

The real but greatly exaggerated death of Postmodernism

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Abstract

This paper tracks the managing-out of Postmodernism in UK universities, before casting doubt on the tendency to declare its death. Firstly, Postmodernism's current status as 'geist' is defined and the question is put as to whether Postmodernity is dead in the university. I use Google Ngrams and data from the main three academic libraries I am affiliated to in order to broadly answer in the positive. That the collapse of Postmodernism maps out on the crash of 2008 suggests that Postmodernism's 'geist bubble' may have been enabled by access to credit, by a finance bubble. However, the paper then describes the emergent academic terms 'post-postmodern', 'after-modern', 'neomodernism', 'Metamodernism' and the 'New Sincerity' - suggested new paradigms coming after Postmodernism - critically, as they are all rooted in Postmodern theory or postmodern culture, for instance the writing of Fredric Jameson and David Foster Wallace.

I argue that we need to attempt a new re-orientation rather than overarching terms for a new era which has barely shown its shape yet. We are not in a position to fully diagnose what comes after Postmodernism is managed out of academia, although clearly there are ramifications for the study of culture broadly. Playing advocatus diaboli I suggest that it would be better to reconsider terms such as False Consciousness than to float new signifiers over the current

interregnum. Nobody knows what is opening up and nobody knows what to do about it. The new paradigms being sketched in by academics are at best inadequate and at worst risible. A turn to negation is required, not a new positivism of naming. The 'real but greatly exaggerated death of Postmodernism' presents us with a contradiction but it is precisely in this contradiction that we need to begin again.

Postmodernism

It is tempting to suggest that Postmodernism died with David Bowie, in 2016. After his death, his art collection was sold, which included some Postmodern Memphis furniture (Sotheby's, 2016). Postmodernism spanned an epoch, from playful, ironic cultural mixing - if you have Tweed trainers, they are Postmodern - and of course the academic theory which readers should be familiar with. Bowie was quintessentially Postmodern, with his many personas and his mixed-up styles, with his 'fake' or 'plastic' soul (Devereux, Dillane & Power 2015).

Alan Kirby wrote about the death of Postmodernism well over ten years ago, in 2006. Kirby stated that Postmodernism was still alive in university libraries, but dead outside them. Now it is possible to declare that it is dead in the academic library too.

What was perhaps unique about Postmodernism as a cultural philosophy is that it stretched from counter-cultural consumer purchases right through to philosophical discourses. There is no parallel of this in, for instance, affect theory or critical realism. Because of its span, a satisfactory literature review of Postmodernism is impossible to present in a single paper.

However, this difficulty in itself is worth spending some time on, as the trouble is located in the fact that most areas of academia were flooded with Postmodernism during its time as an orthodoxy of sorts. Literature, art, education and marketing have all been infected. At the same time, Postmodernism is presented as a transient cultural bubble, floating free from the concrete circumstances of human production. The evidence for the managing out of Postmodernism from the academy and its collapse as a live discourse now tells us this is not the case, as this paper will outline: The fog of Postmodernism hung over a very particular economic and historical landscape.

However, difficult though a full overview might be, it is possible to outline the use of the texts underpinning the argument being made here: To put the subject in a broad context, 'Postmodernism' here favours David Harvey's more structural explanation of the subject (1989) over Jameson's sometimes abstruse cultural diagnoses (1991). Harvey places Postmodernism in relation to infrastructural changes such as containerization and offshoring (1989). This parallel sits well with one argument that will be made here, that Postmodernism existed in relation to a large credit bubble.

This is, to be careful, not to posit a crude Marxist base-and-superstructure model though. Here we might return to Raymond Williams on the base-and-superstructure, as an ad hoc formation, meaning actual examples of relations between the economic and the superstructural, the cultural, from any given place and time in history, rather than as universal, abstract laws (Williams, 1973). Jameson makes similar points in relation to base-and-superstructure and these are taken on more strongly here than, for instance, his explanations of Postmodernism made through the Van Gogh and Warhol examples (1991). In terms of Jameson, the original essay on Postmodernism in *New Left Review*

(1984) is more useful to return to at this point, as is the follow-up review by Dan Latimer in 1989.

Dan Latimer's review is prophetic. In it, Gang of Four return as muzak, as financial traders reach a kind of trance state where the world beyond the numbers vanishes. Most importantly though, Latimer convincingly accuses Jameson of being too kind to Postmodernism and its complicity with centre right Capitalist Power (Latimer, 1989).

Lyotard's sense - of how what is happening has the changing role of information to thank - must be retained, as must his later work in, for instance *The Differend* (1988 [1983]) that Kantianism exists in the heart of the Hegelian Aufgehoben (dialectic) as it cannot finally escape its own condition in language. Callinicos's skewering of Postmodernism is interesting (1990) but omits its own powerlessness in the face of Postmodern Orthodoxy: His deflation of the subject was forceful, but it halted nothing. Right now, we see how Neo-Kantianism rises out of the mystical depths to congeal into something powerful and disturbing called 'Post-Truth'.

Beverley Skeggs' short review essay on the subject from 1991 is excellent, even though as dismissive as Callinicos's, and she includes overlooked work on the subject by female academics. The other dimension to this is the non-western European ethnicities and cultures for whom Postmodernism made and still makes little sense at all. In many ways, then, the deeper roots of Postmodernism do lie in German Idealism and French philosophy, exported to America, only through its dissenters after 1968, the Situationist International and thinkers who became codified under the term 'Post-structuralism'. Sadie Plant's book *The Most Radical Gesture* (1992) is key, then, to this dimension of Postmodernism too, for the purposes of the argument being made in this paper. [1]

What we are dealing with, ultimately, is a series of fissures in western European cultural philosophy, and that has ramifications for all of us. However, it is the way in which Postmodernism is being managed out of the university and replaced by new inadequate terms which concerns me here.

Postmodernity, dead in the university?

To fully understand this section, please make reference to the appendices at the end of this paper.

In terms of the death of the discourses of Postmodernism in the academic library, statistically, the word ‘postmodern’ rose steadily from 1972, peaking at around 1990, before waning as gradually as it rose. References to ‘postmodern’ stutter after 2008 and then fall off to almost nothing in 2016.

By late 2016, it is dead in the university. By some wonderful poetic serendipity, the top result of the university library search for ‘postmodern’ is the 2016 *Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*. What we are dealing with here, what can be seen on the graphs in the Appendices, is a ‘geist bubble’. A zeitgeist that rose, trembled and then popped completely, leaving only a damp circle.

Initially, Google Ngrams were used to map this curve from 1970 to 2008. Anyone can do this online. However, it is more difficult to see what happened to the discourses of Postmodernism after 2008, as the public Google Ngrams only cover up to and including 2008. The library stats at two large British universities checked this part of the curve. A combined search for ‘(postmodern) AND (postmodernity) AND (Postmodernism)’ yields a graph that also tallies with the Google Ngrams (again, see Appendices).

The end of this bubble sees Postmodernism utterly collapse as an academic discourse. Hegel's idea that live history passes into system has often been applied to the processes of Postmodernism, but Postmodernism itself is ultimately as culpable to Hegelian sublation as any historical discourse (2015 [1812]). The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature, here we are.

It is possible to see in this geist bubble, from years of teaching the subject, the different phases of Postmodernity in statistical data that I had previously only tracked through my reading. These phases have been speculatively applied to the graph curve (again, see Appendices).

First comes the 'avantgarde phase', 1972-1985, which matches Charles Jencks' assertion that Postmodernity begins at the dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis, on March 16, 1972: Mass planning is dead. Modernism is over (Haddad, 2009). This phase is also characterised by events such as the New Spirit in Painting Exhibition of 1981, where Modernism no longer fits as a term and so new ways of explaining fragmentary approaches are suddenly required (see McEwen, 1981).

We then see Postmodernism as a 'rising discourse', 1986-1996, a period coinciding with the Big Bang of financial markets in the UK. Postmodernism moves away from its avant-garde phase, as those initial experiments are used as resources by consumer capital, buoyed up with cheap credit for both producers and consumers. The dangers of this, we now know, were discussed at the time of implementation (Pickard and Thompson, 2014).

Here, the preparatory avant-garde post-modern archive (lower case, hyphenated) effectively becomes an unwanted but intensive R&D exercise that

can be used by consumer capitalism. The same thing happens with outmoded military technologies, the radio, the internet (for which see Kittler, 1999).

Next, we hit the millennial peak, 1999-2000, which sees Postmodernism as a new kind of orthodoxy. A cipher moment for this period might be the appearance of the term 'postmodern' on an episode of *The Simpsons* in 2001 (Kamerman, 2001). Then we see it as a gradually waning discourse in 2004-2006.

What follows has here been speculatively called a 'Publisher's Interregnum', a stuttering, jagged rise and fall. Books sometimes take a whole year and even longer to move from an accepted manuscript to the library shelves. This explains the gap after 2008, before we can finally detect how Postmodernism passes from a live discourse to a completely historical one. Because of this it is perfectly legitimate to move the graph curve back a year or so at which point it will begin to rise more distinctly around 1972. Again, please see the appendices for the data.

In 2008 the global financial crash occurs and by 2016 references to Postmodernism are back to nearly nothing. This final piece of data is the most interesting and important: Postmodernism was produced and upheld by the huge credit bubble that begins around the late-1980s and only fully collapses around the turn of 2007-8. The banks that fuelled this in Britain are often the ones who caused the crashes in their sectors through risk, thereby tightening access to credit after 2008 (see Perman, 2012).

Of course, readers may wonder what is coming after Postmodernism and as yet no big over-arching 'ism' has been fully declared, although academics appear to be preparing this (more later). Ten years ago, Kirby ventured 'pseudo-modern',

an internet-driven, infantile trance state (Kirby, 2006). It is hard to deny. But now, in 2018, as well as being able to see the death of Postmodernism, finally, statistically, in the university library as well as outside it, we can also see what is coming to replace it and it is much bleaker. Bleaker than even the narcissistic internet trance Kirby rightly diagnosed (ibid).

One can make objections already, that ‘Hipster’ is the continuation of Postmodernism, with its infantile picking up of old objects to be resold with a cool twist. But during the height of Postmodern Orthodoxy, people didn’t go to gentrified ironic cafés en masse to smash their windows (Khomami and Halliday, 2015). A new name is required, at the same time as the very last thing humanity needs is a new name for a cultural epoch.

What is clear, as shown by the data presented here, is that Postmodernism was being managed out of the university well before 2008. The name of a year-long module I worked on, ‘Postmodernism’, was changed to ‘Contemporary Debates’. Much of the literature art students were given for this class, for instance ‘Inside The Whale’ by Paul Wood (2004) began with a worried disclaimer that Postmodernism is inadequate as a term and a discourse. This is true, it always was. The sceptics can be found all the way through the subject’s history - and it is now a history - for instance Beverley Skeggs asked educational theorists to stop ‘wasting time’ on Postmodernism (1991) but it is not possible to ignore such a large geist bubble.

However, there are enough continuations of Postmodernism within the new emerging paradigm for us to need to proceed with caution even if we actively wish to declare it dead.

After-modern

Kirby's replacement term 'pseudo-modern' is interesting because a minor cult of New Modernism has been rising for some time. We have Owen Hatherley's *Militant Modernism* (2009) and the following popular books (for instance, 2010) and the various Modernist Societies (2016). But these good intentions arrive via a nostalgic rearward view, a turning away from the present into a past seen as more caring, something which actually characterises trauma (Freud, 1932). They often project utopian flights forward and are very critical of Postmodernism.

But the New Modernists often present us with a contemporary collage of Modernism, a positive, celebratory version, without its horror, madness and war (see Sass, 1992). All of these things are evangelistic and nostalgic at the same time. They cannot be described as Postmodern as they are characterised by the fundamentalist belief in an idea, but they do not have enough velocity to fully pull free from the condition of Postmodernity either.

New Modernism or Neomodernism seems to contain the idea that it is exceptional. That Modernism is exempt from nostalgia because it is 'modo', of 'the now'. It isn't. Like St Paul on the road to Damascus, the Neomods have been struck by the revelation that Modernism has gone, but it is always with us. The New Moderns are Pauline. They wait, yet it has already arrived. It has been torn violently from us, that which we love. But wait, it is also all around us (Williams, 2015). This in fact shares with Derrida the wait for deferred meaning in 'Différance', something that sat very well with Postmodern discourses (Derrida, 1988 [1967]).

It is possible to argue that once we had Postmodernism, now we have neo or pseudomodern. That Postmodernism is dead and now we have some 'after-

moderns'. But the Modernism Ngram sets don't peak in the 1960s. They peak around the same point as the Postmodern sets. Post-modernism does have to be discussed in relation to what it comes after, Modernism. They are tied together. In a world where Postmodernism has occurred, one doesn't make sense without the other.

The reality is that we no longer have an over-arching explanatory framework. These intrinsically religious Militant Modernisms - and the diagnostic ones from Kirby - are in some ways being created to shield their users from this horrible truth: we face a void. Here again it is possible to return to a diagnosis rooted in trauma (Freud, 1932). We are in a dead time, capitalism is on the levelled floor of sheer grey ruin. It isn't 'year zero' because the beginning, as Gillian Rose explained, is swallowed by the fractured centre ground. In times like these, we find ourselves in Rose's *Broken Middle* (1992). This is a place where the law and ethics are sundered apart.

So, to sketch this New Modernism in as a rising discourse would be wrong. Because the data doesn't exist at any useful scale yet, and it is easy to distort the importance New Modernism has on the wider discursive cultural and media landscape. Let us then turn to this wider landscape. John Hayes, the UK government transport minister, condemned brutalist architecture in 2016 (Hayes, 2016). He argued that 'it is "aesthetically worthless" and embodies a "cult of ugliness."' In a speech he declared that the Government would be the 'vanguard of a renaissance' in architecture by 'rebuilding a Doric arch that stood outside London's Euston station before it was demolished in 1962.' He said the public 'crave harmony' in architecture and that 'people don't like 'modernist architecture'.

Hayes neglected to explain that here also is a return to neoclassical power architecture. This statement was also made in the sheer vertiginous horror of a national housing crisis. People die in doorways and some doorways are being fitted with spikes to stop the homeless from sheltering there in the first place (see Foster, 2016). The next government announcement along declared that Buckingham Palace will be given a £370m+ refit (Davies, 2016).

The declaration of 'pseudo-modernism' or New Modernism as a replacement for Postmodernism is simply not strong enough. Kirby's characterisation of pseudo-modernism's effects on the subject are real. But further work needs to be done on contradictions such as the building of a Doric arch in a time of unnecessary human abjection: The epoch of New Modernism it is not.

A brief summary of the Brief History of Credit

According to Sassatelli:

'Studies on late modernity, postmodernism or post-Fordism have shown that during the last two decades of the 20th century new and complex models of consumption were met and stimulated by niche marketing, reflexive advertising, new media, new spaces for leisure, new forms of tourism, and so on.' (Sassatelli, 2007, 48).

Here is the very big ground - as much as it can ever be called a 'ground' - for the shifts in the structures of feeling under discussion in this paper:

'Aestheticization and standardization are aspects of a consumer culture predominantly characterized by the symbolic elaboration of commodities, whose diffusion is also linked to financial phenomena like the development of credit services for consumption.' (ibid: 49).

In short, 'barriers to acquisition' (ibid) are flattened by credit and so is access to new social-symbolic realms for the consumer.

'Finally, it is also a period of increased global visibility of consumer culture and of its politicization: just think of the cultural and political dynamism generated by consumption in societies in transition from Communist to capitalist systems...' (ibid).

The rise of credit also equals the rise of 'risk' as a paradigm, as explored by Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and Bauman. More focused studies underpin these rather macro works (for instance Donncha Marron, 2006). In a large Federal Reserve review of the sector, 'Credit Cards: Use and Consumer Attitudes, 1970-2000' the obvious is laid out: 'A notable change in consumer financial services over the past few decades has been the growth of the use of credit cards, both for payment and as sources of revolving credit.' This has 'origins in the 1950s as a convenient way for the relatively well-to-do to settle restaurant and department store purchases without carrying cash, credit cards have [since] become a ubiquitous financial product held by households in all economic Strata.'

Credit cards are the 'near', the object closest to the everyday - in a way why Marx begins Capital in his time with the commodity, perhaps now one should start with the debit or credit card. Credit cards replaced the installment-plan offered by many retail stores. In terms of the rise of credit, the data in America is astonishing:

'...consumer credit outstanding increased from \$119 billion at year-end 1968 to \$1,456 billion in June 2000 (in current dollars, not seasonally adjusted), while the revolving component grew from \$2 billion to about \$626 billion over the same period. Because 'population, income' and nearly every other economic indicator

also rose over the period, the growth of consumer credit is often put in perspective by comparing it with the growth of consumers' income.' (Durkin, 2000).

There isn't space to explore the striations within this data, but it should be clear that the bubble is the same for credit as it is for culture, the late 1960s/early 1970s to the millennial peak. The history of the Access credit card is an interesting one to consider in relation to my thesis. Its rise parallels that of postmodernity as surveyed via Google Ngrams. It was launched in late 1972.

My initial examples show how for the university postmodernism really is last year's geist, but for wider western culture 'it' continues to shapeshift into more sinister forms. The state of permanent credit is also a state of permanent indebtedness, there is a dialectic here already. 'Credit reporting' is part of the new culture and it shifts some of the policing in a Foucauldian sense over to the agencies of credit. As Deleuze pointed out in one of his final essays (1988) 'man' (sic) remains ever indebted as the era of biopower wanes. Only after 2019 do we begin to see how true that prophecy was.

The Infrastructural Real

People like Minister Hayes will dictate what the environment looks like, not neo-Modernism. The aesthetics of Modernism, like the gloss of Postmodernism or Political Correctness, arrive without any guarantees. Modernist aesthetics do not enshrine the subject in validity or benevolence.

The Doric arch contains dialectical tensions within itself, that can and probably will explode it. Ideologically, the adoption of the classical style presented early Christian society with a problem, that of assimilating essentially pagan

representations. Because those fluted columns come from pagan Greek temples such as The Acropolis (Shepherd, 1994).

This problem was overcome, the process of transition from Pagan to Christian symbolism was then encoded in neoclassicism as a triumph in itself. Later, this congealed into neoclassicism as the default architecture of power (see Nuttgens, 1997). A fluted column as a cipher for hundreds of years of rule over the masses under whichever orthodoxy happens to be prevalent.

This is the Neoclassicism that is set to return in the UK, alongside the continuing global fundamentalist populist political shift. Can we declare that the one remaining slab monotheism of Capitalism equally has no trouble assimilating a modernist aesthetic with a socialist appearance into itself? In the Financial Times there are ‘modernist heritage’ articles. The prices of the houses and art will fluctuate in response to them (Heathcote, 2015).

The wider point being made here is that there is a new kind of structuring under way that doesn’t have a name yet. No academic will give it one. The new structures of feeling are rising from other condensations of what Spinoza called the ‘Sad Passions’ (in Curley, 1994). They are extremely ugly. A new moment of ‘conjuncture’ is coming, a term taken by Stuart Hall from Althusser (Brewster, 1969).

We knew that Postmodernism was dead, no big conferences, no new books, but now we have the final affirmative absence of a pulse in the university. Of course the books are still in the library, and students still get them out, but no new work is coming through from behind. The other thing we now have that Kirby didn’t, when he made the call over the body of Postmodernism in 2006, is this sense of what is coming. But what is coming is The New We Do Not Know

What. The Neunknown, The Pseudovoid, and it is not 'sublime' because there is absolutely no beauty in it.

One theoretical moment to return to now is Alastair Bonnett's argument for a progressive politics of nostalgia, in 2010. Finding traces of nostalgia in Situationist texts, he argued that nostalgia is inevitable and it should be harnessed positively. Bonnett makes his points well and nostalgia does present us with these dilemmas. But we are only now seeing, and this is no fault of Bonnett's, what a 'positive politics of nostalgia' actually looks like: It has been given a name and that name is 'Post-Truth'.

Metamodernism and the 'New Sincerity'

There are, however, much more recent attempts to rename the new cultural era opening up before us: Professor Antony Rowland, Principal Investigator on the AHRC funded 'Metamodernism' Research Network writes that 'Metamodernism has gained impetus as an important area of academic research over the past ten years', that 'many critics agree that the more general term "post-postmodernism" is not sufficient' and that they 'also disagree on the central aspects of metamodernism' (2018).

'Post-postmodern', as far as I am aware, was first used by Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker in their essay for the British Art Show 6 catalogue as far back as 2006, tallying with Kirby's declaration of the end of Postmodernism. 'In these post-postmodern days...' they began. 'Post-modern' means 'post-relevant' and so to announce that we are post-post relevant doesn't mean a great deal. It certainly doesn't mean we should take Metamodernism or the New Sincerity seriously as names for a new cultural epoch now either.

The main proposer of the term Metamodernism is Tim Vermeulen. Vermeulen explains: 'When I was growing up, in the mid-nineties and the early 2000s, I listened to Radiohead. On "There, There," they sang, "Just because you feel it, doesn't mean it's there."' For Vermeulen, deracinated modernity *plus affect* equates to what he calls 'The New "Depthiness"' (2015). Vermeulen writes:

'A year or so ago, while watching the television show *Girls* (episode 3 from the third season), I was struck by a sentence that was at once reminiscent and completely different from that line from the early 2000s. "Just because it's fake, doesn't mean I don't feel it." The line from the Radiohead song that described our world as a hall of mirrors calls to mind Jameson's understanding of depthlessness as the last stage in a particular history of a particular flattening. But what the line from *Girls* hints at is that, just maybe, we are seeing the first stage in another history of another kind of deepening, one whose empirical reality lies above the surface even if its performative register floats just below it: depthiness.' (ibid).

The announcement of 'Depthiness' or a new term in 'Metamodernism', even as a development from Postmodern theory, is cracked with problems. Vermeulen has discovered that although postmodern culture is vacuous, it actually means things to people and causes emotive responses. That people's meaning is contradictory and unreal, but of great emotion-inducing importance - in short, real to them - has been understood by social anthropologists for decades. It may be true to say that just because it's fake you don't feel it, or that just because you feel it, it doesn't mean it's real, but all of that has been the territory of anthropology, psychoanalysis and 'false consciousness' for decades. It is also, crucially, the territory of Postmodernism and not a new cultural epoch.

Of course the experience being described in Season 3 of *Girls* is very different to the belief in fertility spirits. Postmodernism designated how the divorce of referent and meaning works (and it does work, in a positive sense) in its particular historical time and space. Therefore 'Depthiness' and 'Metamodernism' are simply not new paradigms. They are not quite category mistakes either, but they are not far off.

The AHRC website (2018) explains how 'Vermeulen proposes that metamodernism attempts to account for the emergence of a wider "structure of feeling" in the twenty-first century which responds to our historicity, bound up with the aftermaths of 9/11, the financial crash and austerity.' I would like to know which 'we' is being designated with the term 'our' here: 9/11, the crash of 2008 and austerity are affective sites of western modernity. Vermeulen describes how he envisions the 'New Depthiness' is the soul as surface play rather than authentic feeling (2015) but it draws on Butler to make that point and so is not beyond postmodern fluidity.

Vermeulen explains that the term 'Depthiness' is a reference to 'Jameson's notion of depthlessness and Stephen Colbert's joke about "truthiness."' Colbert, a comedian, 'invented the term to criticize politicians' tendency to bend the facts to fit their program.' Colbert apparently explained this during his 'controversial speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2006', aiming his comments 'at then president George W. Bush...' (ibid).

'Depthiness' is, then, solidly linked to what at the time of writing hadn't yet been called Post-Truth, but now has been. Read this way, 'Depthiness' is in fact just the dialectical flipside to Post-Truth, a slightly more positive facet of a larger object with much more dangerous aspects. Therefore any discussion applauding 'Depthiness' as a harbinger of a new age of sincerity and truth is to be warned

against. Here we can see how the death of Postmodernism has been greatly exaggerated.

However, what Adam Kelly of the University of York has called 'the New Sincerity' needs a little more qualification and explanation. Kelly reads David Foster Wallace in a similar way to Iain Williams (2015) who claims that Wallace forces us to invest in his long, wordy books - in this sense they are quantitatively encouraging sincerity, we have to put time in - and from there he works through the postmodern malaise precisely through a kind of distanced and estranged prose. With the reader, Foster Wallace tries to break out of the alienated condition into a kind of 'new sincerity'. The analysis of Wallace's writing, once the fact that his books are long is put aside, is certainly plausible. But I want us to hold on to the fact that Foster Wallace attempted all this within a Postmodern mode.

Kelly's version of 'New Sincerity', couched in a very particular reading of Derrida (2017) was then refuted by Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts (2017) who stated that Kelly's understanding of Derrida's 'iterability' and 'undecidability' was flawed and that the 'apparent New Sincerity' 'works at the expense of black and female characters'. Kelly then responded to their remarkably aggressive critique (2017).

I am not weighing into this unpleasant spat between Kelly, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts (2017) at all here, even though Kelly's reading of Foster Wallace (2016 and 2017) has much more traction than much else offered as a replacement for Postmodernism thus far. But I do want to suggest that what is missing from 'the New Sincerity' 'Metamodernism, neomodernism and all the other terms is precisely *negation*.

Richard Sennett's greatest contribution to this is his term 'destructive gemeinschaft' or negative community (1967). Working class communities, often the yardstick of authentic indigenouslyness, were places where 'destructive gemeinschaft' could be found. The presence of sincerity and authenticity in great abundance did not mean that everyone there was benevolent. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts (2017) are right to say that exclusion can work through sincerity. This is a large part of the reason why I urge a return to dialectical thinking rather than the application of new overarching terms. To simply posit Metamodernism or New Sincerity is to lose all of the negation which dialectics provide.

That these paradigms emerge from reading Foster Wallace watching Season 3 of *Girls* and listening to Radiohead hasn't stopped the more exitable academics from taking Metamodernism on as if it were a solid object. Academic papers are already being produced and passing muster: For instance, 'Metamodernism as we perceive it' by Dali Kadagishvili (2013) begins 'Metamodernism is a new moment in philosophy, art, literature, fashion, photography, economics, politics and other spheres of human activities...' Lauren Gardner (2016) then launches 'Metamodernism' as a 'A New Philosophical Approach to Counseling' and Michel Clasquin-Johnson aims us (2017) 'Towards a metamodern academic study of religion and a more religiously informed metamodernism'. Rasa Vasinauskaitė (2015) claims that the paradigm alters 'cultural contexts, concepts of the perception of the world and its reality' that the paradigm 'of postmodernism is being changed by the theories of post-postmodernism, metamodernism, or new realism...'[2]

All of this happened after Postmodernism was declared a cultural phenomena, Postmodernism was applied to education theory, sports science and almost every other subject. None of this need trouble us, except the one thing it all

points to, that there is what Stuart Hall called a new conjunction emerging, but it will take much more time and further exploration before we can even begin to see what that consists of. The AHRC network, Vermeulen and Kelly are all right about one thing, and that is precisely that the structures of feeling are changing, although I hesitate to describe them as 'widening': A more populist and everyday version of 'New Sincerity' in Britain aligns itself with Corbynism on the left and with Brexit on the right. It is to these resentments and agonisms - underpinning the desire for a more stable, sincere world, a 'new solid' - we should turn.

Re-orientations

We need to announce a new re-orientation rather than over-arching terms for a new era that has barely shown its shape yet. We may not, then, yet be in a position to fully diagnose what comes after Postmodernism is managed out of academia, although clearly there are ramifications for the study of culture broadly, and for university culture and policy especially. However, we can begin a series of re-orientations. One place to start again is Beverley Skeggs' 1991 review essay 'Postmodernism, what is all the fuss about?'

Initially, there seems to be a problem with Skeggs' critique as it appears to veer from a shoulder shrugging title 'what is all the fuss about?' to declaring 'it' as a masculine overarching paradigm, an implicitly phallocentric truth regime. The gendering and her critique are both solid, the problem is that Postmodernism is either easy to brush off, a vacuous term, or it is a tyranny.

However, what becomes apparent as the essay develops is that there is no contradiction here: This is precisely the crux of the problem and the power to adhere Postmodernism possesses. The contradictions, as with Marx in *Capital* (1976 [1867]) are exactly the point: Skeggs says that Postmodernism is riven

with paradox as it sets itself up as relativistic and acts as a truth regime at the same time (1991). Post-structuralism does similar things, in that it declares an End of History for knowledge that, handily for the final inscribers, delivers its creators to the new planet of Post-Knowledge as its Lords. It is interesting that those most sceptical of Hegel should attempt to pull off the same trick he did at the end of *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1976 [1807]), which was to install himself at the head of the geist he also claimed to illuminate. The way all of this is tied up with poststructuralism is the subject of another essay (and one that I am working on).

There never was a Post-structuralism and in some ways there never was a Postmodern age. We are always only ever seeing a new kind of structuring and a new kind of modernity (for which see Norris, 1985 and Merquior, 1986). Yet both geist bubbles are solidly detectable discourses, with tangible impacts on academic and other structures. ‘Post-Truth’ works precisely as a truth regime. It does not matter how riven with sheer paradox it is. It works in the way that Pierre Clastres shows Guyaki hunting rites to ‘work’. It is clear there is no tangible link between rite and outcome, but it works for Culture at that moment, for a people living and dying on their wits (Clastres, 1998). Vermeulen operates at the fuzzier, more banal end of this concept when he watches season 3 of *Girls*.

Skeggs takes issue with Postmodernism as it makes us think we are actually living in new times. The argument being made here diverges from this, as the credit bubble which ghosts Postmodernism was ‘the new times’. The credit supply did not fundamentally solve the working class position, it only allowed it to be hidden and for class discourses to be weakened, but like any large-scale economic phenomena, it certainly altered things: It created new structures of

feeling that have been breaking apart since 2008. Mark Fisher accounted for these well (2009).

As always, we both were and were not living in new times, with no contradiction, and this is why a return to Hegelian dialectics is required.

This said, and with Postmodernity in mind, we should refuse Metamodernism and the 'New Sincerity' as announcements of new times. Skeggs' critique is precisely the place to begin again, because as we saw in the Clinton-Trump election contest gender and ethnicity are precisely the targets of this new disturbing age. It is no coincidence that as I write many UK academics are being told of their 'duty' under Prevent legislation to monitor an intentionally vaguely solicited 'radicalisation' which at least implicitly equates with Islamism.

Here are exactly the recent cultural advances that are going to be under attack: the meagre advances made in gender equality and multiculturalism over the last few decades. The return to class is a slightly different thing, and the subject of further work, but what is clear, what needs to be announced here, is that Postmodernism is morphing out of the mainstream and turning into a different, bleaker discourse, that underpins rising rightwing discourses.

Skeggs lists the Postmodern character as 'a challenge to the truths of the Enlightenment, to rationality', 'a challenge to totalising theory and the construction of meta-narratives' a 'challenge to empiricism and positivism', a 'crisis in the legitimacy of (masculine) authority' (1991). In Lyotard (1980) Postmodernism is turned to in the face of the failure of 1968 as a Revolution and the subsequent disenfranchisement of a hard left (masculine) Marxism (ibid). It is now possible to argue that the legitimacy of masculine rightwing

authority is on the rise again and that these crises are waning. What we are seeing now is the enabling of monstrous discourses previously repressed under liberal-lite forms of culture codified as ‘Political Correctness’, enabled, counter-intuitively, by the Postmodern inflation of ‘Post-Truth’.

False Consciousness, what's not to dislike?

With the current historical context in mind we need to turn to face the harder stuff, and False Consciousness is part of that. False Consciousness is a Marxist term. It denotes a situation where the understanding and feelings of a great mass of people do not match the hard facts of their lives. The man who perhaps developed the concept most, Gyorgy Lukacs, saw that old institutions cling on far longer than is necessary as countries modernize. Guilds are a good example. In Britain, we still have popular royalism. I have covered this elsewhere (see Hanson, 2017).

False Consciousness is not simply confusion, it is a kind of mass hallucination floating over and describing a situation that it is possible to see very differently in concrete form. This is perfectly well served by Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping. That urban modernity and postmodernity are too complex for any individual to see or understand.

As a working class writer and academic I seem to have cut through the usual worries around declaring False Consciousness, because my family live there. Middle class writers fear False Consciousness because it effectively means calling out the working classes using a Marxist term. But False Consciousness is to be found at the same co-ordinates as Post-Truth and Neoliberal doublespeak. Post-Truth is Postmodern False Consciousness.

False Consciousness doesn't mean the working classes are idiots, but it does mean that they have been systematically fed untruth. Many others are already saying this anyway, in one form or another.

False Consciousness is not a declaration that 'the working classes are stupid', it never was. There is not some place 'over there' where False Consciousness exists, in relation to a place over here where it does not. We are all blind to the full, macro complexity. In many ways, False Consciousness is the political landscape per se, it is not binary and it takes different forms.

There is an assumption that, in Britain, somehow 'Brexit' Leave Voters didn't understand the facts and Remain voters did. Neither side had a clear picture of what they were voting for, or the consequences. The vote was made through cultural feeling, on both sides: False Consciousness.

False Consciousness is not just about Those Who Understand and Those Who Do Not. The mirror of this logic is the binary of those who have accepted a monotheistic religion into their lives and those who have not. This is the unconscious dimension that the liberal and left wing commentators inhabit. It is evangelistic. By showing 'them' the way, or the facts, we will somehow trigger a great wave of transformation. The wave is here and it has little to do with you. The wave will be structural, it will be uttered but ultimately it will re-speak all of us and I do care about the stark fact that the masses are being redirected to the right, whether you call it 'repressive desublimation', False Consciousness, Post-Truth, fake news or theorise it via Dewey or Marx.

The same urge lurks under the attempts to re-brand the new era of culture with 'Metamodernism'. This is a Legitimation Crisis, but what is really needed is Polity Rebooted, not new terms for a cultural epoch. If we want to reach for the

terms we are going to need I suggest these are among them: Class, gender, ethnicity, negation, slum, exploitation, alienation, agonism, dialectic.

Between and across all of these terms are structures, groups, organically and inorganically forming and re-constituting themselves just as the everyday city does. Between and across all of these terms, then, are structures and so there is still a structural-ism and there has never really been a thing called Post-structuralism, only an extended diaspora of the structuralist movement. The argument over which parts of that diaspora are worthwhile or not is another argument, albeit an inevitable one and one I will make later.

Conclusion

This paper does not just ask why Postmodernism disappeared from university discourse, but it asks questions concerning the clear change in quality of cultural discourses and how they have shifted into something far bleaker.

To add to the End of Postmodernism, there is now some discussion about the possibility of the 'End of Physics', which ushers another kind of Postmodernity back in. Steven Hawking has said that humans crave a comforting, explainable universe. This is work for another day, but similarly, Neomodernism, Metamodernism and the 'New Depthiness' are all issued via the cry of an infant separated from the mother's breast, although it was separated long before the cry came, the cry only came with belated recognition, and 'the breast' it seeks is an invented phantom.

Postmodernism outside of the university, then, morphs into new forms that may or may not receive a new name. What is relevant for the purposes of this paper is that it is being managed out of the academy to become a floating signifier used to enable all kinds of abusive cultural slurs. It may no longer be called

Postmodernism, there may no longer be such a thing as fiction, but there are certainly still facts. Here are some: Class, gender and ethnicity activisms and academicisms will need to recalibrate themselves to become much more robust as this process unfolds.

We could return to Nietzsche, whose declaration that God is dead came with the often ignored footnote that we have still to get out from under His shadow (1991 [1882]). Hegel sensed this, in the *Phenomenology* (1976 [1807]). It is possible to declare that 'Postmodernism is dead' in the university in a fairly finite manner, as demonstrated here, and many will say good riddance to it. But its shadow is still with us and all over, and it is a very disturbing shadow, as the corpse of Postmodernism is still very bloated.

In 2006 Kirby stated that Postmodernism was still alive in university libraries, but dead outside them. Now it is possible to declare that it is dead in the academic library but horribly alive outside. This is partly the contribution to knowledge this paper brings, but it also questions any final, finite declaration of a death of Postmodernism. There is no contradiction here, and the argument will be made that what seems to be contradictory - the death of Postmodernism and its continuation - can be held and accounted for by proper Hegelian dialectics. Via dialectics, the contradictions themselves become the motive force for the conceptual expansion of what is assembled (see Lefebvre, 1940 [2009] and Marcuse, 1941: 45-6).

What needs to be dialectically processed is the relation between 'truth' and 'untruth'. 'Post-Truth', then, is precisely the place to begin again, rather than a phenomena to avert our gaze from. Post-Truth needs to be exposed to proper Hegelian dialectics, rather than simplistically opposed.

The discourses of Postmodernism are finally dead in universities, but after that a return to dialectics is offered to inaugurate further discussion via this journal and others. It is also important to state that this paper refuses, in a dialectical spirit, to fakely separate the current political dimensions at stake in this large cultural argument, from the theoretical arguments it makes. A turn to negation is needed not to the positivism of new signifiers for what is culturally to hand.

The Post-Truth era is a time of Redaction. The black line through a word, erasing it completely, yet clearly doing so. The snipped out dialogue from a film soundtrack. The mouths still move, a lip reader may retrieve the words yet. The bank advert that clearly tells untruths, in relation to recent and very publicly known scandals (Hanson, 2016).

Untruth is everywhere, and it is not to be avoided, which has been assumed for a thousand years: that we must get rid of it because it is bad material to be sorted from the good; from 'the truth'. No, untruth is only the dark matter to truth, it holds it together, and in fact we only get a full picture of truth when it has been reunited with its untruth. [3] Here is a way in to dialectics proper (Lefebvre (2009 [1940])). From the everyday sign on the high street to its logical rupture and then back out to a fuller picture of the human social world of culture.

Here is a replacement for Postmodernism that we should actively seek, as academics. This is a crucial dimension to *The Often Exaggerated Death of Postmodernism*: We must begin by exposing Post-Truth to *aufgehoben*, force it to testify as it is preserved, lifted-out and cancelled, in one move. 'Post-Truth', therefore, should not be 'corrected' with 'the facts'. Because its exposure to them will not crumble it, nor will its crumbling, should it happen, reverse time to a point where it never existed as a discourse.

Truth being 'post' is part of its historical facticity, and that has been partly produced by the scandalous passing of Postmodernism through the university. That passing is proveable and other lessons should be learned from it. Switching to terms such as Metamodernism and New Sincerity, both in fact occurring within a postmodern framework, is no solution.

Henri Lefebvre returned the dialectic to its full richness in 1940. Marcuse laid out the roots of Hegelianism clearly a year later. In laying out its roots they both explained how positivist logic is always already inadequate, as it is sealed off from history and the irrational. Dialectics recombines all available discourses in a seething whole, bursting with tensions. It does not neatly process two opposite ideas into a clean 'synthesis'. It allows us to see the buckling pressure points of historical knowledge (ibid).

Postmodernism has reached the end of a phase, but its historical influence continues: Proper Hegelian dialectics can deal with the cancelling, preservation and transformation of ideas in one figure. This is what has happened to Postmodernism. It has been cancelled, preserved and transformed. 'Post-Truth' is a key pressure point of historical knowledge, and it emerges from Postmodernism, and Postmodernism emerges in part from the universities we are affiliated to.

However, dialectical thought is a method, not a tracking of nature. But it is a method academics of culture need more than ever. The dialectic also does not allow us to cease work and 'be complete' at the head of the geist as Hegel claimed (Hegel, 1976 [1807]). The Hegelian total system is a failure. Yet the Hegelian dialectic as method is the only place to begin again (see Hanson, 2014: 9-32).

Quantitative research is not the point of this preliminary, speculative working paper, beyond its initial, illustrative use. Much more detailed research into different data sets are needed to provide a richer picture. But what is clear is that Postmodernism as a discourse has waned since the turn of the millennium and then sharply collapsed after 2008.

The background to the Post-Political is the waning affect of Postmodernism. It is the now-faded backdrop to the awful theatre unfolding before our eyes. As Beveridge & Koch (2016) explain: 'Depoliticisation can be understood more as a contingent political strategy than a political condition' although 'general democratic challenges are accepted' including the collapse of mass participation. Depoliticisation reshapes and redraws political agency, it does not 'obliterate' it. We might return to Skeggs (1991) again here to see how the Postmodern lack of authority as a discourse does not stop it having a great deal of power as a shaping paradigm.

A working group of some sort is needed to track what is happening. [4] A return to 'false consciousness' after Lukacs might be useful. Because as the short-lived Deterritorial Support Group declared, and crucially, declared it after the UK riots of 2011, that 'the Post-Political = The Most Political' (2011).

Only now do we fully see how important that slogan was.

Fig.1: Google Ngram; 1970-2008

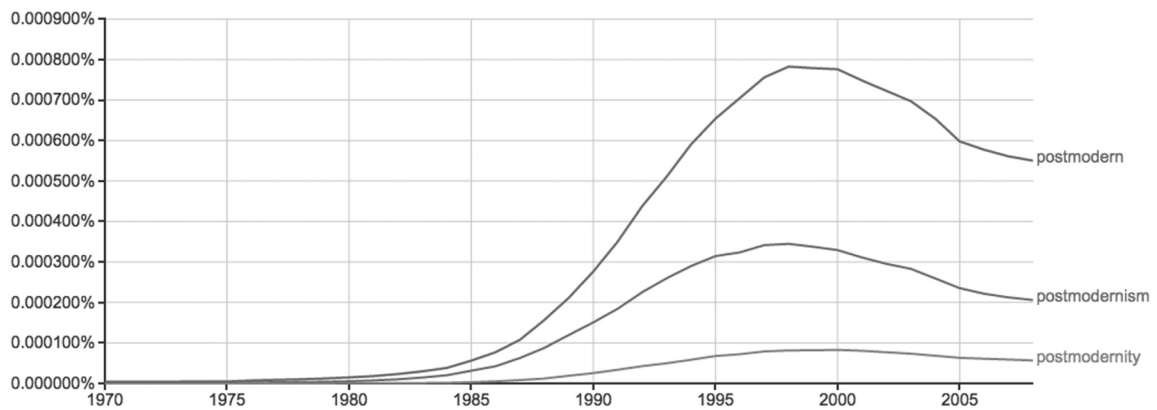


Fig.2: MMU Library Data; 1983-2016

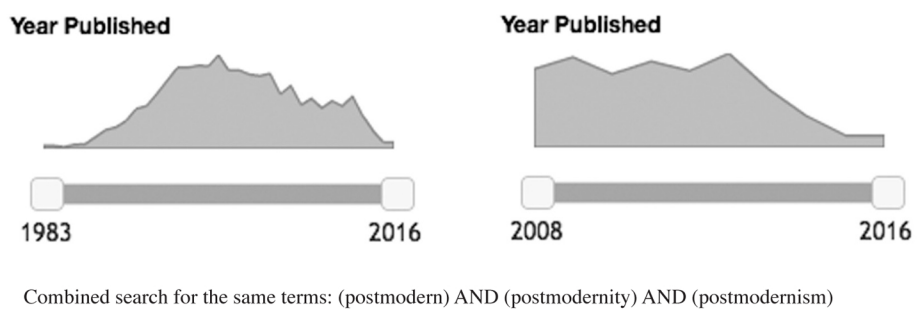
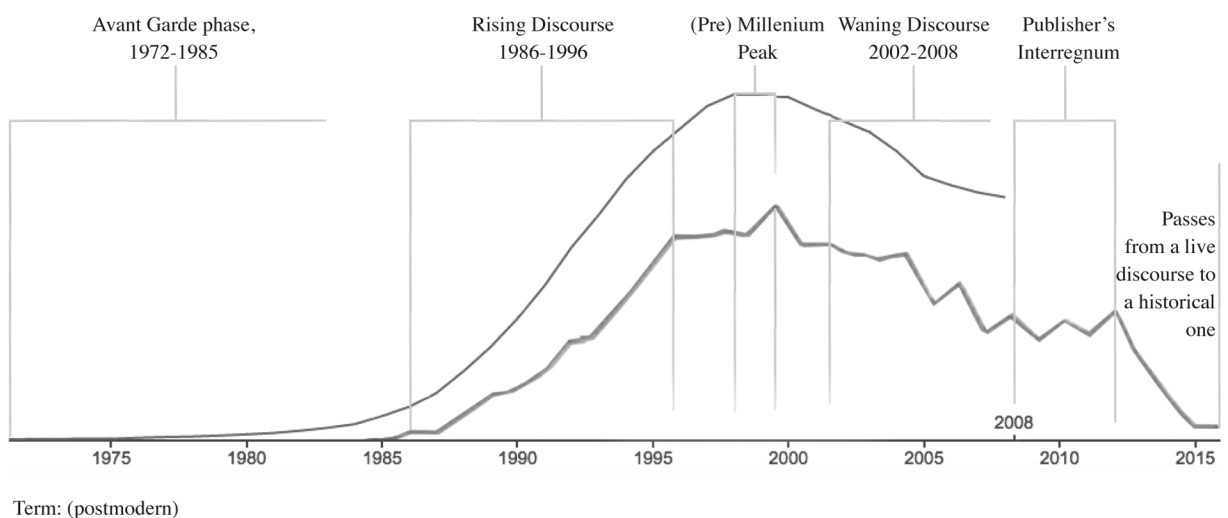


Fig.3: Google/MMU combined with commentary; 1970-2016



Notes

¹I must add a note of caution in regard to the tendency to inflate the influence of once-marginal groups such as the Situationists up to a view-obscuring size. I have covered this in greater detail in a book review (see Hanson, 2010).

²Some of the journals bearing this material are of the weaker 'pay-to-play' type. This makes the material a good deal more than an apposite metaphor for the subject in hand. Access to credit greases all kinds of access. Some of the more pompous claims to being guardians of knowledge found in the 2018 special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 'What Comes After Postmodernism?' would do well to remember this: the problems are as infrastuctural as they are superstructural.

³Adorno discusses 'the lie' in *Minima Moralia*. It is not that the Truth is being degraded by lies, but that neo-Kantian absolutes destroy any possibility of a ground for truth.

⁴During review I was asked to look at the 2018 special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 'What Comes After Postmodernism?.' Several of these papers chime with my own. Many of the contributors make similar claims, that postmodernism is 'no more', but that we don't know what is coming to replace it.

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