

Postmodernism Revisited: Current Trends and Interpretations

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In the contemporary vocabulary, the term “postmodern” has a central significance. It became a kind of cultural extension, a general milieu favourable for polemics. Postmodernism was theorized in many fields, such as architecture, philosophy, art, literature, geography, but its wide use does not mean that it is also strictly defined or general accepted. Postmodernism is rather a paradoxical concept, with many contradictions that cause hermeneutic difficulties. We can’t talk about a unitary theory, a set of principles and postulates or a unique definition, albeit there are some thinkers who consider that besides differences, the disparate trajectories of postmodern meet in a consistent paradigm. Anyhow, the identity of this phenomenon is still controversial and a lot of interrogations are open: is postmodernism a cultural movement, an academic field or just an evanescent fashion/trend? Does it represent an overcoming of the modern perspective, a radicalization, a negation or just a part of it? After it celebrated several deaths, has postmodernism now become obsolete? Is postmodernism replaced by post-postmodernism, transmodernism or other currents?

In this context, what is the pertinence of a new editorial issue on postmodernism, if the latter has been proclaimed self-contradictory, overdone or even dead? In the same time, its age of glory passed, and from this point of view, does a new book

about this phenomenon represent just an archaeological effort or does its scope surpass this layout? *Fifty Postmodern Thinkers*, published in August at Routledge, fully answers these questions. Stuart Sim is a well known author that contributes to the understanding of postmodernism and of some representative figures of it, such as Derrida, Baudrillard or Lyotard. Sim is specialized in Critical Theory and Long Eighteenth-Century English Literature, and teaches at Northumbria University. His research interests are critical theory, postmodernism and 17-18th-century prose fiction. He authored or edited 30 books and some of them have been translated into 17 languages. His publications include *Beyond Aesthetics: Confrontations with Poststructuralism and Postmodernism* (1992), *Modern Cultural Theorists: Georg Lukács* (1994), *Modern Cultural Theorists: Jean-François Lyotard* (1996), *Derrida and the End of History* (1999), *Contemporary Continental Philosophy: The New Scepticism* (2000), *Post-Marxism: An Intellectual History* (2000), *Introducing Critical Theory* (2001), *Irony and Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture* (2002), *The End of Modernity: What the Financial and Environmental Crisis is Really Telling Us* (2010), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 3rd edition (2011), *Addicted to Profit: Reclaiming Our Lives from the Free Market* (2012). Thus, the author's good immersion in the problematic of postmodernism provides a guarantee for the reasonableness of his book. But, to avoid my potential ad hominem sophism, let's see his arguments. Stuart Sim admits the diversity and the diffuseness of the postmodern movement (a more coherent postmodernist movement being traceable only in architecture). The lack of unity is noticeable by the simple existence of many forms of postmodernism, a scenario that replicates the situation of "modernisms". Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that postmodernism has no profile and its work is valueless. It is an important part of the cultural landscape and Sim emphasises two major components: first, the existence of a "definable condition of postmodernity" (3) that insures a set of connections between different postmodern authors. The second one is "its current meaning of a reaction against modernity and modernism, to the extent of constituting an antimodernism in some respects" (3). This orientation is specific for the twentieth century, even if the term were used earlier. Understanding

postmodernism as a reaction to modernism seems to be a favourite approach for Stuart Sim, because it doesn't restrain the concept of postmodernism to aesthetics, but it opens new political meanings (challenging the "grand narratives", the power and the authority).

Regarding the moment of the publication of this book, Stuart Sim affirms that "the time seems ripe" (1) for this kind of project. What are the reasons for this assumption? One reason seems to be the "solidification" of many theories and postmodern ideas along time. This problem reminds me the vexed question of the legitimacy of theorizing the contemporaneity – how is it possible to write academically about a current that is currently underway, since the knowledge is obtained after the crystallization of its object? In this respect, Steven Connor's position seems to be still valid: "The difficulties of knowing the contemporary are well known. Knowledge, it is often claimed, can only be gained and enjoyed about what is in some sense over and done with. The claim to know the contemporary is therefore often seen as a kind of conceptual violence, a fixing of the fluid and formless energies of the urgently (but tenuously) present now into a knowable and speakable form, by fundamental and irrevocable acts of critical choosing" (Connor 1997, 3).

Another reason is the fact that, unfortunately, many major authors that contributed to this field died in the last few years (Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard), a situation that makes necessary a reassessment of their work. Moreover, Sim reads the actual state of modernity as being under a great strain and the credit crisis of 2007-2008 serves as an example for the socio-economic difficulties that slow down the societal progress, one of the golden values of modernity. In these circumstances, we might assert that the above condition "makes it all the more topical to look again at those figures who were critical of modernity's stranglehold on world culture, and of the 'Enlightenment project' in general" (1). Thus, the return to the work of postmodern thinkers does not represent a barren act of criticism, a sterile gesture with no effects, but, on the contrary, it seems to be a fruitful strategy to find there some useful ideas for our contemporary world. This "postmodern turn" is not just a conceptual presentation of postmodernism, a path for the cultural heritage and its

memory, but a pursuit for traces that can be eloquent today. In this context, the main aim of this book is “to show that the critique offered by the movement’s major figures is as relevant today as it was when it first broke into the public domain back in the 1970s and 1980s, and that it was always far more than a short-lived cultural trend that has now run its course” (2). In this assertion, we can find a lot of Sim’s presuppositions about this phenomenon (the refutation of the idea according to which postmodernism is a simple cultural fashion, the refusal of the assumption that postmodernism is meaningless or it lacks any form of utility) and it can be lectured as an act of faith in the relevance of postmodernism. Furthermore, the importance of this current, of its interrogations and of its style was recognized by scholars that belong to many research areas. I can illustrate the latter by giving the example of the postmodernism influence in new media studies, within which “most critical work in digital culture has been presented under the heading of ‘postmodernism’ in cultural studies” (Rodowick 2001, 206). Digital textuality may be seen as an incarnation of postmodern ideas and the dominant discourse of online identity in the ‘90s is under the same postmodern influence, the digital self being conceived as mobile, fluid, rhizomatic and textual.

Another complicated problem that arises from the structure of this kind of book is the criteria that are chosen for the authors’ selection. As it can be easily seen from the title, Stuart Sim selected fifty key thinkers that are considered canonical for any survey of postmodernism (Adorno, Auster, Barth, Barthes, Baudrillard, Bauman, Bell, Bhabha, Bourriaud, Butler, Caputo, Cixous, Debord, Deleuze & Guattari, Derrida, Eco, Feyerabend, Foucault, Geertz, Gergen, Gibson, Glass, Greenblatt, Halley, Haraway, Harvey, Hutcheon, Irigaray, Jameson, Jencks, Koolhaas, Kuhn, Laclau & Mouffe, Lynch, Lyotard, McHale, Mandelbrot, Reich, Rorty, Said, Sherman, Spivak, Tarantino, Thom, Venturi, Ward, White and Žižek). This selection task is not easy at all, having in mind the diversity of postmodernism, the domains in which it developed and the heterogeneity of writers. Furthermore, some thinkers considered as being postmodern do not admit this label and never felt comfortable with this association and this is the case for some leading figures of this movement. One example is Michel Foucault, who, when he was asked about the

postmodern project, offered an unexpected answer: "What are we calling post-modernity? I'm not up to date" (Foucault 1988, 33). Another example can be Paul Virilio (who was not included in this book), who, in a conversation with John Armitage, bluntly said: "Post-structuralism? Yes, OK. Postmodernism? It doesn't make any sense to me. Hence, I do not feel linked at all with postmodernity" (Armitage 1999, 25). Totally aware of these problems, Stuart Sim motivates his choices and the validity of his theoretical claims. Thus, Sim does not construct his approach focusing on the objective of exhaustiveness, but on the representativeness of the authors. The selected thinkers are considered emblematic of the twentieth century postmodernism, because in that period "postmodernism as it is now understood came to have a high profile in popular culture and the public consciousness" (1). The thinkers that were chosen are "leading examples" of their domains and the "isolate" postmodern figures were excluded. In this respect, the selection was done according to two principles, namely chronology and "breadth of postmodern thought" (3). Thus, chronologically speaking, Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) is the first entry and Nicolas Bourriaud (b. 1965) is the last one. Regarding the second principle, Stuart Sim opted for a plethora of fields, in order to get a comprehensive view on postmodern creation. In this respect, the target audience of this book is also very large, being composed of readers that are interested in philosophy, politics, psychology, anthropology, social theory, religion, feminism or arts. Beyond these principles, we notice Sim's background desire of displaying a sort of connection between sometimes very separate ideas, in a quest for a lost unity: "Every effort will be made to cross-reference between these thinkers, to show the connections that can be made between them that do suggest a common set of concerns running throughout their work" (3).

To be able to present the work of fifty of the most important theorists within the postmodern movement in an accessible format, Stuart Sim put an emphasis on the organization of the articles. The standard structure contains an exposition of the most important concepts of the respective thinker, references to their main works and their impact, a maximum of ten main references and a list of references to other texts. Written in an elegant and concise style, with

substantial information and a special care for the soundness of philosophical arguments, *Fifty Key Postmodern Thinkers* constitutes an authentic academic presentation of postmodernism and also a valuable guide for both students and scholars. As Andreas Huyssen put it, “what will no longer do is either to eulogize or to ridicule postmodernism en bloc. The postmodern must be salvaged from its champions and from its detractors” (1984, 9). The real challenge is to transform postmodernism into a veritable epistemic object, and Stuart Sim’s work is up to this task.

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