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# Post-Postmodernism: Mapping Out the Zeitgeist of the New Millennium

## ≈ Abstract

At the turn of the millennium, many theorists questioned the survival of postmodernism and, although it is true that their statements were not supported by a general consensus, the new century brought with it an intense debate on the subject. With this in mind, the aim of this article is to map out the taxonomy of the alternatives to postmodernism proposed by several theorists during the first decade of the twenty-first century in order to understand their nature. This article analyses an extensive corpus of theories, to arrive at the conclusion that this period was an interstitial moment of change whose direction seemed to be heading towards the recovery of a much-nuanced unfinished project of modernity, as advocated by Jürgen Habermas. This attempt at debunking postmodern relativism was thwarted by the social dissatisfaction generated by the bank bailout of 2008 and the ulterior intensification of neoliberalism. However, the subsequent attempts to define the zeitgeist of this cultural phase that followed postmodernism started to dwindle. The desired recovery of this unfinished project responds to a need for univocity that, during the 2010s, leads to a hyper-neoliberalism sponsored by populism and constructed on a kind of reactionary post-truth.

Keywords:

postmodernism; post-postmodernism; unfinished project of modernity; Jürgen Habermas; paradigm shift

## ≈ Resumen

A comienzos del milenio, muchos teóricos cuestionaron la supervivencia del posmodernismo y, aunque es cierto que dichas afirmaciones no estaban respaldadas por un consenso general, el nuevo siglo trajo consigo un intenso debate sobre el tema. Con esto en mente, el objetivo de este artículo es trazar la taxonomía de las alternativas al posmodernismo propuestas por varios teóricos durante la primera década del siglo XXI para comprender su naturaleza. Este artículo analiza un extenso corpus de teorías y llega a la conclusión de que este periodo fue un momento intersticial de cambio cuya dirección parecía estar encaminada hacia una muy matizada recuperación del proyecto inacabado de la modernidad, preconizado por Jürgen Habermas. Este intento de deshacerse del relativismo posmoderno se vio frustrado por la insatisfacción social generada por el rescate bancario de 2008 y la ulterior intensificación del neoliberalismo. Después de esos eventos, los intentos de definir el espíritu de la fase cultural que seguiría al posmodernismo comenzaron a disminuir. La deseada recuperación del proyecto inacabado responde a una necesidad de univocidad que lleva durante la década de 2010 a un hiper-neoliberalismo auspiciado por el populismo y construido sobre una especie de posverdad reaccionaria.

Palabras clave:

posmodernismo; pos-posmodernismo; proyecto inacabado de la modernidad; Jürgen Habermas; cambio de paradigma

**A** the turn of the millennium, the debate around the state of postmodernism intensified. The public had been primed and the literature on the topic was pervasive. Nowadays, there is a vast number of academic publications with the word *post-postmodernism* in their titles – if not with a combination of the words *passing, death, wake, after* or *beyond* and *postmodernism*. However, the outcome of that debate is unclear, as there is still no consensus on the categorisation, meaning and definition of postmodernism itself. In his article “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust”, Ihab Hassan raised – and cryptically answered – the following question: “what was postmodernism in the first place? I am not at all certain, for I know less about it today than I did some thirty years ago” (2003, 200). Together with Charles Jencks, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Linda Hutcheon, Hal Foster or Jean-François Lyotard, Hassan is a leading figure on postmodern theory and one, therefore, must pay careful attention to his words. However, as Jameson assures in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, even though the term is conflicted and contradictory, “for good or ill, we cannot *not* use it” (1991, xxii; emphasis in the original). As Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker – proponents of *metamodernism*, one of the most successful alternatives to postmodernism – put the point: “after all, ‘the’ postmodern is merely the ‘catchphrase’ for a multiplicity of contradictory tendencies, the ‘buzzword’ for a plurality of incoherent sensibilities” (2010, n.p.). However, from an ontological point of view, postmodernism, in all of its definitions and representations, involves a questioning of objectivity, of a referential and descriptive definition of reality. This entails, in Jameson’s words, “a new depthlessness, [...] a consequent weakening of historicity [...] [and] a whole new type of emotional ground tone” (1991, 6). The theorists who tried to describe the new cultural phase at the turn of the millennium attempted to find a solution to the problems created by the problem laid out by Jameson.

As the turn-of-the-century post-postmodernism is still not fully defined, I find it fruitful to provide a thorough analysis of several relevant theories developed at the time. This will serve as a helpful navigating tool for researchers to map out the direction that cultural theory was taking at the beginning of the twenty-first century towards Jürgen Habermas’s idea of resuming the unfinished project of modernity, that is, towards the recovery of the rational possibilities associated with the modern age after the postmodern interlude. Habermas expressed the concept of modernity in “Modernity versus Postmodernity” in the following terms: “the project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic” (1981, 9). This project placed the individual at the centre of a thorough examination of the world through an objective use of epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. This clashes with postmodern thought, since, as Jameson indicates:

Habermas seeks to rescue and recommemorate what both [Adorno and himself] see as the essentially negative, critical, and Utopian power of the great high modernisms. On the other hand, his attempt to associate these last with the spirit of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment marks a decisive break indeed with Adorno and Horkheimer’s somber *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which the scientific ethos

of the philosophers is dramatized as a misguided will to power and domination over nature, and their desacralizing program as the first stage in the development of a sheerly instrumentalizing worldview which will lead straight to Auschwitz. (1991, 58)

We should bear in mind that Auschwitz is, according to Jean-François Lyotard (1991 [1988]), the starting point of the postmodern moment. This is, probably, a vision with a more apt focus on the state of the question at the turn of the millennium. Once Lyotard’s vision of disbelief towards metanarratives was not capable of formally explaining reality, it seemed necessary to re-read these totalizing structures. By the end of the twentieth century, there were common characteristics in the works of a large group of writers, architects, musicians and plastic artists who were similarly oriented towards something different from postmodernism. In literature, the works of David Foster Wallace and the young generation of New Sincerity writers that followed in his wake – Dave Eggers, Mark Z. Danielewski, Jonathan Safran Foer, Zadie Smith or Nicole Krauss – tried to recover an objective look on reality through a literature of honesty, informed by a kind of neo-Romantic irony. In 2010, Vermeulen and van den Akker propose the names of those artists that share in this new trend and include the names of “quirky cinema” directors such as Michel Gondry or Wes Anderson. This trend, Vermeulen and van den Akker assure, can also be seen in:

Herzog and de Meuron’s negotiations between the permanent and the temporary; in Bas Jan Ader’s questioning of Reason by the irrational; in Peter Doig’s re-appropriation of culture through nature; and in Gregory Crewdson and David Lynch’s adaptation of civilization by the primitive. It can be perceived in Olafur Eliasson, Glen Rubsamen, Dan Attoe, and Armin Boehm’s obsessions with the commonplace ethereal, in Catherine Opie’s fixation with the quotidian sublime. It can be observed in Justine Kurland, Kaye Donachie, and David Thorpe’s fascination with fictitious sects, or in Darren Almond and Charles Avery’s interest for fictional elsewhere. (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, n.p.)

The works of these creators tried to reach a rapprochement in the sense that, on the one hand, they continued to have that baroque theatricality that came from postmodernism, whilst on the other they employed a symbolist sincerity that appealed to utopian humanism and the unfinished project of modernity.

There is enough evidence – both from the new nomenclature and from the new surge of manifestos and criticism directed towards the fundamental aspects of postmodernism – to support the claim that the change that took place at the turn of the millennium was, in fact, not a paradigm shift, at least not in the terms in which Thomas Samuel Kuhn defines it in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970 [1962]). Instead, it was directed towards the recovery of a nuanced paradigm of modernity.

Instead of regarding it as a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense, I argue that the first decade of the twenty-first century constituted an interstitial moment – what we could call a “liminal post-

postmodernism” – that resulted, during the 2010s, in both a global dominance of neoliberalism and an intensified form of capitalism after the bank bailout of 2008. Taking the 9/11 attacks as a symbolic starting point, this article will offer an analysis of the different viewpoints with which theorists addressed the change of cultural phase. This phase can be situated around 2012, since this year represents a symbolic end of this liminal phase as epitomised by the fading out of the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement. The bank bailout represents both the moment when the project of modernity was absorbed by what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) called “Empire” and a turning point when the proposals for a new post-postmodern alternative started to lose relevance.

Even though 9/11 is a culturally specific event, the imposition of the trauma of a particular nation upon a “universal” theory of modernity/postmodernity stems from the global hegemony of the USA. Despite the fact that many people in the world do not take 9/11 as a cultural/historical marker, they suffer the consequences of American foreign policy, even if it is not at the centre of their cultural world.

### The Foretold Passing of Postmodernism

The crisis of the early twenty-first century gave rise to the perfect frame for the proliferation of alternatives to a paradigm that was not working and, although the end of postmodernism is symbolized by 9/11, the debate over its decline had been active for quite some time. Relevant scholars and cultural theorists – Marshall Berman (1988 [1982]), John Frow (1990), Charles Altieri (1998) – had been proclaiming it in the 1980s and the 1990s. In the words of Josh Toth,

since the end of the 1980s an increasing number of literary critics and theorists have announced, or simply assumed, the end of postmodernism. The race is on to define an emergent period that seems to have arrived after the end of history. (2010, 2)

Edward Docx’s unambiguous title “Postmodernism is Dead” (2011) represents perfectly the nature of the cultural turn during the first decade of the new millennium. Docx announced: “we are entering a new age. Let’s call it the Age of Authenticism and see how we get on” (2011, n.p.). Because of the need to defend oneself from the ubiquitous postmodern values, in this new age, “we desire to be redeemed from the grossness of our consumption, the sham of our attitudinising, the teeming insecurities on which social networking sites were founded and now feed. We want to become reacquainted with the spellbinding narrative of expertise” (2011, n.p.).

Before Docx, Alan Kirby had already published his persuasive article with the equally clear title of “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond”. Here, Kirby declared that Postmodernism was “dead and buried” (2006, 34), whilst recognising that, within the academic world at least, it was still studied profusely. The pervasiveness of this academic world, nonetheless, gave the feeling that it was still alive, whilst, on the contrary, the actual lack of cultural production where authentic postmodern characteristics

were present highlighted that postmodernism, in fact, was something of the past. For Kirby, the death of this postmodernism was not a new debate; it was something many theorists and critics from diverse fields had already commented upon. Nevertheless, in his book *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (2009), Kirby points out that

it can be argued with absolute assurance that a day will come when postmodernism is over as an appropriate or useful category to define the contemporary, even if some of its traits were to survive. It will only be a question of working out when this happened. (2009, 5)

This quote is paradigmatic of the caution with which the subject was approached and it flags up the diversity of the opinions pertaining to the matter. Kirby’s restraint can be understood within the volatile theoretical terrain upon which the foundations of postmodernism are grounded. In this light, the demise of postmodernism must also be equally unstable, despite the fact that authors such as Toth defended that “postmodernism, to a certain degree, persists” (2010, 4).

Kirby gives a detailed account of the debate on the death of post-structuralism, which had been taking place in the academic world since the mid-1990s (2009, 28). However, although Kirby-like positions regarding the impossibility of being certain that postmodernism is a thing of the past, many other theorists have repeated this mantra so persistently that it has become common currency. Even more significant is Linda Hutcheon’s epilogue entitled “Postmodern Afterthoughts”, which was first included in the 2002 edition of her well-known book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). Here, Hutcheon refers to the question that John Frow first poses in his “What was Postmodernism?” (1990), and Hassan’s article “Beyond Postmodernism” (2003) commences with the self-same interrogation. This question had already been brought forth by Frow more than a decade earlier, where the author clairvoyantly advocated for something that was already in the air and which Hutcheon, twelve years later, would declare:

For over a decade, diagnosticians have been pronouncing on its health, if not its demise [...] with some of the major players in the debate weighing in on the negative side: for people like Terry Eagleton [...] and Christopher Norris [...] postmodernism is certainly finished, even passé; indeed, for them it’s a failure, an illusion. Perhaps we should just say: it’s over. (2002 [1989], 165–6)

Other authors echo Hutcheon’s words and use them to describe what they perceive to be the waning of postmodernism as, for example, Neil Brooks and Josh Toth in their *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007). Jean-Michel Rabaté, in a similar vein, assures that at that moment it was “almost completely discarded” (2005, 10), whilst Andrew Hoberek’s article “Introduction: After Postmodernism” begins by saying that “the essays in this issue of Twentieth-Century Literature propose new models for understanding contemporary fiction in the wake of postmodernism’s waning influence” (2007, 233).

~ This position, as reiterated by Charles Altieri in his book *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts*, centres around the concept as something that is not vital to art: “No artist or writer is eager to ally with it, and even critics in the humanities now find affiliations with the term a little embarrassing” (1998, i).

The authors who heralded the death of postmodernism – or its transformation – also referred to the absence of a theoretical framework for the new cultural phase, among others, in the following titles: Gilles Lipovetsky’s *Hypermodern Times* (2005); Jeremy Green’s *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (2005); Raoul Eshelman’s *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008); Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Altermodern* (2009); Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s “Notes on Metamodernism” (2010); Josh Toth’s *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (2010); Noline Timmer’s *Do You Feel it Too?: The Post-postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010); Jeffrey T. Nealon’s *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012) or Peter Boxall’s *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013). The incontrovertible titles, with the exception of Peter Boxall’s, all attest to the substantial and relevant change that was being heralded.

### Crisis in Cultural Theory

In *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton describes the reasons why he believes that cultural theory, whilst having enjoyed great health during postmodernism, was now becoming a declining discipline. Cultural theory had turned its gaze from the objects of study that, according to him, really matter, “truth, virtue and objectivity” (Eagleton 2004 [2003], 17). Here, Eagleton declares that the virtues and achievements of cultural theory have been as follows: the advances in studies related to class struggle and the proliferation of gender, environment and postcolonial studies. However, as Hardt and Negri assure, “the deconstructive phase of critical thought, which from Heidegger and Adorno to Derrida provided a powerful exit from modernity, has lost its effectiveness” (2000, 217). These authors argue that, even though one cannot “doubt the democratic, egalitarian, and even at times anticapitalist desires”,

postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power. Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference. These theorists thus find themselves pushing against an open door. (2000, 138)

For this reason, many of the cultural movements that emerged with the supposed passing of postmodernism largely agreed with Eagleton’s position that one must regain those important themes, which were forgotten about or abandoned during the postmodern parenthesis.

During the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was a surge of manifestos that emulated those of modernist artists and thinkers and which were associated with those new terms that sought to validate the

legitimacy and purity of new artistic and philosophical movements. Among them, we can find the cinematographic movement Dogma 95. This movement contained a decalogue, defined by its authors as a “Vow of Chastity” (Vinterberg and von Trier 1995). This manifesto was destined to make a more authentic cinema at a time when the medium had lost, according to the creators of the movement, its sincerity. The “Remodernist” manifesto (2000), developed by Billy Childish and Charles Thomson, is an attempt to subrogate postmodernism with a narrative founded on a transcendent document that arises within Stuckism, an artistic movement related with the rebuttal of modernism. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), the influential book written by David Shields, reclaims the democratization of culture without intermediaries. In order to do so Shields, in addition to writing his own text, takes words from other artists and thinkers and he does not reference them in the body of the text. The New Puritans, a short-lived group of writers, also published a manifesto against postmodernism in which a return to the plot line was claimed as an intrinsic value of the literary work. The manifesto was published in a collection of short stories, *All Hail the New Puritans* (Blincoe and Thorne 2000). All these manifestos served to lay the firm constituent foundations of a new ethos. They tried to finish the dead end that – using Hardt and Negri’s term – “Empire” entailed. The feeling of unease caused by a postmodern vacuum intensified until, at the turn of the millennium, it became clear that a change was needed.

In that atmosphere of uneasiness and sense of change, an immense multitude of alternatives appeared. The new cultural phase had not yet been defined and, even today, its character is uncertain. There were readings and re-readings of the moment of crisis and its possible solution. Many of them proposed a name for the new framework and this is one of the indications that a change was taking place. The names proposed also indicated the direction of their change, as the majority of the proposals include the word modernism in their nomenclatures. According to Jencks, “it comes down to a battle of what could be called ‘Prefix-Modernisms’” (2007, 215).

Regarding the nomenclature of the new paradigm, Hutcheon pointed out that “post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it and name it for the twenty-first century” (2002 [1989], 181). According to Boxall, “what underlies all of these critical movements is the sense that the historical language which is required to describe the passage past the horizon of postmodernism is lacking, or unformulated” (2013, 59). Authors like Jeffrey T. Nealon – ten years after Hutcheon summoned theorists for a new nomenclature – were still calling it post-postmodernism and even claiming that “‘post-postmodernism’ is an ugly word” (2012, x). Nealon still prefers its use because, more than a death, he thinks that postmodernism has undergone a mutation, an intensification, and the term helps to express that idea. As Kirby indicates in “Successor States to an Empire in Free Fall”,

the theories speak of paradigm shifts and new cultural dominants, and suggest that our world now runs in different patterns and according to another logic [...]. They accept the historical reality of the postmodern moment, but believe it is over. And, most intriguingly, they think they know the name of its successor. (2010, n.p.)

The alternative nomenclatures proposed include Lipovetsky's "hypermodern times" (2005), Raoul Eshelman's "performatism" (first proposed in 2000 in "Der Performatismus oder das Ende der Postmoderne. Ein Versuch"), Kirby's "digimodernism" (2009), Vermeulen and van den Akker's "metamodernism" (2010), Jencks's "critical modernism" (2007), Jeffrey T. Nealon's "post-postmodernism" (2012), Christian Moraru's "cosmodernism" (2011), Jose Lopez and Garry Potter's "critical realism" (2001), or Nicolas Bourriaud's "altermodernity" (2009).

### Alternatives to the Crisis

Sébastien Charles wrote one of the chapters in *Hypermodern Times* (2005), in which he introduces Lipovetsky's thought. Charles tells us that modernism was a change in history in terms of the relationship that individuals had with the past, the present and the future. To understand the perspective from which the post-postmodern era is analysed in that book, one must consider one of the recurring themes in the academic literature related to postmodernism and among the authors of this paradigm: presentism. Modernity looked towards the future; it was a Hegelian project. The happiness, the emancipation of the individual, was something yet to come. Lyotard, however, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, characteristically argues about "the pointlessness of any periodization of cultural history in terms of 'pre-' and 'post-', before and after" (1991 [1988], 24), since it delegitimizes the present moment.

Unlike in other periods, the project of modernity put the moment of the realization of human happiness – in its historical sense – in the future instead of within a past when everything was better, following the Platonic tradition. However, during the second half of the twentieth century, the gap left by the historical project – and the authority of grand narratives, which constrained the emancipation of the individual – was filled by a neoliberalism that went hand in hand with a hyper-hedonistic individualism. All this changed the moment of realization of human happiness from the future to the present. This presentism was the product of an intensification of Berman's theory (1988 [1982]). Berman warned us of the loss of solidity – using Marx's "contradiction" – due to technological development placed both at the service of a commodification of knowledge and the opening and liberalization of markets. Later, and in a similar manner, Lipovetsky draws our attention to the advances in the digital world of the information technology that have made communications in "real time" (2005, 66) cement the reign of neoliberalism and produce a long-term vision of history somewhat volatile and undesirable. Lipovetsky's attitude towards the end of postmodernism is in line with Habermas's advocacy to recover the project of modernity. Technological advances and the liberalization of the market have led the individual towards her own alienation and away from emancipation through knowledge, as promised by Enlightenment: "now, at the very time when Foucault was still using the idea of discipline in its various guises as the principle of intelligibility of the real" (Charles 2005, 3) through punishment, Lipovetsky heralds a post-disciplinary era that, even emancipating the individuals from the constraints of the authority of traditions, does not free them from other control mechanisms.

### Hypermodern Times

In this light, it is interesting to note that, in Lipovetsky's book, Charles exposes an idea by French Philosopher Pierre-André

Taguieff that is close to what constitutes the loss of values represented by the speculative-knowledge alternative that Wilhelm von Humboldt chose when constituting the University of Berlin. At the same time, he is giving an implicit escape valve: "Taguieff shows that the logic of precipitate modernization has lost any real human purpose, and that technology has led to a decline in all values. These two aspects then lead directly to a form of neo-nihilism" (Charles 2005, 18). However, Charles contends that "we must not paint too black a picture of things: not everything can be reduced to consumption [...]. Certain values proper to modernity, such as human rights [...] the desire for truth, or the importance of human relationships" (18). Lipovetsky's alternative is not to regain the project of modernity without nuances. It is a mixture, since, in a society in which knowledge has been atomized, it is very difficult to return to old structures. Society has learnt to think in a certain way, it has learnt to be self-sufficient, it has shattered myths and it has also learned that there is the possibility of having freedom to choose. However, as a counterpart, it has lost any way of holding on to something safe. It is not that it can re-establish a universal enlightened narrative, but it can be cultivated by being hypermodern so that, in the atomized society, it makes free, albeit informed, decisions.

### Critical Modernism and Critical Realism

According to what Jose Lopez and Garry Potter affirm in *After Postmodernism*, their proposal, a critical realism based on concepts such as truth and knowledge, is related to the thought of Habermas: "Some readers will note the affinity in the above description between critical realism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and its second generation representative Jürgen Habermas" (2001, 14). On the other hand, in *Critical Modernism* Jencks speaks of postmodernism in the past and maintains that it was a critical movement within modernism itself: "Post-Modernism is just Modernism in its reformist and reflexive mode, that is, critical modernism" (2007, 46). Today, in the face of the crisis, which he explains in the book, new models of modernism emerge that compete with each other and "if one sort of hyphenated-modernism or another is inevitable, then critical modernism assumes more importance as a single stream among others" (215). Competition between the large numbers of alternatives will make a theoretical amalgam of a critical nature prevail.

### Performatism

Eshelman presents a very different point of view in his book *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008). The book tries to make sense of the gap between postmodernism and what he considers to be a return to a monism/referentiality, in clear reference to a pre-postmodern aesthetic tradition. Eshelman explores this gap in the fields of literature, cinema, architecture, theory/philosophy and art. In performatism, "the subject is presented (or presents itself) as a holistic, irreducible unit that makes a binding impression on a reader or observer" (2001, n.p.). The term *holistic* is reminiscent of metanarratives in their ability to explain the entirety of a historical argument. Creating an identity in a monistic society is easier, since the search for truth does not become an inane task. The need to resort to this monism is associated with a need for metaphysics and intuition to leave poststructuralism behind. Many of the characteristics of performatism (which are not restricted to Eshelman's proposal) appear in the works of artists, writers and creators at

the end of the twentieth century: authenticity – that is, sincerity – the rebirth of the author, the use of the linguistic sign as an act of trust – that is, belief – the disappearance of the ironic or cynical subject, and the metaphysical optimism that is shown in states of transcendence. In this regard, Kirby criticizes Eshelman's point of view in *Digimodernism*. He argues that Eshelman tries to draw a successor to postmodernism using the same tools of that movement. Kirby's abundant criticism of performatism – he calls it “backward-looking anti-postmodernism” (2009, 40) – can be summarised by saying that he does not propose a successor to postmodernism. However, even though it is true that performatism makes use of postmodern instruments, it could also be argued that it makes more sense than digimodernism, as Kirby describes a cultural stage through a medium. That would be like defining the Renaissance by assessing the relevance of the invention of the printing press. Performatism, on the other hand, defines what he calls “the new aesthetic” (Eshelman 2008, xii) regarding four different categories: “ostensivity”, “double framing”, “opaque or dense subjectivity” and “a theist or authorial mode of organizing temporal and spatial relations” (xii–xiii). Ostensivity is a concept – developed by Eric Gans in *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation* (1981) – that is reminiscent of Herder's edenic protolanguage or *Natursprache* – developed in *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) –, which is connected with post-postmodernism, as it is a Romantic idea necessary for the development of a post-postmodern referentiality. Related to this, the concept of double framing denotes the constructed nature of the artistic expression. It is very much related to the same postmodern sense, but it is used to attain an escape from destructive irony through a negotiation of meaning. Opaque or dense subjectivity is conceived as a reaction to the postmodern subject. The opaque subject cannot be explained/understood through language; it is reminiscent of the Wittgensteinian metaphysical subject: it should not be spoken about because it cannot be conceived through speech, but it can be comprehended in a transcendental way. Resisting to speak about the individual acts as a protection against the relativistic language games, which creates the breeding ground for the construction of a holistic identity. The theist mode is also related to the construction of a unified reality, in this case, of a sense of time and place, as opposed to postmodern fragmentation.

### **Digimodernism**

Kirby, by aligning himself with Habermas, defends that modernity is an unfinished project that is in a moment of intense crisis and joins the group of thinkers who believe that the enlightened vision of the world never ceased to interest the individual. That is why he maintains that his alternative to the death of postmodernism is another stage in modernity. He affirms that postmodernism was not a rupture, but a phase. However, he proposes that “the successor to postmodernism, whatever it may turn out to be, will be many things, but not its predecessor” (Kirby 2009, 21). Rather than claiming that values from the past are taken up, Kirby argues that the successor of postmodernism will not recapture the project of modernity from before the adoption of the stance of disbelief towards metanarratives. More in line with his position on the question of the successor of postmodernism is Lipovetsky, whose theory he praises. Despite considering it incomplete, the hypermodern times, like digimodernism – or Jencks's critical modernism –, looks to the future, to continuing the project advocated by Habermas, but building from the moment

immediately before, without feeling a nostalgic desire to return to a pre-postmodern phase. Kirby argues that what differentiates his theory from the others is that the very nature of digimodernism makes it deal with all aspects of modernity. This nature is given by what triggered it: “the redefinition of textuality and culture by the spread of digitization” (44). In this regard, he praises Jencks's theory of critical modernism.

In the last chapter, he offers an analysis of what the arrival of digimodernism implies socially. Here, Kirby contradicts himself, as this interpretation could be read along the lines of what is criticized at the beginning of the book. There is a nostalgia for a society that appreciates competition. This position is briefly justified at the end of the chapter as follows: “this transition requires an Enlightenment rightly revamped, rewritten, and renewed by postmodernism, and a restored family structure rightly critiqued and renewed by feminism. No politics today wants either: it wants consumerism, which would destroy both” (245). The last sentence is very similar to what Habermas points out in “Modernity versus Postmodernity” (1981).

### **The Altermodern**

Nicolas Bourriaud's point of view, however, is contrary to Kirby's and to Eshelman's. While Eshelman returns to pre-postmodern values, Kirby announces a further stage of continuation – not recovery – of the project of modernity. Even though for Bourriaud there is no need to go back to modernism in order to get rid of the problems posed by postmodernism, he affirms that the altermodern “harks back’ to a previous period” (2009, 13). *Altermodern* is a term coined by Bourriaud for an exhibition of the 2009 Tate Triennial. It offers a view that favours cultural relativism. For Bourriaud “[t]here is no question of a return to the principles or the style of twentieth-century modernism, nowadays the object of a revival far from our preoccupations” (13). Nevertheless, altermodernism looks like nothing more than a globalized postmodernism that has reached all parts of the planet, an alternative to the previous cultural phase whose only difference is the incorporation of cultures that had not previously participated in the dominant cultural programme.

### **Metamodernism**

In “Notes on Metamodernism”, Vermeulen and van den Akker describe their theory as follows: “We will call this tension, oscillating between – and beyond – the electropositive nitrates of the modern and the electronegative metals of the postmodern, metamodern” (2010, n.p.). The meaning of metamodernism is made clear in the following passage, where they explain their position towards the end of history when they speak about the death of postmodernism:

Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. (2010, n.p.)

~ If, according to Lyotard, the disbelief towards the grand narratives had the Holocaust as its final cause, the excess derived from that disbelief led to a relativism that, in Lipovetsky's words, by maximizing narcissistic individualism, gave way to runaway consumerism. Metamodernism tries to solve this problem through self-regulation: "Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, n.p.).

The collapse of paradigmatic boundaries proposed by Vermeulen and van den Akker to create a different continuum has permeated the critical ideas of many theorists. Even now, more than ten years after the publication of their seminal essay, the use of the term *metamodern* is pervasive in the myriad of academic articles and book chapters dealing with the current cultural phase. Vermeulen and van den Akker have also developed the concept in recent publications and, together with Alison Gibbons, they have authored works like "Metamodernism: Period, Structure of Feeling, and Cultural Logic: A Case Study of Contemporary Autofiction" in *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature* (2019), where they apply to autofictional literature the arguments elaborated in the collection of essays *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017). The latter title brings together pieces by very relevant post-postmodern theorists, most of whom have already been mentioned in this article, such as James MacDowell – the proponent of the post-postmodern label "quirky cinema" (see MacDowell 2010) – Josh Toth, Lee Konstantinou, Noline Timmer, Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, or even Raoul Eshelman. The book's point of departure is to take on Fukuyama's notion of the end of history in order to propose what they consider a more apt summary of "the current historical moment": John Arquilla's idea of the "bending of History" (van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen 2017, 2). They contrast this new notion with Jameson's postmodern "senses of the end" (2) and develop a new metamodern cultural logic through sharp examinations that bring contemporary intellectual production into focus. The collection of essays offers pragmatic examples of how metamodern aesthetics and theory continue to rely on the oscillation that Vermeulen and van den Akker described in 2010.

The problem with metamodernism is that it is a dangerous alternative. Metamodern oscillation can trigger reactionary thinking based on populism and what has recently been called *post-truth* if the pendulum oscillates too much towards enthusiastic fanaticism. This creates the necessary breeding ground for a new hybrid capitalism disguised as nationalism and protectionism, which, at the same time, proclaims the absence of modern binaries, thus, paradoxically, the motto of the new "Empire" could certainly be "Long live difference! Down with essentialist binaries!" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 138).

### *Post-postmodernism*

Another alternative is proposed by Jeffrey T. Nealon, who begins his preface to *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* with the following statement: "Post-postmodernism is an ugly word" (2012, ix). However, Nealon justifies the use of the term, favouring it over other less cacophonous alternatives, because of the prefix "post". This prefix represents the fact that postmodernism has mutated: it has "passed beyond a certain tipping point to become something recognizably different in its contours and workings" (ix). Nealon

recognizes, however, in line with the other alternatives I have analysed, that "it's not something that's absolutely foreign to whatever it was before" (ix). Nealon's arguments suggest – in a similar sense to Lipovetsky's – that post-postmodernism does not mean a liquidation of postmodernism, but an intensification of capitalism. He justifies this by saying that after the 2008 financial crisis there was a hope of recovering an economic system with a renewed "mid-twentieth-century Keynesianism [...] more than a decade into the new millennium, 1980s-style neoliberalism was soon to be a discredited thing of the past" (1). This hope did not have a correlate in reality, since the banks were rescued and neoliberalism emerged more fragmented and difficult to overcome. Hence, Nealon's transformation of Fredric Jameson's influential title: capitalism is not in its final phase, but is transformed to be always in the present moment. Neoliberalism has taken over all spheres and has codified the language of nearly all cultural practices. Thus, the book analyses cultural instances ranging from the appropriation of the values of rock culture to the university turned into a company.

Unlike Lipovetsky, Nealon offers no alternatives. His book is an analysis of some areas of contemporary culture as representative of an entire era. Nealon does not speak of paradigm shifts or returns to emancipatory projects. Furthermore, Nealon's post-postmodernism only takes into account what is happening in the United States. Despite the fact that all of the above may be a handicap for a holistic analysis, his examination of contemporary culture in terms of cultural definition through neoliberalism is very useful to understand the situation in the world of literature, art and theory in general. The post-postmodern generation recognizes as truisms what, at the beginning of postmodernism, were subversive provocations. Hence, the construction of an identity different from the one built in the context of postmodernism becomes an extremely complicated task. Nealon's analysis can serve to put into perspective contemporary theories that deal with the construction of coherent identities at the end of an era in which fragmentation is assumed as something natural.

### **Conclusion**

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the drive towards the recovery of the unfinished project of modernity oscillated between opposites in a (seemingly) balanced relationship. Apparently, the sign of the times was an artistic anti-postmodernism captured in manifestos and decalogues and fuelled by a desire to restore autonomy to art and the author. There was a struggle aimed at establishing an unmediated creative territory and a search for a pristine language that allowed a blurring of the incommensurability of language games. That linguistic communication, stripped of all artifice and double entendres, would aim to end the prefabricated human consciousness mediated by representation. However, the advances (in terms of social reforms) brought about by the relativism of the end of the twentieth century made it almost impossible to ignore certain aspects of postmodernism that were still essential.

The new proposals tried to bring together the utopian earnestness of a modern reconciliation with univocity and the anticapitalistic, linguistic democracy and egalitarian lessons learnt during years of relativistic presentism and deconstruction. After the financial crisis and the bank bailout of 2008, the attempt at oscillating dialectics gave way, during the second decade of the new millennium, to a kind of (oxymoronic) distorted ~

recovery of truth – a pseudo-objective perception of reality. The univocal discourses, based on binary oppositions, fed the new totalitarian and reactionary metanarratives of a neoliberalism on steroids that managed to channel its discourse through populism and post-truth. In terms of Hardt and Negri, the concept of “Empire” incorporated the attempt at the recovery of the Habermasian project in the same way as it incorporated postmodern difference during the previous decades. Due to the topicality of the study, we do not have a model for the result of the COVID-19 crisis. However, the taxonomy of the hopes and desires of the liminal post-postmodern zeitgeist of the 2000s may help elucidate upon it in the near future.

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<sup>1</sup> I have found it convenient to use the term *post-postmodernism* for several reasons. The topicality of the study makes it difficult to discern a common used-and-accepted nomenclature to designate the period. Even though it is a controversial term, I found it to be the most neutral option. It is true that Alan Kirby considers it a vile term (2009, 40), and Jeffrey T. Nealon himself, who uses it to title his well-known book *Post-Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Just in Time Capitalism*, calls it "an ugly word" (2012, ix). However, despite its detractors, many of the theorists who speak about this period make use of it, among them Linda Hutcheon (2002 [1989]) – who uses it hoping it is not the final one–, Raoul Eshelman (2008) or Nicoline Timmer (2010). As Tom Turner – the first author to put the term in the title of a book with a similar sense – aptly put it, "[as] post-postmodernism is a preposterous term, we must hope for something better [...]. Let us embrace post-postmodernism – and pray for a better name" (1996, 10).

Título:

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