

MODERNISM AND POST-MODERNISM: THE DUPLICITY OF INNOVATION

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This paper is an attempt to expose some of the conceptual contradictions on which postmodernist discourse seems to thrive. Not all theorists of the postmodern are unaware of these theoretical aporiae, but they do attempt to make of them a theory with claims to general applicability, consistency and coherence. Furthermore, the claim to newness which postmodernism posits is examined here in the light of the unresolved debate on the demise of modernism. That postmodernism both announces and celebrates the assumption of such a demise is considered here as a suspect theoretical move which, in an undeclared and uncritical sense, bears a close resemblance to the phenomenon of fashion. In this sense, the intellectual phenomenon of postmodernism itself may be seen as another version of the ever-same passing as the new.



No theory today escapes the marketplace.
(Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*)

There is not now nor has there ever been a metanarrative or a transcendental space. Theory exists everywhere in a practical state. (Warren Montag, "What is at Stake in the Debate on Postmodernism?", *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*)

In this article, I have set myself a difficult task indeed: to discredit postmodernism as a useful or meaningful term for critical thought; to refute its claims to be the discourse of our time, be it in literature and art or philosophy and culture in general. To begin a discussion on postmodernism by saying that I don't believe such a thing exists is paradoxical, to say the least: yet it is the suspicion about the constant and overwhelming presence of the term in any contemporary literary or cultural discussion that provides the impetus for the investigation that follows. This is partly an attempt to deal with questions which spring to mind when the term postmodernism, or postmodern is invoked: Why is postmodernism such an influential term? What does it mean? Does everybody who uses the term (and this is literally *everybody*, from journalists

and media personalities, to academics and undergraduate students the world over) understand the same things by it? Where did it come from? Where is it going? When will it end? In an attempt to get to the core of this problem, I will address some of these questions: To begin with, where does the term come from?

The current consensus is that the term originated with debates about architecture, most notably through a reevaluation of modern architecture's insistence on formalism, purity of style and utopian functionalism. The influential book in this context is Charles Jencks's *The Language of Modern Architecture* (1977). An additional reference is also made to Arnold Toynbee's use of the term in *A Study of History* (1947-1954) where it is suggested that a "post-Modern age" began in 1875, as the fourth stage of Western history following the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages and the Modern age. According to Toynbee, the "post-Modern" age is a "Time of Troubles," a period of anarchy and relativism, social turmoil and revolution.¹ These two sources relate to the two main aspects or uses of the term in its current context: Postmodernism is thus understood as a technical, descriptive term for recent artistic practices (in architecture, visual arts, literature, etc.) as well as a term which describes the state of contemporary culture. Of course, these two significations depend on each other for evidence of the usefulness and applicability of the term: it is therefore argued that a postmodern culture requires postmodern art forms and vice versa. The question to be asked here is: What is postmodern culture? What does it mean for a culture to be postmodern?

One of the key texts which addresses this question, or rather, the text from which this implicit assertion originates is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Lyotard's book purports to be a "report on knowledge" or more specifically on those "transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard, 1979, p. xxiii). The "postmodern condition" is seen by Lyotard as the result of what he calls "the crisis of narratives," or of those discourses of legitimation which set the rules for science. He thus defines "postmodern" as the "incredulity toward metanarratives." In the context of this crisis, Lyotard proceeds to diagnose a new state of things whereby the beliefs and certainties on which modernity was based – its "grand narratives" – are no longer applicable or universally accepted. No single narrative or system of thought can rely on a universally shared language or discourse while new and individual languages are added to the old ones without the possibility of an accompanying claim to a shared legitimacy. This is partly due to the changing physiognomy of social relations which since the Second World War are more significantly determined by an upsurge of technology and the development of advanced mechanisms of communication. The prominence of this "communication component" as Lyotard calls it, in postmodern societies brings with it a proliferation of "language games" and a shift of emphasis from the message (or end) to the *means* of communication.

Lyotard's assertion works on two levels: on the one hand, he observes and defines this assumed new condition; on the other, he bemoans its arrival: it is often ignored in the celebratory remarks of postmodern critics that is what Lyotard sees an ambiguous and ambivalent arrival. The society and culture he describes is a problematic one in that it presupposes a loss and an absence which results in a state of permanent melancholy. That is, the loss of a sense of collectivity, of a meaningful and universal human history makes it impossible to share the belief in great unifying narratives about the world. He points out, however, that this state of loss is not a new one:

The great narratives are now barely credible. And it is therefore tempting to lend credence to the great narrative of the decline of great narratives. But, as we know, the great narrative of decadence is there in the very beginning of Western thought, in Hesiod and Plato. It dogs the narrative of emancipation like a shadow. (Lyotard, 1989: 318)

Thus Lyotard relativises his position by pointing out that this new realisation of a postmodern condition is at the same time a recurrent phenomenon in Western thought. It appears, therefore, that the case for the postmodern which Lyotard makes in *The Postmodern Condition* is less than clear-cut. In the Appendix to this book, an often anthologised piece entitled "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?", he puts forward a reading of the postmodern which places it within the confines of the modern, though with a difference. To begin with, Lyotard states that "[the postmodern] is undoubtedly a part of the modern" (Lyotard, 1984: 79). To complicate things further, he continues, "A work can become modern if only it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (79). Here, then, the term is seen as an element of the modern itself, as an epistemological and discursive category already at work within the category or discourse of the modern:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; ... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (81)

The postmodern thus becomes a term which qualifies and expands the modern. This is a strange critical move in that it obfuscates what is by now assumed to be the clear and commonly accepted version of postmodernity that he helped make current. This is an interesting phenomenon in itself, not unrelated to the problems at the heart of the term: in other words, Lyotard seems to be expressing the desire to exercise a kind of authorial control over his own intellectual property; as an original theorist, meant to start schools of thought rather than follow them, he seems to be pointing out that the postmodern is more than a fashionable term to be used by all and sundry,² but rather a term with complexities which resist accessibility. This attempt is obvious in more recent

writing by Lyotard where, while still using the term, he reviews his own earlier position in order to “redesign” the term and its connotations.³ In a collection of essays entitled *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Lyotard reinstates the term “modernity” as the focal point for his discussion of temporality in which the postmodern appears, albeit in a qualified way. In the essay “Rewriting Modernity,” he explains how this revision came about:

The title “rewriting modernity” was suggested to me by Kathy Woodward and Carol Teneson of the Center of 20th Century Studies in Milwaukee. I thank them for it: it seems far preferable to the usual headings, like “postmodernity,” “postmodernism,” “postmodern,” under which this sort of reflection is usually placed. (24)

This, then, would mean that, according to Lyotard,

neither modernity nor so-called postmodernity can be identified and defined as clearly circumscribed historical entities, of which the latter would always come “after” the former. Rather we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself ... Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity. (25)

Postmodernity here becomes a transcendent state, innate within modernity, both born of the modern and a bearer of it: “modernity is pregnant with its postmodernity” and “postmodernism is modernism ... in the nascent state.” Although this is an interesting contradiction, a paradox pregnant with meaning, to attempt the obvious pun, it further problematises the relationship between modernity and postmodernity: if postmodernity is both already within and before modernity, where are we? – or, to put it more awkwardly, when are we? Are we or are we not still within modernity?

In the same essay, Lyotard answers this question implicitly by conceding that:

I have myself used the term “postmodern.” It was a slightly provocative way of placing (or displacing) into the limelight the debate about knowledge. Postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity, and first of all, modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology. But as I have said, that rewriting has been at work, for a long time now, in modernity itself. (34)

Lyotard is acknowledging therefore that his investigation of knowledge belongs in modernity, and is a continuation of those debates and “rewritings” which constitute the conceptual project of modernity. Given that this is usually thought to originate in the period of the Enlightenment, that is in the 18th century, this has been going on for a long time indeed. In which sense does Lyotard “rewrite” then? He concludes the essay by stating that, “rewriting

means resisting the writing of that supposed postmodernity” (35). This is indeed an amazing feat of rhetoric! It is also an instance of self-reflexive thought, of revision, reevaluation and rewriting which Lyotard rightly identifies as a typically modern procedure. This, however, does not mean that he can escape the paradox of his thought. Furthermore, if even the suspicion of a seed of a possible postmodernity-to-be is simply a symptom of modern self-examination, why do we need the term “postmodernity”? If, as Lyotard points out, it is false after all, why not simply say so and be done with it? Again, an implicit reply would be that modernity is *compelled* to think this way, to think of its future overcoming. A manifestation of this situation is the typically modern preoccupation with periodisation. Lyotard is not the first to point out this fact,⁴ but he does so in emphatically psychological terms: thus for him, “historical periodization belongs to an *obsession* that is characteristic of modernity” (25, emphasis mine).

Lyotard’s Freudian language is very seductive in that it interprets a crucial problem and paradox in terms which can then be further analysed through a different discourse. As with the analogy with melancholia and mourning, Lyotard literally *analyses* every blind spot ad infinitum. All this is very interesting, but it does not answer the questions about postmodernity: are we concerned with the question of postmodernity or postmodernism simply because, as moderns, we are obsessed with periodisation? Are we *all* obsessed in the same way, or is it possible that some of us are actually suspicious and critical of this so-called obsession? In an attempt to shift slightly the point of view here, I would point you to a comment by Raymond Williams: in his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams includes an entry for “Isms” in which he remarks:

There have been **isms**, and for that matter **ists**, as far back as we have record ... **Isms** and **ists** are still used, wittily or contemptuously (often with a sense of rapturous originality) but usually from orthodox and conservative positions, and even by *scientists*, *economists* and those professing *patriotism*. (144-45)

This suspicion is shared by other theorists and critics, especially, as to concerns the validity of the term “postmodern.” Jürgen Habermas, for example, one of the most outspoken critics of postmodernism argues that the term forms part of what he calls a “neoconservative” agenda.⁵ This is, he claims, a predictable phenomenon in that it is only a manifestation of the ever-present conservative school of thought which attempts to discredit and forget modernism by announcing the end of modernity, the end of history. In “Modernity - An Incomplete Project” (1981), an essay which has become central in the modernity-postmodernity debate, Habermas summarises postmodern claims thus:

The impulse of modernity, we are told ... is exhausted; anyone who considers himself avant-garde can read his own death warrant. Although

the avant-garde is still considered to be expanding, it is supposedly no longer creative. Modernism is dominant but dead.⁶ (Docherty, 1993: 101)

Habermas's argument with postmodernist/neoconservative theory which he calls "a feeble kind of criticism of modernity" (102), is that it appropriates the critique of aesthetic and cultural modernity, of "modernism," in order to read in the assumed "failure" or "normalisation" of modernist innovative practices the demise of the whole modern project. For Habermas, these attempts are contemporary developments of the old reaction to modernity and the Enlightenment project of rationality, emancipation and justice. He proceeds to argue that this is a project which has always incorporated a counter-movement, a resistance to reason and linear temporality, but also one which should not be abandoned.

Habermas's view that the Enlightenment project should be sustained and adapted to contemporary forms and concerns is a central issue in debates about rationality and progress. Not all theorists consider the Enlightenment debate a fruitful one, however. According to Michel Foucault, for example, we need to resist what he calls the "blackmail of the Enlightenment." Indeed, Foucault has been branded a "young conservative" and "antimodernist" by Habermas in terms of his critique of the project of rationality.⁷ Nevertheless, Foucault does implicitly agree with Habermas in the understanding of modernity as an ongoing conceptual and cultural affair: in an essay entitled "What Is Enlightenment?", he defines modernity in the following terms:

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by "attitude," I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an *ethos*. (Foucault, 1991: 39)

According to Foucault, then,

it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of "countermodernity." (39)

Although Foucault does not explicitly identify "countermodern" positions with conservative ones, he does see them as belonging to the attempt to establish the arrival of "an enigmatic and troubling 'postmodernity'" (39).

The association between postmodernism, countermodernity and conservatism is made by other theorists of the modern. Peter Bürger, for example, argues that the debate about modernism and postmodernism is more often about "intellectual power positions" than about the existence and form of a

cultural and literary movement:

the concept [of the postmodern] may be serving only to breathe new life into an old strategy of culturally conservative writers, who on many occasions in the past have pronounced the death of modernity. (Lash and Friedman, 1992: 95-6)

Critics from literary contexts other than the Anglophone also seem to share this view: Federico de Onís, in his *Antología de la Poesía Española e Hispanoamericana (1882-1932)*, for example, says that post-modernism is “a conservative reaction within modernism itself, when the latter settles down and becomes rhetorical like any literary revolution that has won out” (Cited in Calinescu, 1977: 77).

Similarly, and from an insider’s viewpoint, Frank Kermode hints at a certain cynicism in the practice of criticism when he remarks that

[Postmodernism is] another of those period descriptions that help you to take a view of the past suitable to whatever it is you want to do. (Kermode, 1988: 132)

Closely related to the above suspicions about the term and its implications is the analysis of the postmodern agenda offered by the American cultural critic Fredric Jameson: in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues that

... every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today. (Docherty ed., 1993: 64)

Jameson makes the following connections:

... aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation ... this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world ... (65)⁸

If one can assume, however, that there is a negative/critical consensus on the postmodern it seems to be that the term disguises itself, though not very successfully, as the new when it is really the expression of another reaction against modernism and what it stood for. Here, both defending and attacking positions converge, as the grounds on which this battle is fought is always that of an

understanding of the modern and its culture and art. As Jameson argues in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," the coherence – if any – in the various descriptions of the term postmodernism "is given not in itself but in the very modernism it seeks to displace" (Kaplan ed., 1988: 14). I would like to preempt the discussion of why and whether modernism is considered to have ended or failed by offering the view of one of its preeminent theorists. In an essay entitled "When Was Modernism?", Raymond Williams argues that current definitions of "Modernism" were established in the 1950s as a result of an "ideologised" selection procedure. That is, not only is it not the case that what we understand modernism to be is not the whole picture of the movement, but also that the periodisation of the modernist movement serves the purpose of depriving the modern movement of today of a meaningful and polemical term. According to Williams:

After modernism is canonized, ... by the post-war settlement and its accompanying, complicit academic endorsements, there is then the presumption that since Modernism is *here* in this specific phase or period, there is nothing beyond it. The marginal or rejected artists become classics of organized teaching and of travelling exhibitions in the great galleries of metropolitan cities. "Modernism" is confined to this highly selective field and denied to everything else in an act of pure ideology, whose first, unconscious irony is that, absurdly, it stops history dead. Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of development. It is *after*, stuck in the post. (Williams, 1989: 34-5)

For Williams, this is an ideological perspective. What it means is that "By its point of view, all that is left to us is to become post-moderns." That is, in order for postmodernity to arrive, modernity (and its culture) must be declared dead, gone, finished or failed. As Albrecht Wellmer puts it, echoing Williams's melancholy and ironic tone,

With the "death of God" virtually forgotten, the contemporary postmodernist debate frequently proclaims the "death of modernity" instead. (85)

The type of pronouncement on the death of modernity that critics of the postmodern have in mind may sound similar to the following statement by Jean Baudrillard, one of the most consistent postmodern theorists. Baudrillard here speaks of "the revolution of postmodernism" as "the destruction of all histories, references and finalities." He claims that:

The future has already arrived, everything has already arrived, everything is already here ... I mean that we can neither expect the realization of a revolutionary utopia, nor an atomic explosion. The explosive force has already entered things themselves. There is nothing more that we can wait for ... The worst case, the imagined cataclysmic event upon which every

utopia was founded, the striving of history after a metaphysical purpose, etc., any kind of ultimate goal now lies behind us ... (Cited in Wellmer, 1991: 41)

This vision of the future, post-death and destruction, after the explosion, the fall and cataclysm, "the gigantic process of loss of meaning" as Baudrillard calls it, is put forward in a spirit of provocation. In this sense, it resembles the effect of those modernist shock-techniques which were meant to alert and awaken the modern world from its complacency.⁹ It is also, however, openly and unashamedly apocalyptic, eschatological in tone. Again, this is a mode of thought closely associated with modernity, but not only. Jacques Derrida has commented on this kind of thinking in an essay entitled "On the Apocalyptic Tone Adopted by Recent Philosophy." Derrida uses the title of an essay by Kant, as playful support for his argument, namely that discourses (and programmes) of "the end" have proliferated in Western philosophy.¹⁰ He points out, however, that although there have been different discourses, they have tended to take the form of "a going-one-better in eschatological eloquence, each newcomer, more lucid than the other, more vigilant and more prodigal too, coming to add more to it" (Derrida, 1984: 20-1).

Derrida continues with a parody of this breathless, overwhelming tone:

I tell you this is the truth; this is not only the end of this here but also and first of that there, the end of history, the end of the class struggle, the end of philosophy, the death of God, the end of religions, the end of Christianity and morals ... the end of the subject, the end of man, the end of the West, the end of Oedipus, the end of the earth, Apocalypse Now, I tell you, in the cataclysm, the fire, the blood, the fundamental earthquake, the napalm descending from the skies by helicopter, like prostitutes and also the end of literature, the end of painting, art as a thing of the past, the end of the past, the end of psychoanalysis, the end of the university, the end of phallogentrism and phallogentrism and I don't know what else. (21)

This mockingly random *assemblage* of eschatological terms lightly but accurately mimicks the kind of final pronouncement which is often produced by theorists of postmodernity.

It is this apparent randomness of terms and associations, however, which also characterises theoretical pronouncements on "postmodernism" as a new literary discourse. In *Teaching the Postmodern: Fiction and Theory*, for example, Brenda K. Marshall begins her introduction by offering the following array of terms, names, concepts, etc.:

différance

historiography genealogy
Morrison context
Kristeva deconstruction
ex-centric
structuralism history
language Wolf
Barthes
counter-memory history
metafiction language
Carter ideology
parody play
de Lauretis intertextuality
subject position Derrida
history Foucault
feminism
Rushdie language
Marxism
critical revisiting
poststructuralism
text work Hutcheon
Coetzee language
Althusser historiographic metafiction

(1)

According to Marshall, the above

shuffle uncomfortably in a shared space, rub shoulders angrily, eye each other suspiciously, laugh, and look for the door. There is none. They are neither outside, nor inside. Sometimes they clasp hands in recognition, and then begin to dispute. Each has a definition, each resists definition, each defines the other. Each is a node within a multi-dimensional network, one of unaccountable nodes ... This is not chaos, this is not anarchy, this is not entropy, although it may be chaotic, anarchic, entropic... That is the postmodern. (2)

I hope I am justified in finding this attempt at a definition an exceptionally unhelpful one. In fact, not only is it unhelpful, it is deliberately obfuscatory and reductive in that it expresses no more than this writer's selection of relevant items to be included under the postmodern "umbrella."

Presumably, of course, this random eclecticism is the strength of any postmodern approach, since, as Marshall claims, the above constitutes but one choice among innumerable others, because, after all, "that is the postmodern"! Indeed, in case readers are (naively) expecting a definition, Marshall continues reassuringly:

But don't worry: I'm not here to get it right, once and for all. No, that wouldn't be very postmodern. Rather, this book is designed to present certain shared concerns of theorists ... and of fiction writers who are working within ... what I call the postmodern moment. (2)

What follows is Marshall's version of "the postmodern moment" and of the theorists and writers who live within it. Before we explore this idea of the "postmodern moment" further, let us look at other attempts to define "postmodernism" by experts in the field: in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," Ihab Hassan begins by stressing the tentative nature of the term:

Can we really perceive a phenomenon, in Western societies generally and in their literatures particularly, that needs to be distinguished from modernism, needs to be named? If so, will the provisional rubric "postmodernism" serve? Can we then – or even should we at this time – construct of this phenomenon some probative scheme, both chronological and typological, that may account for its various trends and counter-trends, its artistic, epistemic, and social character? (Docherty ed., 1993: 146)

"Could we, should we"? Hassan apparently can and he comes up with the following list:

Some names, piled here pell-mell, may serve to adumbrate postmodernism, or at least suggest its range of assumptions: Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard (philosophy), Michel Foucault, Hayden White (history), Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, R. D. Laing, Norman O. Brown (psychoanalysis), Herbert Marcuse, Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas (political philosophy), Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend (philosophy of science), Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Wolfgang Iser, the "Yale Critics" (literary theory), Merce Cunningham, Alwin Nikolais, Meredith Monk (dance), John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez (music), Robert Rauschenberg, Jean Tinguely, Joseph Beuys (art), Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks, Brent Bolin (architecture), and various authors from Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jorge Luis Borges, Max Bense, and Vladimir Nabokov to Harold Pinter, B. S. Johnson, Rayner Heppenstall, Christine Brooke-Rose, Helmut Heissenbüttel, Jürgen Becker, Peter Handke, Thomas Bernhard, Ernst Jandl, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Julio Cortazar, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Maurice Roche, Philippe Sollers, and in America, John Barth, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Walter Abish, John Asbery, David Antin, Sam Shepard, and Robert Wilson. Indubitably, these names are far too heterogeneous to form a movement, paradigm, or school. Still, they

may evoke a number of related cultural tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes. These we call *postmodernism*. (146-47).

In case this list does not satisfy the more theoretically-minded reader, in the same essay Hassan offers another attempt at a definition, again in directory form; this time, the reader is invited to consider certain “schematic differences” between modernism and postmodernism:

Modernism	Postmodernism
Romanticism/Symbolism	Pataphysics/Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Art Object/Finished Work	Process/Performance/Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Hypotaxis	Syntagm
Paradigm	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy

(Docherty ed., 1993: 152)

To dispute the accuracy or validity of this over-simplified schema would take another article, so arbitrary do some of these distinctions seem to me at least! More importantly, though, this categorisation strikes me as profoundly self-contradictory in two ways: firstly, it does the exact opposite of what Hassan for one so painstakingly argues that is impossible to do, that is to describe the postmodern as if indeed it existed, out there to be observed and characterised. Secondly, it does seem to operate in terms of binary oppositions or dichotomies which surely defy the fluidity, ambiguity and plurality associated with the postmodern. Hassan himself seems to acknowledge this contradiction when he adds that “Yet the dichotomies this table represents remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer, even collapse” (152). It seems in fact that postmodernism is synonymous with contradiction in Hassan’s scheme, or rather

the result of an interplay of contradictory tendencies. Such is the magical indeterminacy of postmodernism that at one and the same time it can be determined by "ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation" (153), in other words, by "a vast will to unmaking" *and* by a very clear sense of distinction from modernism!

We are now entering the area of "postmodernism" proper, as such arbitrary definitions of the term proliferate in theoretical writing. At this point, let us ask the obvious question: What *is* postmodernism? This sounds like a straightforward question which should invite a direct answer. In fact it isn't straightforward at all, if, that is, one wants a straight answer. Writers on postmodernism go to great lengths (and in the process consume an awful lot of time and material) to explain that we should not expect an easy answer at all. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale devotes a large part of his introductory chapter to explanations of why "postmodernism" is such an elusive and problematic term. Although McHale seems more self-conscious than Marshall and Hassan (and thus redeemingly self-ironising) about the paradox of a theoretical investigation which cannot define its terms, he nevertheless settles for arbitrary formulations of the following type:

... we can discriminate among constructions of postmodernism, none of them any less "true" or less fictional than the others, since *all* of them are finally fictions. (4)

McHale qualifies this statement in the next paragraph in order to stress that, however fictional, constructions of postmodernism should be distinguished from each other according to certain criteria, namely of self-consistency, scope, productiveness and, more importantly for him, interest. Therefore, he argues,

If as literary historians we construct the objects of our description ("the Renaissance," "romanticism," "postmodernism") in the very act of describing them, we should strive at the very least to construct *interesting* objects. Naturally I believe that the fiction of postmodernism which I have constructed in this book is a superior construction. (5)

McHale's "superior construction" emphasises the "ism" in postmodernism in order to argue that the term does not signify an "after the present" or "after the modern," but an "after the modernist movement." In this sense, the post and -ist are taken literally to mean succession and/or reaction to modernism. McHale proceeds to construct a literary historical scheme whereby the dominant concerns of modernism are seen as *epistemological* and those of postmodernism as *ontological*. According to this categorisation, modernist texts tend to ask questions about knowledge, one's role in it, about the degree of certainty and reliability of this knowledge and so on, whereas postmodernist texts ask questions about the world or worlds, about texts in those worlds and, finally, about the self or selves in the world and the text. Furthermore, McHale

argues, the distinction is never as clear-cut as it may sound, since the texts he purports to analyse occupy a liminal space. He is therefore interested in showing how works by such writers as Beckett, Nabokov, and Pynchon among others illustrate and work through the transition or crossover between modernism and postmodernism. Thus, for example, Beckett's trilogy incorporates this scheme quite neatly in McHale's view, with *Molloy* (1950; 1955) as modernist, *Malone Dies* (1951; 1956) as "hesitating" between modernism (epistemology) and postmodernism (ontology) and, finally, with *The Unnamable* (1952; 1959) as postmodernist or ontological.

An obvious problem with McHale's categorisation of modernist and postmodernist texts is exactly this distinction between epistemology and ontology: to what extent are epistemological questions also ontological ones and vice versa? In other words, when a text asks questions about epistemology, about knowledge and the possibility of knowledge, does it not also implicitly ask questions about the state of being on which this questioning mode depends? Conversely, when texts ask questions about being in a particular or specifically defined world, do they not also apply a kind of epistemological scrutiny in doing so?

Furthermore, it seems to me that issues relating to modes of knowledge and modes of being which McHale so concretely distinguishes in fiction, come together in the questions that literature in the modern world posits about the literary or textual representation of reality in general. In this sense, postmodernist fiction is seen as a realist art form, as a direct representation of the world of postmodernity. For McHale, an unambiguously postmodern world is reflected in a postmodern literature. When he argues, therefore, that postmodernism foregrounds the ontological as opposed to the epistemological, he implies that the mode of being in a postmodern world is assimilated and reproduced in postmodern art forms. Again, the distinction from modernism is significant in that it is assumed that modernism only suspected and tentatively touched upon the kind of reality that postmodernism is experiencing. As an example of this difference, McHale discusses the use of cinematic techniques in postmodernist literature. He argues that while modernism employed and foregrounded these techniques, postmodernism incorporates them as an integral aspect of the reality which it inevitably expresses:

Postmodernist fiction at its most mimetic holds the mirror up to everyday life in advanced industrial societies, where reality is pervaded by the "miniature escape fantasies" of television and the movies ... After all, if the culture as a whole seems to hover between reality and televised fictions, what could be more appropriate than for the texts of that culture to hover between literal reality and a cinematic or television metaphor? (128)

The reason therefore for the proliferation of cinematic and televisual techniques in postmodernist fiction is that it reflects contemporary reality. If modernism, then, employed these techniques at a time when they were not as crucial to a sense of everyday reality as they seem to be now, it did so in a

peculiarly innovative and meaningful way: for the real difference between modernism and postmodernism in this respect is exactly that modernism employed these forms of alternative reality in order to make certain political points about the status of art in the culture of its time. Modernism saw in those forms the potential for a new, critical and transformative art form. Instead, postmodernism, according to McHale's argument at least, cannot help using the material at hand: a supposedly postmodernist culture of 24-hour television and Hollywood movies is inevitably reflected in a correspondingly postmodernist literature. What modernism resisted and attempted to reform, postmodernism assimilates and ultimately celebrates.

What emerges from this understanding of postmodernism is a relationship of direct reflection and representation of the real, however "unreal" that might seem at the present moment. In this sense, McHale's analysis follows from Fredric Jameson's conviction that "postmodernism expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism" (Brooker, ed.: 166). While Jameson bemoans what McHale celebrates, the assumption still remains the same: postmodernism is the art or literature of our time. Postmodernism is thus implicitly seen as a *realist* art form in that it expresses the "truth" of our social and historical moment. The question is: What is this "truth" or "reality" that postmodernism expresses? To answer this question let us return to Fredric Jameson. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson discusses the various new modes of postmodernist expression which relate to "the specificity of the postmodern experience of space and time" (166). A crucial aspect of this experience is the fragmentation of collective social reality into individual, isolated groups. Jameson here follows Lyotard in observing that "each group [speaks] a curious private language of its own, each profession develop[s] its private code or idiolect, and finally each individual [is] a kind of linguistic island" (Brooker ed.: 167). A phenomenon related to this fragmentation is the inability to conjure up a coherent and meaningful sense of the past: for Jameson, this is an aspect of contemporary experience which postmodernism expresses. He summarises it in the following terms:

... the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. (179)

Thus fragmentation, the resulting proliferation of idiolects and a loosening of the historical sense characterise postmodern experience. According to Jameson, this is expressed in postmodern writing in the use of *pastiche*. This, he argues, should be distinguished from the technique of parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral

practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (167)

Postmodernist literature uses pastiche rather than parody because the assumption of a common or normal linguistic practice is no longer tenable. Furthermore, the argument goes, with the demise of modernism, no literary practice can claim to shock or to innovate any longer. All has been said and done, all new and avant-garde techniques have been repeated more than once and have been normalised into canonical styles studied in university departments or exhibited in the great metropolitan museums. As Jameson puts it,

... in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past. (169)

Hence, according to Jameson, the pervasive *nostalgia* which postmodernist art represents and expresses. Pastiche and nostalgia are related modes in this scenario, as the impossibility of newness drives the postmodern artist into a constant regurgitation, and reformulation of past styles and themes. Such nostalgic tendencies are manifested in a type of neo-primitivism or the postmodernist fascination with story-telling and the renewed interest in myth and folklore. At the same time, the awareness of the limits of innovation results in a kind of narcissistic concern with the artistic medium itself, as even this repetition of older forms and styles challenges the borderline between what is traditionally considered artistic and the banal. Thus the postmodernist novel, painting or piece of sculpture, will often incorporate elements from areas of life which are thought inartistic or not traditionally accepted sources for art: video and television, popular music, science fiction, detective stories, etc.

We may want to ask at this point: what is the purpose and effect of this new form? How does it relate to the contemporary reality it so accurately reflects? If, as Jameson argues postmodernism is ultimately a narcissistic kind of practice, how can it claim to be the art of "our time"? If, furthermore, it depends on arbitrary juxtapositions of individual languages, how does it tell stories which have a bearing on our understanding of the past, present and future?

These are questions which Linda Hutcheon addresses in *The Politics of Postmodernism*. According to Hutcheon's conception of postmodernist literature, or "metafiction" as she calls it, it is with an exploration of the relationship between the writing of history and the telling of stories that this supposedly new practice concerns itself. Here, then, the notion of individual and

isolated linguistic islands is celebrated for its emphasis on the impossibility of telling any "one" story with claims to accuracy and truth. According to Hutcheon, postmodernist novels enact a kind of critique of history and historiography, exploring the limits of narrative representation and the threshold between fact and fiction. That, she claims, is a peculiarly postmodernist preoccupation. In the novels of Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Hutcheon sees this kind of "historiographic metafiction" in operation. She observes that, "here narrative representation - story-telling - is a historical and a political act. Perhaps it always is" (Brooker, ed.: 233).

If story-telling is always already a historical and political act, how does postmodernist story-telling differ from other narrative forms? Like most theorists of postmodernism, Hutcheon feels obliged to explain how postmodernist practices can be distinguished from modernist ones:

The past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled – as various forms of modernist art suggest through their implicit view of the "nightmare" of history. The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power ... In a very real sense, postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation. (239)

Postmodernism, as opposed to modernism, according to Hutcheon, is uniquely aware of the problems inherent in representations of the past: "We only have access to the past today through its traces," Hutcheon states and it is our complex and difficult task to decipher them. A further problem with representation and one which Hutcheon claims is peculiar to the postmodern situation is that we are today more suspicious about the way these traces have been handed down to us. In the form of stories, these traces may not always tell the truth, or they may be telling a specific, individual truth:

[The] teller – of story or history – also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. (239)

This, Hutcheon concludes, is "the postmodernist paradox"! Again, one might be justified in wondering whether this is new in any way. Firstly, the claim that the modernist approach to history was that of an attempted escape or control is a reductive one. A discussion of the sense of history in modernism is beyond the scope of this paper; it seems, however, that both the sense of a collective and a personal history was an emphatic concern of modernist writers: Ezra Pound's *Cantos* is one testimony of that concern, Bertolt Brecht's rewriting of history plays another – to take two disparate examples. Secondly, the awareness of the unreliability inherent in story-telling is another quintessentially

modernist theme and narrative technique: Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, or Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* are only two examples of that preoccupation with the problems of discursive truth.

Once again, we come across the phenomenon of a highly ambiguous claim, a two-faced radicalism: on the one hand, postmodernist writing is supposed to distinguish itself from modernism in being more intensely aware of the problematic of narratives, both formally and in the discursive relations to history and truth. By being thus self-conscious about these problems, postmodernist literature is supposedly a form of "metafiction," that is, a constant commentary on and investigation of the act of writing itself. On the other hand, however, the same postmodernist characteristics can only be gauged in terms of a reaction to modernism, in that supposedly postmodernist writing engages more actively with the world, whereas modernism supposedly withdrew from it into an esoteric, almost ahistorical universe of its own. This latter claim implies that postmodernism is a form of heightened realism, a type of representation which is unique to the supposed postmodern condition. In this sense, postmodernism can be seen as both a kind of "hyper-modernism" and an "anti-modernism." These two prefixes, it seems to me, are what the "post" in postmodernism conceals: "hyper" in that it isolates aspects of modernism and amplifies them to serve as sophisticated formal techniques; "anti" in that it refuses and defuses their critical, negative and transformative intent. If modernism was an art of confrontation, postmodernism is one of capitulation.

It seems to me that it would be much simpler if theorists declared their allegiances by choosing either the "hyper" or the "anti." We would then have to choose between those who wish to continue the modern/ist project and those who wish to forget it. Alternatively, even more useful would be to abandon the suffix "modernism" altogether and stick to other formal categories, such as "contemporary realism," "political allegory," "late-twentieth-century storytelling," "consumerist narrative," you name it ... Then, of course, we would be resisting a publishing consensus which allows endless handbooks on postmodernism to appear in bookshops every month. To resist or even to think critically about this would be no mean feat for highly-consumerised cultures such as ours!

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NOTES

1. For a concise exposition, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 5-16.

2. For a discussion of postmodernism as fashion, see David Frisby's *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985).
3. This revision of earlier positions is by no means a unique phenomenon in the arena of writing about postmodernism. Among others, Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale have qualified their pronouncements about the postmodern in subsequent publications; while the former moved on to other areas altogether such as travel literature and neo-pragmatism, relying on postmodernism as a loosely-used and widely-accepted assumption, the latter has refashioned the term by adding to it the notion of "constructivism," as an inevitably and necessarily relativising angle.
4. In *Au Nom de l'art: Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1989), Thierry de Duve argues that "No other period of the history of the West has ever been more driven by the desire to periodise itself, than the one we call modernity." (p. 68, my translation)
5. Habermas distinguishes three categories of such attempts: the "antimodernism" of the "young conservatives," the "premodernism" of the "old conservatives" and the "postmodernism" of the "neoconservatives."
6. For a discussion of the relationship between modernism and the avant-garde as either a continuous impulse towards innovation or as a specific (and past) historical moment (the historical avant-gardes), see Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984) and Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1986).
7. See Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project," 107.
8. For marxist critiques of Jameson's reading of postmodernism, see Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today" (*Textual Practice*, 1, 1, 1987, pp. 32-47) and Warren Montag, "What Is at Stake in the Debate on Postmodernism?" (E. Ann Kaplan ed., *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, London and New York: Verso, 1988, 88-103) For a critique of the implicit ethnocentrism of Jameson's analysis of postmodernism, see Rey Chow, "Rereading Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: A Response to the 'Postmodern' Condition," *Cultural Critique*, 5, (1986), 69-93.
9. The provocative element of the celebration of war as the radical and male principle of "hygiene" for the modern world by the Italian Futurists, for example, was interestingly restated (and reinstated) by Baudrillard when (like a modern-day Marinetti) he claimed a few days before the West's attack on Iraq that the Gulf War would/could never actually take place.
10. See also Frank Kermode's study of eschatological discourses in *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford UP, 1967).

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Η παρούσα εργασία επιχειρεί να αποκαλύψει ορισμένες από τις εννοιολογικές αντιφάσεις πάνω στις οποίες φαίνεται να αναπτύσσεται ο μετανεωτερικός λόγος. Δεν έχουν όλοι οι θεωρητικοί του μετανεωτερικού επίγνωση αυτών των θεωρητικών αποριών, παρ' όλα αυτά προσπαθούν να τις μετατρέψουν σε μια θεωρία γενικής εφαρμοσιμότητας, συνέπειας και συνοχής. Επίσης, η αξίωση του μετανεωτερικού για καινοφάνεια εξετάζεται στα πλαίσια της συνεχιζόμενης διαμάχης για το θάνατο του νεωτερικού. Το γεγονός ότι ο μετανεωτερισμός ταυτόχρονα διακηρύσσει και αγάλλεται για αυτό το θάνατο θεωρείται εδώ ως μια ύποπτη θεωρητική κίνηση η οποία, κατ' έναν έμμεσο τρόπο ομοιάζει στενά με το φαινόμενο της μόδας. Με αυτήν την έννοια, το πνευματικό φαινόμενο του μετανεωτερισμού μπορεί να θεωρηθεί ως μια ακόμα εκδοχή της αέναης επανεμφάνισης του νέου.