerial class (PFEIL, 1990).

Jameson mentions “the new international division of labor,” with “the flight of production to advanced Third World areas.” We all know that a great deal of the world’s industrial production has moved to Asia and Central and South America

⁵ Just a few years ago we might have cited AOL-Time-Warner and Barnes and Noble here; now consider Facebook and Amazon. The *International Herald Tribune* of 16 May 2012 announced that “Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive of Facebook, has managed to amass more information about more people than anyone else in history.” (SENGUPTA, 2012, p.1).

⁶ The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in the “Citizens United” case, granting corporations the same rights as individuals with regard to political contributions, is likely further to exacerbate this trend.

(and, to some extent, eastern Europe). Hence Slavoj Žižek's claim that the US's "disappearing working class' ... is reappearing in China" (ŽIŽEK, 2000, p.40)⁷. Old manufacturing cities have seen the abandonment and rusting away of their industrial infrastructure or, in some cases, its conversion into quaint retail spaces (San Francisco's Ghiairelli Square, a former chocolate factory, is one of the most famous of these). Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Birmingham, Alabama were both once famous for the production of steel; now the leading employers in both are the local universities and the medical centers attached to them. In 1950, the city of Baltimore, Maryland had 113,618 manufacturing jobs. By 1990, that number had dropped to 38,602, a loss of 75,016 jobs, or roughly two-thirds of the 1950 total. Baltimore's job losses in all sectors in the period totaled 76,799, which means that nearly 98% of the total was in manufacturing (COHEN, 2001, p.419)⁸. According to the Baltimore Development Corporation (2010), the top four employers in Baltimore, are now, in descending order, Johns Hopkins University, Johns Hopkins Hospital and Health System, the University System of Maryland, and the University of Maryland Medical System. Of the next eight, six are health care entities and one is a university (Morgan State). This is what we mean when we say that we have transitioned to an information- and service-based economy.

Increasingly in this world, university education is a necessary condition (though no longer a sufficient one) for having a decent job; those without such an education are commonly doomed to low-paying service jobs in retail outlets, restaurants and fast-food joints, and the like. Increasingly, too, it is impossible for a family of four in the U.S. to live a middle-class or even a decent working-class life on the income of a single wage-earner. For all the gains made by women under the aegis of second-wave feminism, the increase in jobs for women may have as much to do with this economic need as with any commitment to gender equity.

Moving to another facet of late capitalism: if boundaries for capital have become more fluid and easily crossed, the same is true, to a somewhat lesser degree, for people. National spaces have become increasingly international, and of course many people from the former colonies have moved to the great metropolises. This sort of change leads on the one hand to greater multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and ethnic

⁷ We all understand the importance of computers, mobile phones, and other electronic tools in this world, but the crucial technology that tends to be overlooked in the popular imagination is what Jameson calls "containerization." The development of uniform containers and the ships and cranes that handle them was essential to the reduction of shipping costs to the point where it became feasible to move production of goods to developing countries where laborers would accept significantly lower wages and greater exploitation.

⁸ Cohen's table from which these statistics are drawn, and which is itself drawn from US census figures, indicates that in the same period, Detroit, Michigan lost 80.3% of its manufacturing jobs; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania lost 69.6%; and St Louis, Missouri lost 80.4%. Of course the flight of jobs overseas is only one cause of these losses; automation is another major factor.

diversity, and on the other to all the challenges of heterogeneity and difference, and to the reactions against these things that can appear in neo-nationalist, anti-immigrant, and other reactionary movements. Increasingly, contact zones have not only expanded, but also taken on a more visible and prominent representative function.

Finally, the shift to a consumption-based economy has led to profound shifts both in the kind of subjects that postmodern societies must produce, and in the dominant ideological apparatuses that produce them. In response to the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and the US entry into World War II, the American people were eager to help their country in its time of crisis. President Franklin D. Roosevelt told them that widespread sacrifices would be called for, including individual self-denial and a rapid and dramatic increase in industrial production for the military (ROOSEVELT, 2012). And indeed the actual increase in production not only helped the allies triumph in World War II, but finally brought an end to the great Depression and ultimately assured the U.S.'s emergence as the leading economic power in the post-war period. Sixty years later, on September 11, 2001, when the U.S. was again subjected to a devastating peacetime attack, and the citizenry asked what they could do to help their country, they received quite a different message. It was widely believed (though apocryphal) that President George W. Bush urged us to go shopping. He did, however, "ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy" and tell us to go to Disney World:

[...] one of the great goals of this nation's war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry...

It's to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed. (MURSE, 2010)⁹.

Particularly given the source of this plea, one is tempted to dismiss it as horrifyingly trivial, and indeed as a symptom of the kinds of values that had made the postmodern U.S. in general, and the World Trade Center in particular, a target of anti-modernist fundamentalism. But in fact President Bush's response, while rhetorically wanting, was not trivial. The biggest real danger the U.S. faced in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 was a crisis of consumer confidence. The airlines were the most dramatically threatened, but if they had not recovered, or if Americans

⁹ In his memoir, *Decision Points*, President Bush comments further on this matter: "Later, I would be mocked and criticized for telling Americans to 'go shopping' after 9/11. I never actually used that phrase, but that's beside the point. In the threat-filled months after 9/11, traveling on airplanes, visiting tourist destinations, and, yes, going shopping, were acts of defiance and patriotism. They helped businesses rebound and hardworking Americans keep their jobs" (BUSH, 2010, p.444).

had taken what would once have been the common-sense step of curbing personal spending in a time of uncertainty, the entire economy could have crashed.

Now, an economy whose activity is 70% in consumer spending is a relatively new development, and it requires a very different subject than those required by the economies of feudalism and modernity that preceded it in western history. The primary lessons this subject must learn are not those of delayed gratification that were taught by the medieval church or the modern school¹⁰. One does not become a good consumer by accepting one's miserable lot on earth in hopes of eventual reward in heaven, or by learning to discipline one's body to boredom, keep quiet, and wait for the bell to ring (or, later in life, for the factory whistle to blow). One becomes a consumer by learning to expect constant, though never fully satisfying, low levels of gratification: in short, one learns consumption by watching television and surfing the net. Thus in the postmodern world electronic media have usurped the schools as (along with the family, where we also learn the lessons of consumerism) the most crucial ideological apparatuses of subject formation. Screens are not simply a ubiquitous feature of postmodern time and space; they are where we learn what we must learn to do our part in the economic and social order.

But now we have begun to cross the line from late capitalism to "postmodernity". I use this term to refer to the social and cultural situation, organization of existence and experience, and structure of feeling characteristic of late capitalist life in the most highly developed countries and regions. Elements of postmodernity other than consumerism include but are not confined to: skepticism toward metanarratives in favor of multiple "language games" *or* anxiety at the loss of metanarratives (particularly national and religious ones) and intense re-assertion of them; loss or flattening of shared narratives of history; loss of interiority and emphasis instead on surfaces; more and more time spent in front of screens; the constantly increasing mediation of all aspects of life and the experience of life as spectacle and/or simulation; the erasure of distinction between private and public life and the collapse together of news, entertainment, voyeurism, and gossip; the notion that the ostensibly real may in fact be a copy of a copy; target marketing and surveillance; paranoia; information overload; schizophrenia and the dissolution of the humanist subject; the notion of identity as generic; cyborg and hybrid identities; and, as suggested above, multiculturalism and the social world as borderland or contact

¹⁰ The evocations of the church as fundamental to the construction of medieval subjectivity and of its replacement by the school in the subsequent era, as well as this paragraph's later explicit reference to ideological apparatuses, no doubt make it clear that this paragraph is deeply indebted to Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." My claim is that with the shift to late capitalism, another major shift in ideological apparatuses has occurred: as the church was earlier replaced by the school (ALTHUSSER, 1971), now the school has been replaced by the media as a site where individuals learn the most important lessons of subjecthood.

zone. Of course the contemporary first world has many other attributes, but these are among the ones most commonly seen as differentiating it from previous epochs, and as defining postmodernity.

The reader may have noted that I have declared incredulity toward metanarratives, which Jean-François Lyotard (1984) defines as “postmodern” *tout court*, to be only one of many features of postmodernity. It is also a feature of what I will later define as “high postmodernism.” But it does not, in and of itself, define what it is to be postmodern. Lyotard’s definition is influential, and it is clear in its context. But finally it is one of those instances where an intellectual, seeing only the part of the world that is his own intellectual milieu, generalizes in a way that simply excludes too much. It is easy to see why Lyotard, writing philosophy in the post-1968 Parisian intellectual world, might mistake this part for the whole. But postmodernity includes not only this kind of incredulity toward metanarratives (religious, philosophical, political, and so on), but also an often fearful, defensive, and profoundly anti-intellectual reassertion of such narratives (for instance Christian fundamentalism and American exceptionalism) in the face of such incredulity. The influence of this kind of thinking in the postmodern world is profound, and it is one of the reasons I have chosen to broaden my analysis of postmodernisms to include the anti-postmodern.

In general the characteristics of postmodernity that I have mentioned are widely known, and I will not spend a great deal of time expanding on them. But the question of history and memory seems an especially important one for U.S. postmodern culture at large, for its politics and, not always in quite the same ways, for the arts. To put it briefly, history has been replaced by the History Channel, just as reality has been replaced by Reality TV. As Adrienne Rich (1993, p.42) once put it, “In America we have only the present tense”. History is not seen as an area of useful or important knowledge, or something from which we have anything much to learn. No doubt general skepticism toward metanarratives (and toward the reliability of sources) is one reason for this disposition. Another, particularly for racial and ethnic minorities, for women, LGBTQ people, and the poor, is the fact that for so very long official versions of U.S. history were at best irrelevant to their personal, family, and group histories and at worst simply false. But consumerism, with its constant emphasis on new fashions and new desires, is the most important anti-historical force. History is only a marketable commodity as entertainment or nostalgia – as spectacle or hobby. Substantial historical knowledge and thinking, on the other hand, require intellectual discipline, which requires delay of gratification. Moreover, as Benjamin’s thesis on “the angel of history” suggests, such knowledge is not necessarily gratifying even when attained.

One of the by now typical observations about the move from the modern to the postmodern is that it entails a movement from paranoia to schizophrenia (HASSAN, 1980; JAMESON, 1991; HARVEY, 1989). The former represents a determinedly unified and alienated self (“There is I; there are the others,” says Pynchon’s clinically paranoid Dr. Hilarious), one who has a single metanarrative into which all other stories are subsumed. The latter figures a more fragmented subjectivity characterized by intensities and unmapped flows of desire. However, as Jameson himself recognizes in his discussions of conspiracy texts and “high-tech paranoia movies,” and of cyberpunk as “fully as much an expression transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia” (38), paranoia too is an element of postmodernism. I would only add that there is also a kind of postmodern paranoia *about schizophrenia*: a shoring up of the defensive boundaries of the self in a reaction-formation against the threat of postmodern and posthumanist subjective dissolution. This reaction is part of the larger phenomenon I have called “pomophobia” (BYERS, 1995, p.6).

Specific forms of both schizophrenia and paranoia not only are part of postmodernity’s structure of feeling, but also are elements of particular “postmodernisms”, which I define as the range of philosophical, and theoretical, literary and artistic, and other discursive manifestations of and/or responses to postmodernity. These include at least three major categories: postmodernisms of play, postmodernisms of resistance, and anti-postmodernisms.

First, the postmodernism of *play*. This is probably the type that most people think of when they hear the term “postmodernism.” Both for that reason and because it is the type that most directly “takes on” high modernism, this is what might be called “high” postmodernism – just as there is a tradition of high modernism in Anglophone literature, including such figures as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and H. D. (but not Edna Millay or Langston Hughes); James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, the later Henry James, Hemingway, and Faulkner (but not Edith Wharton or John Steinbeck). The postmodernism of play includes but is not limited to such phenomena as the following:

- 1) Developments in philosophy and in interpretive and cultural theory: particularly Jacques Derrida’s anti-foundational critique of philosophy, and his advocacy of a Nietzschean delight in the play of signification rather than a Rousseauvian nostalgia for the lost kingdom of centered Truth; and Jean-François Lyotard’s notion that postmodernism is “incredulity toward metanarratives” and their consequent replacement by “language Games” ;
- 2) self-consciously anti-realist fiction. Thomas Pynchon is the poster-boy here, and indeed some of those who think postmodernism is over identify it primarily with the fabulation and metafiction for which Pynchon’s generation, under the influence of Jorge Luis Borges, became famous in

the 1960s and 70s. While the extreme of metafiction embodied in John Barth's¹¹ *Lost in the Funhouse* and explained in his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion" may have run out of gas, the tendency for fiction to reflect on and problematize its own status, as well as that of written history, persists quite strongly in many authors who have risen to literary prominence since the 1970s: for instance, Don DeLillo in *Libra*, Richard Powers in *Galatea 2.2*, Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*, Percival Everett in *Erasure*, Paul Auster in *The New York Trilogy*, Mark Danielewski in *House of Leaves*, Charles Johnson in *Middle Passage*, Stephen Graham Jones in *Growing Up Dead in Texas*. Fabulation, while it very often has political resonances that place it more in the next category (postmodernism of resistance) is perhaps even more alive, from the science-fiction of William Gibson and Octavia Butler to the magic realism of Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, Jonathan Lethem in *The Fortress of Solitude*, Richard Powers in *Plowing the Dark*, or Karen Tei Yamashita in *Tropic of Orange*.

- 3) Experimental poetry that deconstructs humanist subjectivity and refuses traditional forms of order and meaning-making. Examples here range from John Ashbery to the experimental typographies of Susan Howe or the Oulipo-inspired experiments of Harryette Mullen and many others, particularly those associated with "language writing";
- 4) the very specific meaning that the term "postmodernism" has in the architectural world, where it identifies one specific style (the historical pastiche most closely associated with Michael Graves);
- 5) a certain kind of "anything goes" playful and often spectacular pastiche in spheres from the world of contemporary visual art (Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons); to contemporary dance (Pilobolus); to the staging of rock concerts (Kiss, Madonna, Lady Gaga); to the filmmaking of Baz Luhrmann in *Moulin Rouge* or Quentin Tarantino in *Pulp Fiction* or Spike Jonze in pretty much any of his films.

There are some reasons why this postmodernism might be seen as over, but many of the most popular ones seem to me intellectually lazy. One is simply the desire not to have to read or learn about material that's hard to grasp, whether it's French philosophy or formally difficult fiction or poetry that emphasizes sound over conventional sense or highly original and sometimes difficult visual and conceptual art. Another is the preference of certain fiction writers, such as Jonathan Franzen, and their followers among journalistic critics from places like *Time Magazine*, for a return

¹¹ Cf. BARTH, 1984.

to the formal comforts of bourgeois realism. Another is the neo-Puritanical notion that playful fiction and deconstructive literary theory were not serious or politically useful and hence must be replaced by more “authentic” stories and cultural-studies based theory. Despite all of these, however, the postmodernism of play persists – and delights – in a great many fields of cultural activity.

The second category is the postmodernism of *resistance*¹². This is the postmodernism of the post-classical-Marxist, post-Paris-1968 progressive Left, and of social justice movements such as Occupy Wall Street. It is politically committed, but generally on a pragmatic more than a utopian level, eschewing grand narratives in favor of specific interventions. It includes critiques of universalizing humanism, official history, and the traditional western canon of “dead white males.” One of the important aspects of this kind of postmodernism in the arts and humanities, and particularly in literature, is its attempt to make visible and audible those whose stories and histories have been erased or silenced. Hence this kind of postmodernism recognizes the constructed, “fictional” character of received versions of history, but practitioners of it may or may not subscribe to the notion that *all* histories are more or less equally constructed, and on more or less equally shaky ground. Those who do share this notion are closer to the postmodernism of play; generally those who do not share it – who believe that the rewriting of history to include the formerly erased is a true correction of the historical record – lean more toward the anti-postmodern.

The postmodernism of resistance includes work influenced by or compatible with many forms of feminism, post-colonialism, critical race studies, ethnic studies, gender and queer theory, and environmentalism. In American writing, it has given us figures as different as Pynchon (who counts here as he does in play), Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, Susan Howe, Maxine Hong Kingston, Tim O’Brien, Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sandra Cisneros, Edwidge Danticat, and Harryette Mullen – though Howe, Kushner, Parks, Mullen, and others on this list join Pynchon in combining resistance with play. (Indeed, the line between resistance and play blurs even further when we recall that the theoretical notions of Derrida and Lyotard, articulating the notion of the play of the signifier and language games, themselves arise as forms of *resistance* to traditional and hegemonic practices of philosophy.) For examples of the postmodernism of resistance in the art world we might think of Barbara Kruger, Kara Walker, Hans Haacke, Sharon Hayes, the Guerilla Girls, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, and indeed much of the performance art movement. In theory, major figures include Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, and Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Examples are harder to find in mass culture, because very often too much in the way of political commitment is seen as limiting

¹² I take this term from Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* (HUYSSSEN, 1986, p.220).

marketability. Nonetheless we might consider the music of The Clash, Rage Against the Machine, early rap groups such as Public Enemy and NWA; many of the films of John Sayles or Spike Lee or the documentaries of Barbara Kopple; or even such popular films as *Syriana*, *The Hours*, *Brokeback Mountain*, or the Jason Bourne trilogy.

The third category, the *anti-postmodern*, includes the huge increase in evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity, whose institutions often make use of postmodern technologies, marketing techniques, and performance elements in the service of radically anti-postmodern metanarratives. It also includes Pope John Paul II's use in his encyclical "Fides et Ratio" of "the word postmodernism to condemn extreme relativism in values and beliefs, acute irony and skepticism toward reason, and the denial of any possibility of truth, human or divine" (HASSAN, 2001, p.2), as well as the current Pope's assertion that "We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain," and his demands that Catholics re-submit to the church's traditional authority and beliefs (RATZINGER, 2005). Literary critics and cultural commentators within the academy tend toward the postmodernisms of play and/or resistance, and for that reason the importance of the anti-postmodern is in many cases underestimated – as occurs, for instance, in Lyotard's notion that "incredulity toward metanarratives" is sufficient to define the postmodern condition. Anxious and angry defenses of metanarratives (for instance, of a religious or national sort) arguably have a fair bit more political and social impact than skepticism does. It is hard to see incredulity as the postmodern condition in the US when some 40% of the people reject the theory of evolution because it contradicts the Bible. I suppose this does represent a form of incredulity toward the metanarrative of science – but it does so in order to reinforce a faith that seems precisely the opposite of incredulity.

The anti-postmodern, however, is by no means simply a religious phenomenon, or even an exclusively right-wing one. Rather, it includes a wide range of discourses across the political and artistic spectrum that favor a return either to modernism or to traditional metanarratives as the proper response to postmodernity. Examples include the conservative modernism of architecture critic and *New Criterion* founding editor Hilton Kramer; the more progressive modernism of Jürgen Habermas; the Marxist critique of what Terry Eagleton (1996) calls the "illusion of postmodernism"; the philosophical stance of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek¹³; the literary critique of

¹³ Here is Žižek's admiring summary of Badiou's position: "Badiou is clearly and radically opposed to the postmodern anti-Platonic thrust whose basic dogma is that the era when it was still possible to ground a political movement in a direct reference to some eternal metaphysical or transcendental truth is definitely over, and, the experience of our century having proved that such a reference to some metaphysical a priori leads to catastrophic "totalitarian" social consequences, the only solution is to accept that we live in a new era deprived of metaphysical certainties, an era of contingency and conjectures, and in a "society of risks" that renders politics a matter of phronesis, of strategic judgments and dialogue, not of applying fundamental cognitive insights. What

postmodernity from Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Tom Wolfe, Bobbie Anne Mason, and others; the pop resistance to postmodernity in films such as *Die Hard*, *Terminator 2*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Player*, *The Net*, *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *Chicago*, *Catch Me If You Can*, the Batman franchise, and the work of Mel Gibson.

The postmodernism of play and that of resistance tend to share the following elements, in opposition to the anti-postmodern:

- a) Both are on the side of the dissolution of master narratives, and tend to question and undermine the oppositions on which these were based – oppositions such as nature-culture, reality-language, male-female, philosophy-rhetoric, knowledge-power, high art-mass culture.
- b) In contrast to high modernism and to the New Criticism that advocated it, both postmodernisms of play and of resistance work against the notion of high art as transcendent. Both tend to value the ongoing encounter with the field of experience rather than the attempt to rise above and organize it. Both of these kinds of postmodernism tend to see art as a discourse rather than an object, as a process more than a form, as part of an ongoing conversation or action rather than as a world apart or a safe haven from the world's chaos.
- c) Both generally emphasize and celebrate multiplicity and hybridity, rather than unity – in art, not one pure voice, but many more voices; in philosophy, not Enlightenment reason and universals, but located, anti-essentialist, pragmatic theory and praxis.

All of this said, it must be reiterated that the postmodernism of resistance may in some cases gravitate more toward play, in others more toward the anti-postmodern. Compare, for instance, the post-structuralism of Susan Howe to the lyric voice of Adrienne Rich; the attack on identity politics in Percival Everett to the African Americanness of Toni Morrison; the theories and practices of gender studies and queer theory to those of women's studies and gay and lesbian studies.

In proposing this anatomy of postmodernism, I have urged the view that this is not an autopsy. I continue to believe that an understanding of postmodernisms helps us grasp our late capitalist moment, and that an analysis of late capitalism helps us understand the art and literature of our time – art and literature that I find not only worthy of careful study, but full of new modes of instruction and forms of delight. However, arguments about periodization are always at least in part arguments

Badiou is aiming for, against this postmodern doxa, is precisely the resuscitation of the politics of (universal) Truth in today's conditions of global contingency." (ŽIŽEK, 1998, p.240).

about how we carve up some body of phenomena for academic study. And for that reason, among others, they are never completely disinterested. The people I know who think that there is nothing new about postmodernism – that it is simply a new generation of modernism – are by and large specialists in modernism. It is unsurprising that they might seek to subsume the postmodern under their specialty. By the same token, I in my turn have spent a great deal of my career working on postmodernism, and it is probably only to be expected that I would think it is not over. Moreover, it may well be that as a child of the sixties, when postmodernisms were so clearly emergent, I want to preserve a particular understanding of them to preserve my own relevance, and that of my generation: thereby to stave off not the Crying of Lot 49, but the Dying of Lot 68¹⁴.

In the end, however, the quarrel about terminology – about whether the work of 2012 is postmodernism or post-postmodernism or something else, or whether postmodernism is a particular theory and style or a range of them – is not as useful as the categorization and analysis of some different types of today's cultural productions and of some different theories of what kind of cultural work is important and valuable. I am not so interested in the argument about names themselves as in thinking through the tentative map of the cultural landscape to which that argument leads. The argument, again, is a form of bricolage – a use of a tool at hand as a wedge into analyzing the culture – more than it is an attempt to insist that my particular periodization expresses a Truth.

For several decades, some people have mistaken my interest in studying the postmodern for a more or less straightforward and unqualified advocacy of it. That is not my position; indeed, my attempt to periodize the phenomenon (or phenomena) of postmodernism, and especially to do so according to stages of economic development, would in itself disqualify me from membership in the highest of high postmodern theoretical circles. Nonetheless, I do find myself leaning toward a certain kind of postmodern system of values. I do not expect the kind of activity that this essay represents to bring us to a truth in which we can come to rest. Such truth would foreclose the ongoing discourse that I identify with life itself. I think we interpret not so as to come to the end of interpretation, but so as not to come to the end of it – and of ourselves. For that reason, I will close this foray with a few of my favorite lines from that great avatar of high postmodernism, John Ashbery (1975, p.36). He ends his poem forebodingly called “Foreboding” with a glimpse of a vision of truth – and then with an assessment of the real uses of such visions:

¹⁴ The reader should know that none of the other contributors to this issue has seen this text, and none of them should be read as having accepted my paradigm (though of course I hope they may find it convincing if and when they do read it). Even if the reader thinks I am wrong about everything, he or she should not see the other authors here as complicit with or implicated in my errors.

Somebody has just brought me an equation.
I say, "I can't answer this – I know
That it's true, please believe me,
I can see the proof, lofty, invisible
In the sky far above the striped awnings. I just see
That I want it to go on, without
Anybody's getting hurt, and for the shuffling
To resume between me and my side of night.

May the shuffling resume – and resume, and resume, and resume.

BYERS, T. B. Aquele que volta. **Revista de Letras**, São Paulo, v.51, n.2, p.9-27, jul./dez. 2011.

- **RESUMO:** Apesar de sua morte ser constantemente anunciada, o pós-modernismo não descansará em paz até que ultrapassemos a fase tardia do capitalismo. O pós-modernismo é melhor compreendido no plural, como abrangendo todas as várias e conflitantes reações discursivas e artísticas à pós-modernidade. A pós-modernidade é a situação e estrutura sociais e culturais da experiência e sentimento característicos da vida no capitalismo tardio nos países e regiões pós-imperiais altamente desenvolvidos (especialmente os Estados Unidos, a Europa Ocidental e o Japão). As principais categorias de reação a ela incluem o pós-modernismo de jogo e de resistência, assim como o pós-modernismo antipós-moderno. Este artigo descreve o capitalismo tardio e a pós-modernidade e dissecar e contrasta as três espécies de pós-modernismo. O pós-modernismo de jogo ou "alto" pós-modernismo inclui fenômenos tais quais a desconstrução e o ceticismo diante das narrativas grandiosas, a metaficção, a pop art, a arquitetura de pastiche de Michael Graves e os filmes de Spike Jonze e Baz Luhrmann. O pós-modernismo de resistência é aquele da esquerda pós-1968 e da historiografia e crítica, arte e literatura que buscam dismantlar as histórias e cânones oficiais e recuperar as narrativas de minorias anteriormente apagadas. Os pós-modernismos antipós-modernos incluem discursos que percorrem todo o espectro político e artístico e que advogam um retorno ao modernismo ou a metanarrativas tradicionais como resposta à pós-modernidade.
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pós-modernismo. Pós-modernidade. Capitalismo tardio.

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