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The Poetics of Postmodernism

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□ ABSTRACT □

Postmodernism – as a term and a critical and cultural theory – is still engulfed by much academic debate and semantic perplexity. It is true that some critics find it sufficient to consider it chronologically as a movement which appeared *after* modernism; however, the historical and theoretical circumstances that caused the demise of modernism and the rise of the emergent postmodernism are numerous. This paper seeks to delineate postmodernism as an expanding enterprise that incessantly dominates almost every aspect of the contemporary "global village". Thus, the paper addresses the central attitudes and deliberations engendered by the term. It also highlights the problematic relationship between modernism and postmodernism. The "post-" syndrome is equally prioritised not only because of its morphological relevance, but because this epoch distinguishes itself by the culture of the "post-".

Keywords: modernity, postmodernity, modernism, postmodernism.

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شعرية مابعد الحداثة

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□ الملخّص □

مايزال "مابعد الحداثة" – مصطلحاً و نظرية – محاطةً بالكثير من السجال الأكاديمي والغموض الدلالي. صحيح أن بعض النقاد ينظرون إليه من خلال موقعه الكرونولوجي ويعتبرون ظهوره بعد "الحداثة" مدخلاً كافياً لدراستها ولكن الظروف التاريخية والنظرية التي أدت إلى زوال "الحداثة" وانبثاق "مابعد الحداثة" متعددة جداً. فاختزال ظاهرة المعرفية إلى منظور أحادي تشويه للحقيقة. لذلك يحاول هذا البحث أن يؤطر "مابعد الحداثة" على أنه مفهوم آخذٌ بالسيطرة على معظم نواحي "القرية العالمية" المعاصرة. ويتناول البحث عدداً من المسائل الجدلية الدائرة حول "مابعد الحداثة" وحول العلاقة الإشكالية بينها وبين "الحداثة" مع التركيز على قضية "المابعد" ليس لأهميتها المورفولوجية فقط بل لأنها أسست لثقافة راهنة تدعى "المابعدية".

كلمات مفتاحية: الحداثة، مابعد الحداثة.

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The melee of the 20th century theories has finally given rise to postmodernism – an unrestricted and intermixing carnival of cultural, critical, and aesthetic philosophies. Although this pluralistic concept is hyper-defined, it is still overloaded with undicidability and indeterminacy. This, after all, is characteristically congruent with the nature of postmodernism, which is horizontal, agnostic and antitotalising. Indeed, it has been recurrently institutionalised as a paratactic movement, which fundamentally resists rigid forms and boundaries. Rejecting hierarchical logocentrism to the extremes, postmodernism suggests multipartite heterogeneity that involves numerous local "voices from the margins speaking from positions of difference" (Storey, 1993: 161), which intermingle in a state of flux across the globe. "In the world today everything is shared" (DeLillo, 2003: 60). This includes nationalities, cultures, traditions, religions, rituals, mythologies, products, realities and truths. In short, it is the language of a decentralised world which undercuts authoritarian rationality and engenders a colossal critical shift.

The shift marks the passage from a central textual logocentric wholeness into a fragmented idiolectical imaged distribution. The "word", which has long enclosed a single "truth", has metamorphosed into disseminating/ed "words" that often deliver a plethora of "truths" – regional, ironic, contingent, micropolitical and rhizomatous. One noteworthy outcome of this demassification has been a sense of whirling uncertainty and a schizophrenic crisis of national/cultural identity. Capitalist-developed societies, as many thinkers claim, have started to collapse inwardly into collective boredom, cultural exhaustion and economic desperation crowned by contemporary diaspora. Evolving further, these key factors trigger excessive violence and terror in the postmodern battle-like worldview.

David Harvey sees postmodernism, in his *The Condition of Postmodernity*, as "a concept to be wrestled with, and such a battleground of conflicting opinions and political forces that it can no longer be ignored" (1989: 40). Thus, he has strategically laid the foundations and the main features of postmodernism. It is such a turbulent domain accumulating various attitudes and viewpoints, which compete, scuffle and seek legitimisation. Eventually, postmodernism has become a "political lobby", which controls almost every aspect of contemporary life alienating other trends and tenets. In this respect, Terry Eagleton declares that, "For all its vaunted openness to the Other, postmodernism can be as exclusive and censorious as the orthodoxies it opposes" (2001: 97).

Postmodern cultural politics is thoroughly associated with international capitalism and globalisation as Fredric Jameson regards it in his prominent study *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. He believes 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" (2001: 3). Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, also asserts that "postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (1988: 4). Most of the aspects mentioned above are collectively reiterated by Christopher Butler in a summative statement which intends to establish a kind of canon for postmodernism. He says,

I will be writing about postmodernist artists, intellectual gurus, academic critics, philosophers, and social scientists in what follows, as if they were all members of a loosely constituted and quarrelsome political party. This party is by and large internationalist and "progressive". It is on the left rather than the right, and it tends to see everything, from abstract painting to personal relationships, as political undertakings. It is not particularly unified in doctrine, and even those who have most significantly contributed ideas to its

manifestoes sometimes indignantly deny membership – and yet the postmodernist party tends to believe that its time has come. It is certain of its uncertainty, and often claims that it has seen through the sustaining illusions of others, and so has grasped the "real" nature of the cultural and political institutions which surround us. (2002: 2)

Consequently, it might be an unquestioned issue that we are living in a dominating "postmodern age"; yet it would be highly debatable to define and demarcate this epoch. Since Jean-Francois Lyotard published his pioneering book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* defining postmodernism "as incredulity towards metanarratives" (1984: xxiv), there have been many attempts to define postmodernism. Many institutions, departments and websites have been established, and a great number of books, articles, reviews, and studies have been devoted to the postmodern issue. It has been represented as an immense somersault in social, political, economic, cultural, and critical spheres and discourses. By just inputting the term postmodernism in a search engine the Internet would yield about 2,920,000 links in only 0,12 seconds. The definitions are, therefore, multitudinous and diverse, numbering almost as many as those who have sought to examine this *Weltanschauung*. Then "it's clear that we are in the presence of a buzzword" as Dick Hebdige describes it (1989: 372).

Obviously, the postmodern debate has largely dominated the critical and cultural domains over the past four decades. It has engaged capitalists, Marxists, psychoanalysts, poststructuralists, feminists, postcolonialists, architectural critics and new historicists. Their major objective is to produce an accessible and definable concept. The irony is that they have multiplied the diversity because their approaches are based on contradictory and rather dismissive positions.

The postmodern polemics, therefore, has generated a medley of trends and positions. It has divided critics, theoretically, into "advocates" and "adversaries". Thus, postmodernism shows a hybridity of positive optimistic attitudes towards the state of cultural and socioeconomic prosperity; coupled with another negative pessimistic stance regarding the loss of "reality" and the institutionalisation of simulation and consumerist values within society. Some critics, even, express their preference for the high modernist cultural enterprise over the superficiality and meaninglessness championed by the postmodern theory. Hence, within its poetics, postmodernism assumes a set of ambivalences based on the ludic free play of the signification process and the over-extension of non-crystallised and decentralised spheres, along with the practising of double-coding, irony and parody in art and architecture.

However, the debate has not been restricted to the world of academia but it has spread out involving other aspects of contemporary life and altering the form and function of the academy, the museum and the family. Postmodernism offers new ways of perceiving the world and its components. It is rapidly getting into realms as diverse and distinct as architecture, fiction, history, film, media, visual arts, social sciences, philosophy, international relations, decoration, design, fashion and even sexuality. The impact is introducing different ways of understanding the term itself.

Of course, postmodernism has a rather long and tumultuous history in the West. Tim Woods, to start with, suggests many different successive dates for the development of the expression in different domains – "the late 1950s for art, the late 1960s for architecture, the early 1980s for cultural theory, the late 1980s for many social sciences" (1999: 12). Nevertheless, starting from the 1870s, according to Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, the word "postmodern" began to appear in the writings of European artists and critics. John Watkins Chapman, for example, referred to some paintings, which were avant-garde and

"more modern" than the French impressionist paintings, as postmodern (Best and Kellner, 2004). In 1917, Rudolf Pannwitz used the word while describing the sense of decline and nihilism prevailing in Western cultures and societies. Later, Arnold Toynbee used the term in the 1950s to designate the state of knowledge marking, thus, the fourth stage of the Western history development as the "post-Modern" age. However, he did not intend to systematise a theory of the new postmodern era as Best and Kellner claim.

European societies entered a new cultural phase in the second half of the 20th century. Almost everything was changing gradually, radically or outrageously. The postmodern rush had already begun and it was going to sweep away centres and boundaries, rigid forms and uninhabitable compounds, authors and patriarchs, "history" and "power". Shocked and bewildered, devastated and exhausted communities woke up in the aftermath of World War II to reconsider many of their past beliefs. The void, created by Nietzsche's dead God in addition to the fiasco of Reason and Science, was absorbing both the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic entities and blurring their roles and borders.

Nietzsche … proclaimed the "Death of God" as well as the death of Christian morality and metaphysics. With one wave of his philosophical wand, the central symbols, institutions and beliefs of Western culture, which had already suffered a tremendous blow by the Age of Reason, disappeared … What remained were only dark waves of Nothingness – a Void (Powell, 1998: 11).

On the other hand, reason could not create an alternative central unity. Thinking that they were emerging from the ages of darkness and ignorance, the philosophers of the 18th century, who had an unshakable confidence in the power of human reason, sought to achieve the desired humane utopia of prosperous progress by means of scientific knowledge. Yet, capital-centred systems alienated many fractions within the same society and the huge growth of industry and technology has divided communities and increased poverty rates. New geographical discoveries resulted in finding new sources of "cheap" degraded human power and new natural resources to be exploited. Consequently, the clash of interests among the giant countries was souring and has led eventually to two brutal world wars, where science was used effectively to invent more homicidal weapons.

In the following years, the scene was not at all encouraging. Wars spread all over the world in the name of the great principles of humanity. Respected and trusted governments were investing in wars and launching them. Sexist and racial discriminations were subject to more questioning as the colonial countries and their WASP leaders started to fail to justify and legitimise themselves. Civilized societies were killing their "coloured" members while the bookshelves of any middle class family probably contained the *Bible* and the *Communist Manifesto*, along with Kipling's writings and the adventures of Tarzan. Science has inspired buildings that alienated their inhabitants, and fostered the replacement of human beings by robots, which are cheaper and more efficient, increasing consequently frustration and unemployment rates. Science has also produced the atomic bomb launching the nuclear age and the armament race, the Cold War and the Star War project. Hence, the promises and the grand narratives of the Enlightenment and high modernism have failed to establish a solid commitment, awareness, unity, equality and peace. Therefore, a profound rejection of the status quo and a need for change on all levels were growing rapidly among European and American communities.

From '68 we can date the widespread jettisoning of the belief amongst educated, "radical" factions, not only in Marxist-Leninism but in any kind of power structure administered from a bureaucratically organised centre, and the suspicion of any kind of

political programme formulated by an elite and disseminated through a hierarchical chain of command (Hebdige, 1998: 375).

Because of this failure of all the modernist grand narratives above postmodernism was determined to distance itself from modernism. This distancing requires a disentanglement of the overlapping terminology: modernism, modernity, modernisation, postmodernism and postmodernity. Madan Sarup states that "[w]e should be aware that many writers in this field change register from one term to the next and often switch usages" (1993: 130). Hassan considers postmodernism a cultural domain that encompasses the literary, philosophical and aesthetic arts, while postmodernity, on the other hand, implies the "geopolitical scheme" that has come out and prevailed along the 20th century. Later in his essay "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: the Local/Global Context", Hassan suggests that postmodernity – the global process – presents, as one of its multitrack features, the cultural phenomenon, which is postmodernism that entails merging genres, undermining social boundaries and a high-tech prosperous consumerism. Postmodernity is thus, according to Hassan,

a vast umbrella under which stand various phenomena: postmodernism in the arts, poststructuralism in philosophy, feminism in social discourse, postcolonial and cultural studies in academe, but also multi-national capitalism, cybertechnologies, international terrorism, assorted separatist, ethnic, nationalist, and religious movements – all standing under, but not causally subsumed by, postmodernity (2005).

In his introductory guide, Sarup polarises "modernity" with "postmodernity" and "modernism" with "postmodernism", keeping in mind the process of "modernisation". This latter term stands for the socio-political and economic relationship between the change and development in one community and the progression of industrialisation and technology. This process is driven, according to Sarup, by the "expanding capitalist world market" (1993: 131). However, Sarup's polarisation concerning modernity/postmodernity and modernism/postmodernism is temporal as well as cultural and aesthetic.

He alleges that modernity has come into being with the advent of the Renaissance. It summarises all social, economic and political systems that have shaped the West and have created the modern capitalist industrial states. Successively, *post*modernity comes *after* modernity, but it carries within itself a number of ambiguities in relation to its nature and connection with modernity. Many thinkers question the independence of postmodernity from the previous modernity. They inquire also, whether it is a kind of continuity or discontinuity. Sarup maintains the general characteristics of the era as an open democratic space wherein a diversity of pluralistic subjects and identities fluctuates and plays haphazardly. This particular contingency has dominated society and has replaced the central progress by a globalised consumerism advocated and buttressed by surface pleasure and instinctive media-based stimuli.

Modernisation and modernity concern themselves with the economic, political and social movements and transformations in certain periods of time. By contrast, modernism conjoins, and is illustrated, through "a particular set of cultural or aesthetic styles associated with the artistic movement which originated around the turn of the century and have dominated the various arts until recently" (Sarup, 1993: 131). Put differently, modernism presents the culture of modernity and postmodernism stands for the culture of postmodernity that renders, according to Sarup, "a movement in advanced capitalist culture, particularly in the arts" (1993: 131). He, therefore, associates postmodernism with parody, pastiche, irony, randomness, fragmentation, playfulness, and textualisation (1993: 132). This attitude is similar to that of Woods in *Beginning Postmodernism*. For him,

postmodernity describes the prevalent condition of life at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. It labels the cultural, economic, social, political and technological features of the postindustrial, service-oriented incinerating western societies. "*Postmodernism* on the other hand describes the broad aesthetic and intellectual projects in our society, on the plane of theory" (Woods, 1999: 10).

What Hutcheon says about this debatable dichotomy reiterates the arguments above. She distinguishes between the postmodernity and postmodernism by socially and philosophically "periodising" the first and artistically "culturalising" the second. In other words, for Hutcheon, postmodernity is the condition of contemporary life where the postmodernist architecture, art, literature, music and other cultural aspects flourish. Indeed, Dino Felluga asserts this categorisation in his online "Modules on Hutcheon: On Postmodernity".

On the whole, she agrees with other critics regarding the elements that make up the postmodern condition: a world dominated by the logic of capitalism, which has no regard for the rights of oppressed laborers or the ravagement of the natural world; a society increasingly under the scrutiny of government agencies that insist on casting their disciplining gaze ever deeper into our private lives; an increasing reliance on technologies that separate us from other people and the natural world, thus feeding into our senses of atomism and unease; an emphasis on flat, spatial representations … that serve to sever us from our former senses of temporality and history; and a culture increasingly dominated by simulacra.… thus contributing to our sense of separation from the real. (2005)

It is clear that postmodernism demonstrates almost a distinctive case in the realm of academic nomenclature by adopting the controversial prefix "post-". Successive movements, usually, are named to highlight unique characteristics that almost always discontinue their predecessors. Although chronologically superseding it and theoretically repudiating it, romanticism is not, for example, postclassicism. But, by designating the "post-" feature in postmodernism, a direct relationship is foregrounded – a "love-hate relationship" from a psychoanalytical perspective

The prefix can be read, therefore, as a negative rejection of the main word it modifies.

Thus, postmodern discourses and practices are frequently characterized as anti-modern interventions which explicitly break with modern ideologies, styles, and practices that many postmodernists see as oppressive or exhausted (Best and Kellner, 2004).

This discontinuity, like any upheaval in the history of literature, can be interpreted, according to Best and Kellner, either positively or negatively. It might be an emancipation of the arts from the old constraints in favour of new forms and discourses. On the other hand, some might consider it as "a loss of traditional values, certainties, and stabilities" (Best and Kellner, 2004).

"Post-" also gives the impression of continuity, progression and dependence rather than a rupture. In this case, "post-" means "after." No wonder some thinkers believe that postmodernism simply reiterates and intensifies the issues that modernism addressed throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. The basis for this assumption could be mainly taken from these shared aspects, like absurd fragmentation, anti-rationalism, pornography and subversion that can be traced in both modern and postmodern art, especially in the transitional years of the post-war period. This makes some critics like Frank Kermode consider these new artistic modes as "blood-cousin[s] to the earlier tendencies" (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976: 34-35). For Jean François Lyotard, postmodernism is a part of the modern as the cycles of challenge and change are so

complementary. "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard, 1984: 79).

It seems that the more postmodernism is addressed the more ambiguous and challenging it becomes. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon believes that the "debate over the definition of both modernism and postmodernism has now been going on for years…. There is little firm agreement on their limiting dates, their defining characteristics, even the players in the game" (1988: 48). The paradox for Hutcheon is inaugurated by the name itself – *post*modernism "signals its contradictory dependence upon and independence from the modernism that both historically preceded it and literally made it possible" (1988: 23). In fact, Lyotard himself has already underlined the paradoxicality embedded in the term. "*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (1984: 81). This creates what Ihab Hassan calls "*semantic* instability" (1998: 588), the reasons of which are postmodernism's "relative youth" – although it is surpassing now its fiftieth anniversary – and its "semantic kinship" to other current unstable terms (1998: 588). It must be understood, however, that the semantic fluidity and the paradoxical identity of the movement are part and parcel of its definition rather than signs of lacking definition.

It is obvious that the genesis of postmodernism, as demonstrated in detail above, goes back to multiple sources. The anticlimactic fiasco of the Enlightenment, the post-Nietszchian aporia and the inertia generated by World War II contributed to the rise of this movement. It is also obvious that the heterogeneous nature of the concept has engendered a Janus-faced reception. Some consider it dismissive, censorious and capitalist. Others strongly argue that it is assimilitative, open-minded and anticapitalist. This chaotic position also surfaces in the circulation of the opaque and fluid terminology related to the issue. At the centre of the dilemma, is the prefix "post-" itself, because it problematises the nexus with modernism. This is why the paper has addressed the major approaches to postmodernism and scrutinised its basic terminology. It might be said that the more postmodernism is addressed the more debate is needed. However, as argued above, establishing the common denominators, mapping out the territory and coming to grips with the key terms make postmodernism not only accessible but substantially definable as well.

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