REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT: AMBIGUITY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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"It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle"

(Baudrillard 2006).

This paper examines one of the most influential theories of the 20th century, postmodernism, in the present time. Within this framework, this paper concentrates on the main elements of postmodernism in a critical-historical perspective and the recently developed theories which claim to offer an up-to date theoretical framework for the current ambiguous period. This article also investigates the question of whether these recently developed theories provide a better understanding of the present than classical postmodernism. After analyzing the recent theoretical views on the current, along with the classical postmodernism, in the conclusion the study will emphasis that these views (and classical theories of postmodernism), actually, reveal their lack of definition and explanation about the current.

Keywords: ambiguity, culture, modernism, postmodernism, society, theory.

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Introduction

Postmodernism, as a phenomenon against modernism, emerged at the end of the 1960s and brought us some new concepts. As soon as it appeared in the intellectual world this new theory offered us a radical breakthrough: To break off from modernism completely. Consequently this caused some serious debates among intellectuals in the West, especially in the USA. However, the intensity of arguments was restricted in philosophy in the beginning but later spread to architecture, literature and other fields of arts and increased its momentum in the 1970s and in the end reached its peak in the beginning of 1980s.

Although postmodernism has been suspicious of radical views it becomes sufficiently "radical" especially when it applied in the context of modern hopes and utopias which have always been the driving motives of the modern imagination. Thus, postmodern theorists and writers have insisted on dystopic visions, pastiches, parodies, collages, schizophrenic perceptions and developed a stance against characters as heroes, as the impelling force of the narration in modern texts. However this insistence caused some counter-theoretical perspectives. Well known examples are Jürgen Habermas (1981, 1982) and Fredric Jameson's magnum opus *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson 1991).

While Habermas (1982) has used the words "new conservatism" when he defined the emerging theory, Jameson went one step further: He has examined postmodernism as one of the manifestations of the cultural logic of late capitalism which appeared in the 20th century. The 1970s were a time of radical disjunctions, and consequently people experienced these radical breaks in every field from architecture to politics, literature to film and theater.

In the 1990s, postmodern thinking suddenly lost its intensity and left behind an ambiguous world in which some underlying socio-cultural and ideological factors became apparent. Postmodernism lost its momentum just when it was reaching a better definition of contemporary culture and society. It can be said that the theoretical sphere in particular has been experiencing an ambiguity since then. The rationale behind this, indeed, lies in the changes that the world has experienced.

Postmodernism, like humanism or realism, two important movements in modernism, will shift and change continually with time, as Ihab Hassan suggests in one of his informative interviews (Cioffi 1999: 363). So some interesting perspectives have developed with the decline of the debates in the 1990s, but did not in the dialogic and exploratory contexts of the 1960s and 1970s. And these views mostly concentrate on the question of whether postmodernism is over or not today. This study, for this reason, focuses on this question and wants to go one step further: Is postmodernism actually over? If so, are we witnessing another era following this end? How then can we define it? Is it another "late modern", or "post-postmodern"? If so, why cannot we use these terms to define the present state of history? Or are we are experiencing an ambiguous socio-cultural reality which is fundamentally different from the previous eras.

It would be helpful for us to focus on the short history of postmodernism within a historical continuity in order to reach acceptable answers to these questions.

In between the terms: modernism and postmodernism

David Harvey (1992: 7) and Neville Kirk (1994: 221–222) have stressed that today postmodernism is still a polemical term after. Harvey (1992: 7) who has produced a seminal work on postmodernism, writes on this point:

> "No one exactly agrees as to what is meant by the term, except, perhaps that 'postmodernism' represents some kind of reaction to, or departure from, 'modernism'".

Thus Harvey has developed a scheme to make the term more understandable and clearer like Hassan (as will be seen below) and has compared it to modernism. According to his scheme modernism and postmodernism are completely opposed to one another, they are two rival theories. He does not stop here: He continues with harsh criticisms of postmodernism from a Marxist-modernist perspective. Nevertheless, what he shows us in his model in the end is extremely subjective as Kirk (1994: 223) observes. This subjectivity of the term occurs not because of the term itself, but a specific "tradition" in the theory. This can also be seen in the case of Hassan. One question inevitably arises here: How has the term postmodernism become so effective – at least for a specific period of time – in spite of its polemical and contested characteristics? Nonetheless it is not possible to find an exact, definite answer to this question in Harvey. It may be answered to a certain degree, though not completely, through a historical perspective based on the term's origin and its popularity.

Here, Hassan (1983: 14), one of the most influential figures in postmodern thinking, asserts that the anti-postmodern Habermas develops another Marxist-modernist perspective when he defines the postmodern as "regressive" and "conservative". Therefore, it is not surprising to Hassan (1983: 14), to see these kinds of perspectives in every Marxist view. He has stressed that postmodernism, against all anti-postmodern claims, contains a sense of "dissent". Yet this fact, according to Hassan (1983: 15), is different from either the left's or the right's views of opposition. "We must look elsewhere", he writes, "for dissenting attitudes that avoid the antipodes of violence in self and society and resists the coercive discourse of the ideological right and left" (Hassan 1983: 15). He argues within this context that this opposition which is not oppressive and is based on a majority – he uses the words "openness", "variance" and "imperfection" when he defines the term – would be possible in a postmodern society. On this basis Hassan (1983: 15) questions whether or not Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) linguistic model of *The Dialogical Imagination* would be applicable to postmodern society.

Ironically, the term, postmodernism, like its opposite, "modernism", emerged not in the center, but in the periphery. Perry Anderson (1998: 3) in his elucidatory work explains that the term arose in the Hispanic inter-world of the 1930s. Within this world, a literary figure Federico de Onís, first coined the term, "postmodernismo". He used it to describe a conservative movement within modernism itself (Anderson 1998: 4). "De Onis contrasted this pattern – short-lived, he thought – with its sequel, an *ultramodernismo* that intensified the radical impulses of modernism to a new pitch, in a series of avant-gardes that were now creating 'rigorously contemporary poetry' of universal reach" (Anderson 1998: 4).

The term emerged in the Western world twenty years after Onís first efforts in the 1930s. The historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1974) started to use the word in his work entitled *A Study of History*. However he used the term "postmodernism" as an epochal category, in a very different context than that of Onís. Toynbee asserts that, as a non-aesthetic, epochal category, postmodernism signifies a rupture from the "modern age" that started in the 9th century and continued to the Renaissance (Kumar 1995: 132).

Postmodernism, according to this periodization, originated in the late 19th century. To Toynbee the postmodern age based on irrationality, uncertainty and anarchy in thoughts and feelings, symbolizes the end of the "modern age" of Western society.

After the intervention of Toynbee, the term gained a new dimension with a North American poet Charles Olson (Anderson 1998: 7). By contrast, Olson assumed that the new era is an outcome of late modernism that became rather influential especially in the beginning of the 20th century (Anderson 1998: 11). He created a distinctive new poetical style in which he intentionally dealt with "not the past, but the present" with its striking vividness. Olson (1955: 741–742) expresses this in his work *Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement.* Although he insists that he focuses on the "present" and its vividness, he wants to reach this vividness through the investigations of the past. His well-known poem *The Kingfishers* can be seen as an example within this content. The poem which examines time in a counter-pointed balance "opens the legend of Angkor Wat's trade in the blue-green plumage of the kingfisher and the enigma of Plutarch's rock at Delphi, intersecting Mao's report to the CCP" (Anderson 1998: 9). When the poet reveals the particularity of the present with the references to the past, in fact, he develops the first postmodern literary forms. These forms and the insistency on these forms by the author, as Anderson has noted, continued until the mid-1950s. His distinctive style and aphorisms significantly affected William V. Spanos's *boundary 2*, one of the turning points for the history of postmodernism. Among them, Hassan, came to the fore and became the sole author of the theory.

Other than in narrow academic and literary circles, the term did not have much usage until the late 1960s, and the publications of Hassan's writings. It appeared first in architecture, then in dance, theater, painting, film and music and later in the 1970s gained widespread popularity in all fields (Bertens 1995: 4; Connor 1997: 5–6). Here, however, it must be underlined that the gravitational center is the year 1968. Thus, Alexander Dunst (2008: 107) was not absolutely correct when stressed in regards to Jameson that as soon as the term emerged in the late 1960s it started to lose its strength. In contrast to this view postmodernism has continued after 1968. Although postmodernism "did not acquire any wider diffusion till the seventies" as Anderson has noted, it began its rise to prominence in the 1970s and gained its popularity at the end of the decade. As explained above, *boundary 2* is the first turning point for the theory: the journal, appeared in the fall of 1972 with the subtitle *Journal of Postmodern Literature and Culture* and took the legacy of Olson (it published a special issue on Olson, entitled "Charles Olson: Reminiscences, Essays, Reviews") and included the writers who became widely known especially after 1970s (Hassan, Marshall McLuhan and John Cage are only a few of them). In this journal the writers examines the characteristics of the new era.

Here another point must be made in this respect. If we agree on Andreas Huyssen's (1984: 16) approach, the postmodernism of one decade is different from another. So the postmodernism of the 1960s is distinct from the 1970s and 1980s. Each decade rises with its own spirit and this must also be studied and considered. Therefore if one examines the 1960s, 1968 in particular, as the crystallization period of the term, one

should study the 1970s as the decade in which the term gained greater importance. Similarly, it seems to be more accurate to evaluate the 1980s as the years of "confirmation" and "ideologization" for the term, in which it was transformed into a justification mechanism for every controversial aesthetic and political stance emerging in every field.

Two canons of postmodernism: Hassan and Jean-François Lyotard

Hassan does not separate postmodernism from modernism as his rival thinkers Harvey and Jameson do. He starts with a refusal of absolute disjunctions. He instead examines postmodernism as a result of the development of modernity. In other words, according to Hassan, postmodernism lies deeply within the body of modernism (Cioffi 1999: 360) and that is why his categories concentrate more on "continuity" and "diversity".

In Hassan's view temporal categories especially become important. Thus if one analyzes his contributions to the term one clearly sees his temporal indexes: Beginnings and ends of specific time periods. However his temporal categories neither have a tendency to include certain dates nor an inclination to put names on concrete historical developments as in historian Toynbee's works. Hassan analyzes postmodernism within this context and only in the light of aesthetic transformations. This is because what he shows us in the end is a kind of ambiguousness.

According to Hassan's (1982: 393) perspective the temporal index for postmodernism is not clear, so he has stressed that the starting time of postmodernism is uncertain. In this respect James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Ulysses play an important role, because of their relations to postmodernism. According to Hassan (1982: 394), for this reason, Joyce can be studied and defined as one of the great authors whose works include early postmodern fictional characteristics (symbolic references and parallels, the starting point of the Ulysses is Homer's Odyssey, structure of the novel, behavior and actions of the characters, internal monologues, stream of consciousness, space-time experience (to capture the sense of simultaneity in space and time)). In his later works he adds some other modernist figures into this category, from Dadaists to Franz Kafka.

Hassan (1982: 390) grounds his famous postmodern debates in a hypothesis he created himself: Movements in arts, philosophy and literature within the course of modern history would easily turn to be "postmodern revolts". Hassan undoubtedly mentions particular philosophers, artists and literary figures whose works contain postmodern elements (anti-narrative, irony, exhaustion, immanence, etc). In this sense even Michelangelo would be a postmodern figure in his unfinished artistic genius in this sense. Therefore, postmodernism, to Hassan, does not have a clear beginning and end:

> "That Modernism does not suddenly cease so that Postmodernism may begin: they now coexist – in effect, I was saying that Postmodernism lies deeply within the body of Modernism" (Cioffi 1999: 360).

Hassan (1975: 31) has also stressed that postmodernism is not an aesthetic or ideology, but an "anticipated history". Within an uncertain temporal index postmodernity is certainly an aesthetic movement that spans across wide areas, from architecture to literature, painting to cinema. It was first developed within modern or "late modern" texts, not separately from modernity, though he never uses this term in a positive way. Hassan in this context has always pointed out that modernism has changed over time and has caused a major transformation in socio-cultural and political spheres. According to Hassan (1982) this transformation especially affected narratives.

Nevertheless, at this point, Hassan (1982: 395) made another significant effort to reach a clear definition of postmodernism by highlighting that postmodernism is that "unimaginable" which modernism has tried to avoid except in its euphoric moments. This definition, for him, is a sincere evaluation of the present situation of humanity rather than the definition being locked up in alienated forms, images, narratives (one of the arguments of anti-postmodern theorists). Thus the "masters" of our time would only be "revisionists" (Hassan 1975: 55–56). Not surprisingly, artists, creators, "artistic masters" of our time would be only "epigones" who are unable to produce authentic works which are *original* and full of hopes of the future of humanity as can be found in modern works. An artist of a postmodern time could only use the vagueness of the "radical forms" (antiform, anarchy, intertextuality, and interminancy are only some of the "radical forms" that reveal themselves in postmodern works) due to the disappearance of the authorial self. Thus an artist, an author of postmodern time, can only record the vagueness of his time with the innovative forms. Indeed these forms also reveal the impossibility of being purely radical after the huge number of writings, works of arts, revolutions, formal and contextual developments that had taken place. Hassan, in this regard, adds Samuel Beckett as another striking example of postmodern literature.

Continuity and coherence, one of the most distinctive characteristics of modern narratives, have also turned into language-games, cuts, collages, irony and fragmented texts in Hassan's (1982: 395) theory. Thus, according to Hassan (1982: 396), it is no longer meaningful to write or produce such works. Radical changes in the forms of contemporary society indirectly caused fundamental changes in literature especially since the 1910s. These fundamental changes concerned division and advance fragmentations of the life experiences of modern man. He thus suggests that literature produced its new forms, forms of expressions, and fictions and this situation continued together with the fundamental changes in the background of advanced Western societies. Hence the new forms of literature, the literature of the contemporary generated critical perspectives, represent the new reality in its extreme ambiguity.

As stated above, Hassan developed his first formulations on postmodernism in his seminal work *Dismemberment of Orpheus* (first published in 1971) and he continued his analyzes and added new perspectives in his later works: *Paracticisims* (Hassan 1975), *The Right of Promethean Fire* (Hassan 1980), *The Postmodern Turn* (Hassan 1987). Within this new perspective his formulations are mainly characterized by the binary oppositions between modernism and postmodernism. According to this binary

opposition, in postmodernism *play*, for example, replaced modern *purpose*. Similarly, *hierarchy* became *anarchy*, *design* became *chance*, *presence* became *absence*, *synthesis* became *antithesis, genre / boundary* became *text / inter-text*, *signified* became *signifier*, in postmodern arts and literature (Hassan 1982: 267–268). In one of his other works, *Beyond Postmodernism* Hassan insists on these formulations, and he went another phase further in order to search the common characteristics of well known postmodern works:

> "The answer is familiar by now: fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, an ironic, sophistical stance, an ethos bordering on kitsch and camp" (Hassan 2003: 4).

What Hassan examines is very important when clarifying the boundaries of the term for other writers. He was the first writer who clearly showed us the boundaries and the basic characteristics of postmodernism as well as its radical detachments from its predecessor.

However, although Hassan's analyzes and formulations clarify the term to a certain extent, they cannot precisely answer whether postmodernism is an artistic movement or not, or if it is a phenomenon, and how psychological, philosophical, economical and political factors interact with one another and how they shape the theory. He was not only the first writer who pointed out the distinctive characteristic of the term, but also broadened and made it a term that embraced other fields of art and sciences. Moreover, Hassan, more than other *boundary 2* group members contributed to the term. Hassan's first considerations of postmodernism, containing especially literary and aesthetic ones affected other important figures within postmodern and anti-postmodern thinking, from Lyotard to Charles Jencks and Jameson.

Hassan's postmodern literary criticisms in the late 1960s moved to architecture in the next decade. The term gained a strong position and determined discussions within the postmodern frame in this field in the 1970s. However, another work, *The Postmodern Condition*, published in 1979, pulled the term into an unexpected dimension, philosophy. Lyotard, who directly borrowed the term from Hassan, turned his eyes especially towards "grand narratives" and language games. Both, according to Lyotard (1984), have significant role in the emergence of postmodern society.

To Lyotard, the historical process reveals legitimate language contexts and grand narratives. But, after a certain period of time in history, according to Lyotard, time shows us that Western society produces new, legitimate language contexts and narratives, new "meta-narratives" that abolish past narratives and contexts. Here he questions one of the driving forces of the Age of Reason: the Enlightenment. However he is fiercely critical of the ideals, the "universalist claims" of the Enlightenment. For this reason, his work is characterized by persistent oppositions to universals, "meta-narratives".

Regarding the formation of the "legitimacy crisis", Lyotard (1984: 66) proposed that the most important factor that caused this crisis was the developments people experienced, especially in post-industrial society. Thus, Lyotard, benefiting from the analysis of such post-industrial society theorists such as Daniel Bell, Alain Touraine

and Talcott Parsons, believes that the postmodern society has been created and has experienced many transformational developments after post-industrial society (Readings 1991: 54). Lyotard (1984: 60), like Hassan, believed that the postmodern period did not begin immediately after the modern period, but from the beginning modernism was a kind of renewal movement (Readings 1991: 54). For this reason, some writers such as Diarmuid Costello (2000: 76–77) suggest that Lyotard was actually engaged in a project of rewriting or re-conceptualizing modernism itself rather than theorizing it.

Lyotard worked from the hypothesis that the existing transformation of knowledge and information within societies and cultures after the post-industrial period initiated fundamental changes, especially in the linguistic practices and language systems of the post-industrial societies (Lyotard 1984: 70). Accordingly, as soon as the process of transition to a post-industrial period started, linguistic practices created other systems in which communication sub-systems were converted to language games and constituted societal formations. Lyotard, unlike Parsons, does not see society as an organic unity or a conflict center as Karl Marx assumed in all his works, but presented it as a linguistic communication network (Anderson 1998: 35–36).

Lyotard has also analyzed the linguistic practices of a problematized language that both modernists and pre-modernists, especially Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, used to criticize 19th century society, culture and human beings. Lyotard, when he constructed his hypothesis based on this language, reached a theoretical assumption: Language has been decentralized in post-industrial societies. According to this theoretical viewpoint, "all societal networks", for this reason, "are based on language but it has been weaved not from one thread but infinite number of language games" (Harvey 1992: 47).

Lyotard (1984: 70–71) has continued his argument by saying that there are two main determining factors of the development of modernism and modern discourse: the French revolution, "the story of the man who created his own freedom on the bases of knowledge and information", and German idealist philosophy, "the truth itself over time developed its spirit".

The dialogic aspect of Lyotard's postmodernist analysis, however, was related to the constitution of the crisis of legitimacy: Within a discontinued and fragmented structure, in the period of cultural representations which did not allow for any universal perspective, Lyotard (1984: 71) stated that grand narratives, utopias, the most important characteristics of modernism, no longer have any magic, importance and reliability. This point has been overwhelmingly discussed within postmodern and anti-postmodern theories. In this respect the legitimacy of grand narratives, which were situated in the heart of modernism and helped the progress of mankind recover from their own dead-end lives, was criticized. According to this view, modernism, based solely on the Enlightenment, was discerning to a story of a "terrorist mind" and became ideologist. However, this situation cannot be considered as an ideological attack on Lyotard, because both his personal biography and the foundations of his theoretical analysis, as Anderson (1998: 37–38) highlights, was based on liberal criticism of the West. What is significant here about entering into this kind of systematic thinking is

the results that every thinker had encountered in the course of the history of the West. Hassan has experienced a similar breaking point, that in a different frame.

Moreover, Lyotard (1984: 60) accuses anti-postmodern writers of being stubborn and making up "another meta-narrative". After describing the fundamentals of his theory as "incredulous towards meta-narratives" Lyotard (1984: xxiv) writes in the latter parts of his seminal work that the *Postmodern Condition* is intended to "destroy a belief that still underlies Habermas' research, namely that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the "moves" permitted in all language games, and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in its contribution to that emancipation" (Lyotard 1984: 66).

Lyotard, when compared to Hassan, clarifies and gives more scientific dimension to the term postmodernism within changing reality. His real contribution is not only related to the elucidation of the term but is also concerned with the first philosophical presentation of the basic codes of the period.

In the light of all these explanations it can be emphasized that postmodernism, with the help of the seminal works of Hassan (1982: 267–268), Lyotard and Jencks (Jencks 1992: 34), insists especially on these points:
– Rejection of propositions which claim general validity;
– Pluralism and fragmentation rather than monism in language games, information sources and scientific communities;
– Preference of the *heterarchical* rather than the *hierarchical* in systems of thought;
– Contested consensus rather than consensus;
– Acceptance of pluralism of discourse;
– Semiotic view rather than materialism;
– Adoption and highlighting of differences and variety; realization of linguistic transformation which led to discussion of the facts, reality, the truth and accuracy;
– Instead of absolute values, liberty of options opens to interpretation and distrust;
– Interpretation of reality as much as possible, instead of using words in a certain space of time and reality understanding them in their own integrities and autonomies;
– Adoption of the ecological rather than mechanical;
– Reckoning to the understandings which divide human beings into two parts as soul and body, opposing the domination of the unique and absolute truth;
– Anti-narrative / *petit histoire* rather than narrative / *grande histoire*.

The new perspectives on the current

Modernism, as the pinnacle of the Enlightenment, started in the second half of the 19th century and continued its strength until the 1960s in the West. Postmodernism, as explained above, emerged in the 1960s when modernism started to decline. It can be said that postmodern debates, as explained by the key authors such as Hassan,

Jencks and Linda Hutcheon below, have lost their momentum today. Although postmodernism has lost its popularity today we are unsure of what theory we should use instead. This situation occurs because of our failure to define the current situation. So we unavoidably encounter these questions: How should we examine *today*, the 21st century? As one of the decades of modernism? Or a "late-modern" era? These are the important questions one has to ask if one wants to understand the true characteristics of the present time of history. However, the question of whether we are in a new era of postmodernism or not depends on one's point of view. The theorists, for instance, who base their standpoints on modern terms and approaches to contemporary society tend to call it "late modern" era and also examine it as a radical break from the past. On the other hand, postmodern writers claim that history is over (especially in case of extremist writers) and what remains from the past is absolutely different from today. Here an analysis which focuses mainly on the refusal of the past's "grand narratives" and utopic visions becomes apparent. Nevertheless what is clear in these debates is that the old modern and postmodern approaches cannot give us a correct account of the present. The old terms are not sufficient to understand the present. Some postmodern writers for instance have now stressed that postmodernism has ended. Hassan is one of them and suggests in one of his works that we should "propose to engage" postmodernism in ways that may lead us through it, beyond it" (Hassan 2003: 4). Similarly Jencks (2012), whose 1977 work "The Language of Postmodern Architecture" helped popularize the term, also claims that postmodernism has ended with the start of the new millennium. Hutcheon (2002: 165–166), another influential writer in postmodern thinking recently writes in this context:

> "The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on as do those of modernism in our contemporary twenty first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. 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".

Here again an ambiguous situation arises, due to the lack of definition of contemporary culture and society. Thus these approaches, which try to answer the question of what kind of era we are in at the moment, have tendencies to use different names. On this point we face different approaches. Within this framework, for a better understanding of today, if I exclude Gilles Lipovetsky's (2005) "hypermodernism" and Alan Kirby's (2009) "digimodernism" for the reason that the first concentrate on the general picture of postmodernism only, and the latter has a tendency not to see the "positive sides" of postmodernism within its severe critical perspectives. Apart from these, three recent works must be mentioned: The works of Mikhail Epstein (Epstein *et al.* 1999; Epstein 2011), Raoul Eshelman's (2008) "performatism" and the writers of "meta-modernism", Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.

Epstein, who is known for his works on Russian postmodernism, claims that postmodernism has become entirely conventional and provides the foundation for a new,

non-ironic kind of poetry (Epstein *et al.* 1999: 467). However, according to Epstein *et al.* (1999: 467), it is not enough to use conventional postmodernism to understand the present. After analyzing the theoretical backgrounds of modernism and postmodernism he offers the words with the prefix "trans-" or "hyper-" instead of the words "late modern" or "postmodern" to describe the current situation of contemporary culture and society. Epstein (2011) contends that the terms of the past, like "objectivity", "subjectivity", "utopia", and "authenticity" can now be explained only through the new terms that are made with the prefix "trans- / hyper-", such as "trans- / hyper-subjectivity", "trans- / hyper-utopianism" and "trans- / hyper-originality". Based on these theoretical approaches on Italian semiotician Umberto Eco and French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, Epstein (2011) has proposed that the suitable concepts of the new century can only be achieved with these prefixes. According to Epstein *et al.* (1999: 7), due to experiences occuring in the ambiguous-hyper real conditions of the present, the prefixes, "hyper-" or "trans-" would be better suited to the new reality. He asserts that the new terms, which transcend the old forms, show us the characteristics of contemporary culture and society. Epstein *et al.* (1999: 7) stressed that the new era following postmodernism is the era in which "pseudo-reality" became dominant. While in modernism, which was shaped under the effects of "super-reality", clear definitions and concepts about the reality could be substantiated, in the new times, in the "pseudo-reality" this situation has fundamentally changed: "Hyper (or 'Trans-') is a kind of 'super' that through excess and transgression undermines its own reality and reveal itself as 'pseudo'". Epstein (2011) goes one step further: In spite of the views of anti-postmodern thinkers–they claim they claim that utopia, one of the driving motives of modernist works, intentionally ignored in postmodern works – there remains a sense of utopia.

Epstein (2011) has identified the consequence of the present and its art and literary practices as "the resurrection of utopia" which is "no longer a social project with claims to transforming the world, but a new intensity of life experience and broader horizons for the individual". He proposes that the new era in which the death of the subject was declared would not be explained with terms like "postmodernism" any more, but the new words starting with prefixes, like "trans-". However, here, where the "trans-" is reborn according to Epstein (2011), any work becomes "aware of its own failures, insubstantiality, and secondariness". For this reason, even utopianism to Epstein (2011) must depart from this total decay. Utopia is born in this deep frustration. Epstein has also stated that postmodernism is "a part of a much larger and more extensive whole", called postmodernity. The new era, therefore, must be explained using the words starting with "trans-" as soon as the disappearance of the previous postmodernism.

From a different perspective, German-American writer Eshelman claims, that postmodernism is over and it must be replaced with performatism. Because performatism forces viewers to identify with one new sense of creativity based on aesthetically mediated experiences of the transcendence. Unlike postmodernism which examines art, theater and other related fields as undermined by narrative or visual apparatuses

to create uncertainity about the status of the work and how it is received, performatism serves, according to Eshelman (2008: 2), "neither to foreground nor contextualize the subject, but rather to preserve it: the subject is presented (or presents itself) as a holistic, irreducible unit that makes a binding impression on a reader or observer". In other words, performatism approaches the content and form from the outside and examines it from this position. Performative works, according to Eshelman (2008: 1–8), force viewers to identify with simple, opaque characters or situations and to experience beauty, love, belief and transcendence under particular conditions. According to Eshelman (2008: 1), all of the performatist works "derive their strength from the authorially guided apotheosis of reduced, whole subjects and from the performative use of object-bound, holistic signs". Within this perspective, he refers to some literary and cinematic works: From German literature, Ingo Schulze's *Simple Story*, American-Hollywood Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999), Danish Dogma filmmaker Lars von Trier's *The Idiot* (1998). All these examples, according to Eshelman (2008: 2) "derive their strength from the authorially guided apotheosis of reduced whole subjects and from the performative use of object-bound, holistic signs". The performatist concept of the subject, according to Eshelman (2008: 4), reveals itself most clearly in the films mentioned above: "In *American Beauty* the hero consciously reverts to a state of puberty; in *The Idiots* the commune members intentionally act like mentally retarted persons".

Eshelman has stated that the well-known problems regarding temporal, spatial, and causal development in postmodern works may only be solved with a performatist epoch based on "tendency to create chronotopes allowing a choice between possibilities or even repeated choices between possibilities". His view does not give us a complete and precise answer to the reasons which cause fundamental changes in the structure of chronotopes. Nevertheless he suggests that this problem would be overcome with performatism, because of its insistence on time-space unity, and chronotope. Eshelman (2008: 3) observes the inadequacy of the current terms. However his view does not provide precise answers for understanding contemporary society, and it remains limited to aesthetic and literary fields.

Vermeulen and Akker offer a "third way". They assert that the present state of history, though they focus on the years of the 2000s, is characterized by the emergence of a new sensibility that oscillates between, and can also be situated beyond, modern positions (utopism, linear progress, grand narratives, history, ect.) and postmodern strategies (historicism, rejection of propositions which claim general validity, anti-utopism, anti-narrative, ect.). For this reason, they prefer to use modernism with a prefix "meta-" which comes from one of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato (2001). Although "Metaxy" means "between" in Plato's writing (Plato 2001: 36–43), it signifies a movement between opposite poles, "good and mortal", "wisdom and ignorance", "beautiful and ugly". To Vermeulen and Akker (2010: 4) "postmodern tendencies are taking another shape, and, more importantly, a new sense, a new meaning and direction". This new sensibility should not be either modern or postmodern it must be in between or beyond the ideological positions, as can be seen in the definition of Plato's

"metaxy": Here Vermeulen and Akker use a new concept "atopic metaxis". "A topos" means a place (topos) that does not exist: "If the modern, and the postmodern itself by way of a utopic syntaxis, and the postmodern expresses itself by means of a dystopic parataxis [these are some of the well-known modern and postmodern positions in both theories] the metamodern, it appears exposes itself through a-topic metaxis" (Vermeulen, Akker 2010: 12). Consequently Vermeulen's and Akker's theoretical approach concludes ambiguous statements about the present and future.

Although they suggest that meta-modernism longs for another future, they also do not give clear reasons for the necessity of this kind of future. Their theory offers some interesting insights into contemporary society and culture, but remains as in the cases of the above two authors, silent especially about underlying socio-cultural and ideological refractions in the background of contemporary culture and society.

Conclusions

The perspectives discussed above indicate that we are in a distinct stage of history, in a new era. However, we face difficulties in defining this new epoch. Shall we explain this new era in postmodern terms, or shall we consider it as a continuation of modernity? When they analyze this era some liberal writers who are influenced by postmodern approaches tend to select and use words from postmodernism.

Nevertheless what is obvious in these writings is that it is no longer enough to use either modern or "old postmodern" terms and definitions for a complete understanding of the present. We are in new stage of history and the main deterministic factor of this new era is ambiguity. This is what Jameson (2005: 215) once has called "disneyfication" where reality is replaced by artificial cultural representations (signs). Thus, as in Disneyland, there is no longer reality, but only its signs. In a sphere where signs become dominant, reality consequently loses its status and power, as one of the distinctive authors of the 20th century, Baudrillard (2006) has convincingly stressed in his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation*.

If the subject is more precisely a sign, or the only presence in contemporary culture and society is the sign, then we have to speak about ambiguity, about reality. What we examined in the second part above, in fact, are readings of this ambiguity. Thus, when we describe the true nature of the present situation, this should not be the words by the use of the words starting with "post-" or "trans-" prefixes any more, but with words centering on ambiguity. This, as stated above, actually occurs because of our failure in finding a definition of the current world.

The world of today is neither "meta-modern" nor "postmodern". It is a world in which ambiguity becomes apparent and thus is because it is more accurate to define it as the era of ambiguity. This era has developed through the stages of a long history of modernity, especially through the late modern and postmodern phases. Its roots are in modernity, in the fundamental transformation in the 16th century, in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

At this point, one may refer to the view of one of the grand figures in postmodern thinking, Richard Rorty's (1984) view, that Habermas' main thesis of "false modernity" which is based on the resurrection of the aims of the Enlightenment is another reflection of a utopic desire. What we constantly encounter after postmodernism is the impossibility of a return to the past. Here, it is also problematic that, if we have to return to the past's true ideals for accomplishing a new enlightenment, how it could be possible through the present world's totality and the rationality of its instruments left behind. Therefore, the flow of history to the future takes place in its own dynamics. One of the most important achievements of the postmoderns was indeed to see this fundamental necessity and disjunction. They have recorded the changing situation. However when they recognize it – at least in the beginning of 1980s – within a strong ideological stance, as one of the most humanistic, developed and more acceptable stages of history, they failed.

Modern elements (industry, production, product, importance of capital, labor, division of labor, etc) still have their importance in the ambiguous era. Nevertheless, they are only minor details in the large picture. What is more important and dominant is ambiguity in the new era where reality vanishes and is replaced by the signs. Today we are experiencing the consequences of this uncertainty. This is a new era after postmodernism, an era of ambiguity.

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DABARTIES REFLEKSIJOS:
NEVIENAREIKŠMIŠKUMAS ŠIUOLAIKINĖJE
KULTŪROJE IR VISUOMENĖJE

Metin Colak

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje esamuoju laiku nagrinėjama viena įtakingiausių XX amžiaus teorijų – postmodernizmas. Atliekant šiuos tyrinėjimus iš kritinės ir istorinės perspektyvos susitelkiama į pagrindinius postmodernizmo elementus ir pastaruoju metu plėtojamas teorijas, reikalaujančias nūdieniam nevienareikšmiškam laikotarpiui suteikti naujausią teorinį pagrindą. Straipsnyje gvildenamas klausimas, ar šios pastaruoju metu plėtojamos teorijos leidžia geriau suprasti dabartinį, o ne klasikinį postmodernizmą. Išanalizavus naujausius teorinius požiūrius į dabartį kartu su klasikiniu postmodernizmu, išvadose pabrėžiama, kad šie požiūriai (ir klasikinės postmodernizmo teorijos) iš tikrųjų dabartį aiškina nepakankamai apibrėžtai ir tiksliai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: nevienareikšmiškumas, kultūra, modernizmas, postmodernizmas, visuomenė, teorija.