

Blog Post Nr. 8

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Performatism, Political Economy, and the Media

Readers of this website may wonder a bit that I treat things like literature, art, film, and architecture but don't address weighty socio-political issues of the day or try to work them directly into my notion of performatism. The reason isn't because I don't have strongly felt political views or am trying to take a dispassionate position "above it all." Rather, I'm just generally very skeptical about how much social, political, economic, and mediatic developments can be used to explain epochal shifts in culture.

My basic position goes something like this. Works of literature, art, film etc. obviously refer back to and are influenced by surrounding social developments. At the same time, though, these works are part of coherent, more or less autonomous systems of aesthetic reference which exert a greater immediate influence on their practitioners than the amorphous events or trends swirling around them. If you're, say, an up and coming young American author with a political conscience, you might want to write critically about the American engagement in Iraq, the financial crash of 2008 or the police shooting people of color. If you do so, though, you won't be yanking those topics out of thin air and converting them into literature: you'll have your eye on what Thomas Pynchon or Maya Angelou or Dom DeLillo or whoever came before you wrote about. In particular, you'll have your eye on *how* they did it—the "how" being part of the key to getting yourself recognized either as a continuation of some existing literary trend or as part of a new, innovative direction.

Positioning yourself like this in a literary or cultural field isn't done completely freely. In spite of the seemingly endless choices available, there are, because of the weight of historical tradition, only limited logical possibilities for organizing works of literature in terms of plot, narration, and style. For example, in writing your critical novel (assuming you're not being ironic), you won't want your language to sound like that of Charles Dickens or Ernest Hemingway, and you won't want to include 19th century devices like overheard conversations in the garden to keep the plot moving. You might, however, think a lot about whether you want to create heroes or heroines whose actions are ironically undermined by the narration. Alternatively, you might want to create protagonists whose actions lead to positive results in a way that defies rational explanation. If you take the first logical route, you'd be following in a distinctly postmodern tradition; if you took the second, you'd be taking a path that I and numerous others have described as performatist or post-postmodern.

These basic literary devices—and not simply the topic you're writing about or the socio-economic conditions they refer to—will determine the overall mood of your work. In other words, the decisive difference in defining the historical "spirit of the times" or epochal mindset is (among other things) whether you cast your work in an ironic mode or one hinting in a non-ironic experience of transcendence, hope, unity etc. In this regard literature and the other arts differ from socio-economic or political

processes in the real world by virtue of the simple fact that they can make up their own outcomes. If you want to give your work a non-ironic spin in the way I just described, then you can do it. And, in doing so, you'll be consciously or unconsciously following the example of numerous other writers who've made a similar decision not to be ironic anymore either.

This is why the field of literature is much more coherent than, say, politics, where a clearly stated policy can go drastically awry when it bumps into real life. And this is also why speculation about how socio-economic conditions affect literature is very often circular. Since it's much easier to make overarching judgments about the state of literature than it is about the state of politics or society or the economy, the starting point for this kind of causal analysis is often literature or culture itself. In other words, the more or less coherent concept of a literary epoch or period is used to provide a framework for defining the much more diffuse socio-economic forces that are supposed to be causing it in the first place.

There are several basic ways that literary or cultural theories go about linking socio-economic and political developments causally to literary ones. The most prevalent method, which I've talked about at length in Blog Post Nr 1, "The Misery of Posthistoricism," regards literature as one of many overlapping kinds of discourse—"discourse" referring to the way power relations are expressed in language and various institutional practices. Because they see literary discourse as constantly interacting with other discourses in unforeseeable, variegated ways, critics of this type don't think it's possible to reach any overarching conclusions about the state or development of literature. Seen this way, literary history devolves into the description of an endless series of small shifts in the greater flow of discourse. Scholars using this approach are generally not interested in defining post-postmodernism because they can't—their methodology simply doesn't allow them to do it.

This type of discourse-based criticism is very good at connecting literature with individual socio-economic issues and it avoids the sort of circular reasoning described above. However, if you want to know anything about the state of literature as a whole, there's no way of finding out—all you'll get is a bunch of seemingly singular individual interactions between literary works and social discourse. This is why critics like Andrew Hoberek look at contemporary American literature and see nothing but "a phase of as-yet uncategorized diversity" (see my remarks in the [Annotated Bibliography](#)). In short, critics like this can't see the forest for the trees, and they see "uncategorized diversity" because they don't allow for any specifically literary categories to begin with.

The second type of method is Marxist or Neo-Marxist and assumes that literature and other cultural realms are part of a superstructure determined by an economic base, which is to say capitalism. Most Neo-Marxist critics use as their jumping-off point the work of [Fredric Jameson](#), who is widely regarded as the most important theoretician of postmodern culture. Jameson's major achievement was to have combined a very clear-headed, sophisticated analysis of postmodern culture with the concept of "late capitalism" borrowed from the work of the Belgian Marxist economist

Ernest Mandel. I can't go into all the details of "late capitalism" here, but the scenario laid out by Jameson always sounded fairly plausible even if you weren't a fire-breathing Marxist: he saw postmodernism as arising in the late 1950s and early 1960s as an expression of the increasing commodification, globalization, and mediatization of capitalism.

As with a great deal of Marxist criticism, Jameson and Mandel's theory was very good at describing the inequities of the capitalist system but less good at predicting its capacity for self-correction or presenting any real-world alternatives to it (Mandel was a Trotskyist who also rejected the bureaucratic communism of what was then the Soviet bloc, and Jameson takes a similar position). For this reason Marxist criticism of this type tends to hang in mid-air. While you might nod your head approvingly at its scathing ethical critique of capitalism, you also might wonder why capitalism is still going strong and why presumed alternatives to it (Venezuela anyone?) disappear or wind up as political and economic disasters.

Since few if any of the Neo-Marxist academic critics we're talking about have any formal training in economics, they tend to focus on the ethical shortcomings of capitalism and usually wind up writing essayistic critiques of capitalist culture rather than stringent analyses of its economic mechanisms. The situation was summed up by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book [*The Specters of Marx*](#), in which he stresses the continued ethical relevance of a plurality of different marxisms, as opposed to one dogmatic Marxism with a capital "M." In any case the economic theory used by Neo-Marxist or Marxist-influenced critics on postmodernism isn't based on original research, but on a mixture of general knowledge and economic analysis borrowed from economists who are usually on the far left of the political spectrum.

If you do follow Jameson's Marxist line of reasoning, its main advantage—that it explains postmodern culture as the direct expression of a long-term, specifically defined phase in the historical development of capitalism—turns out to pose a serious logical problem. For if cultural change is the result of fundamental changes in the nature of capitalism, you'll have to show that late capitalism has been superseded in some way by some equally basal change—something like "late late capitalism," although you probably wouldn't want to call it that. As I've noted in Blog Post Nr. 2 ("The Prison-House of Postmodernism"), Jameson took a second look at the state of capitalism in 2015 and was unable to see in it anything qualitatively different from what he described it in the early 1980s. Accordingly, he simply renamed postmodernism "postmodernity" and completely ignored the question of whether a post-postmodernism was even possible.

This same problem dogs critics like Jeffrey Nealon and the metamodernists who orient themselves towards Jameson. Nealon, whose book on [post-postmodernism](#) came out in 2012, rather oddly subtitles his work "the logic of just-in time capitalism," which plays on Jameson's famous article on postmodernism and—get this—a form of production developed in the Japanese car industry in the 1960s and '70s that became popular in the West in the 1980s and '90s. In spite of constant references to

“post-postmodernism,” Nealon can’t bring himself to say that it is anything more than an “intensification” of postmodernism (which itself is an “intensification” of modernism), which means all these “isms” are swimming along in the same historical current and don’t mark discrete or dialectical stages of historical development. Nealon is in fact so sure that things intensify in order to remain the same that he doesn’t even bother to reconnect his updated critique of capitalism with any sort of close readings, which leaves whatever valid conclusions he may have made dangling in mid-air.

The metamodernists, by contrast, argue that there has indeed been a fundamental change in the way capitalism works (see my notes on [Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism](#) in the [Annotated Bibliography](#)). The buzzword here is “neoliberalism” (which incidentally was already in full swing back in the 1980s under Thatcher and Reagan). What makes metamodernist-style capitalism different is the advent of certain conditions which “emerged, converged and coagulated” (p. 11) in the time between 1999 and 2011. The conditions cited by the metamodernist editors are too numerous to list here, but they include the millennial generation coming of age, the easy availability of digital technologies, the geopolitical rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the dream of oil independence through fracking, the second Iraq War, the Arab Spring, the debt crisis and so on and so forth—practically everything with any socio-political or economic impact that happened in those years makes the list. The metamodernist authors go on to say that these developments shouldn’t be seen as a “series of unrelated events” but rather as “interlocking dialectical movements across spatial scales, temporal cycles and techno-economic, cultural and institutional levels” (p. 12). As is the case in expansive cultural critiques of this kind, there isn’t much of any accompanying analysis to back up this claim—you pretty much have to take the authors’ word that these very disparate things are all intertwined.

Assuming that you do, you’re faced with the next logical hurdle, which is that these developments taken as a whole have led to the intensification of the neoliberal trend in capitalism that has been ascendant since the 1980s—something that would not seem to be anything qualitatively new in economic terms. The tortured syntax of the metamodernists’ argument makes clear that they are aware of this logical problem themselves: “the apparent resurgence of neoliberalism in the aftermath of the crisis does not entail that we are *not* witnessing a fourth update of capitalism—a ‘capitalism 4.0’ [...] as it were. We certainly are” (p. 17). Once more, we have to take their word for it that the dominant mode of capitalism has changed fundamentally (even though it doesn’t really look like it). Finally, the metamodernists’ closing argument owes more to [Chicken Little](#) (“the sky is falling, the sky is falling”) than to rigorous socio-economic analysis: “writing from today’s perspective, we appear to have been too rapidly moving along the neoliberal path leading [...] to a clusterfuck of world-historical proportions [...] in which wealth is concentrated at the top 1 per cent of the pyramid, while rising sea levels and super storms crumble its base, where the rest of us reside in highly precarious conditions” (p. 17).

Even if you're willing to swallow this cataclysmic argumentation hook, line and sinker, you might still wonder what it has to do with the specific mechanism that the metamodernists find everywhere in present-day culture, which they describe elsewhere (in their original manifesto) as an oscillation "between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity." For if this is indeed a reaction to a "clusterfuck of world-historical proportions" it seems a fairly tame one, and on top of that holds forth positive-soundings qualities like enthusiasm, hope, empathy, unity etc. It also begs the question: is the socio-economic mess we're in determining culture or is culture determining the way we deal with the socio-economic mess?

The metamodernists solve this problem by referring back to a "structure of feeling" which bridges the (apparently wide) gap between disastrous socio-economic development and the relatively up-beat arts. The metamodernists, who refer here to a concept set forth (but never developed) by the Marxist critic Raymond Williams, seem to be looking for a term that is less metaphysically loaded than Hegel's clunky *zeitgeist*, which supposedly runs through and guides the entirety of human history in predictable dialectical leaps. If you want to avoid *zeitgeist*, however, there's always the good old term "epoch," which I prefer (see Blog Post Nr. 1 "The Misery of Posthistoricism").

Although I do sympathize with the metamodernists' attempts to reconstruct a "structure of feeling," I'm a lot more cautious than they are about trying to explain how socio-economic factors affect literature and the other arts (or the other way around). In particular, I prefer to limit speculation about what "caused" performatist devices to an examination of how they rework or negate postmodern and modern devices—it's the only place you'll find a one-to-one correlation between the things you're studying (try, for example, to connect the "dream of oil independence through fracking" with the "oscillation between naiveté and knowingness"). In any case, I've found that the use of these devices leads to a transcendence-seeking sensibility that is markedly different from that of postmodern irony or modernist utopianism (here, too, the metamodernists arrive at similar conclusions—see the discussion in Blog Post Nr. 4, "Theory Smackdown").

Unlike the metamodernists, I'm cautious about making expansive claims about what the transcendent sensibility of performatism means in larger socio-economic or political terms. There are, no doubt, rhetorical expressions of transcendent optimism in politics, as for example in Obama's "Yes, we can," Merkel's "Wir schaffen es" [we'll manage it], and Jeremy Corbyn's authentically preserved old socialism (for a good metamodernist analysis of how British Labour politicians present themselves as authentic see Sam Browse's article on Jeremy Corbyn's rhetoric in the *Metamodernism* book, pp. 167-182). Also, there is the new populism (Trump, Brexit, PIS in Poland, Orban in Hungary etc.) which includes elements of unity, hope, and optimism etc.—tied unfortunately to authoritarian, bigoted leaders and nationalist ideology. It's indeed interesting to examine how these political developments work from a cultural

perspective, with the emphasis being on the “how.” While this kind of critique can help us understand certain aspects of political culture, it’s not a substitute for in-depth analyses dealing with the “what”—with extremely complex political, social, and economic mechanisms that can perhaps be described partially in terms of a culturally defined “structure of feeling” or an “epoch” but that can’t be reduced to it entirely.

Mediatic Explanations of Post-postmodernism

One thing I’ve noticed about media studies in general is that they tend to overinflate the importance of their object of study. Let’s take as an example this very text. Granted: if the new media weren’t here, I wouldn’t have written this and you couldn’t read it. The rise of the web has given me a forum to present my scholarly notions in a more popular form and has made it easy for anyone anywhere to get access to them. Does that change the substance of what I write about? The answer is: not much. I simplify a lot of arguments and I play down the semiotic jargon, but I haven’t changed any of my basic points. Does it tremendously magnify the influence of what I’m writing? That’s hard to say. This site gets around 1,500 hits a month from all over the world, and the web obviously makes my theory more accessible. However, my writing here is addressed primarily to non-academics and students and not professional scholars, who (for very good reasons) still value peer-reviewed papers over self-published stuff on the internet.

So just how “revolutionary” is the web? In this case not all that much—it’s made the communication between academia and the general public a lot easier, but it hasn’t erased the difference between them, which is defined by things like peer-reviewed publications, number of citations, scholarly consensus etc. and not by a certain type of media exposure. Also, you may have noticed that there’s no discussion forum or message board on this site—if you want to communicate with me you have to do it like scholars privately do, which is to say in a polite personal e-mail and not in a free-wheeling web “discussion” populated by anonymous trolls and cranks.

I’m well aware that up to now I’ve ignored the question of what role media play in performatism. Part of the reason for this is that there is already a very good book on the subject—Alan Kirby’s [Digimodernism](#) (2009). Alan’s remarks on performatism were originally quite dismissive (check out pp. 39-41), but I’m happy to say that we’ve corresponded and met since then and have arrived at numerous points of agreement in spite of our different approaches.

From my point of view, I find his description of digimodernism as a “new form of textuality characterized by [...] onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship” (p. 1) very compelling—up to a certain point. Whereas the qualities he describes undoubtedly appear in digitized texts in all forms of social media and in some niches of high and popular culture (novels written in twitter form, interactive fiction, or video games), they most assuredly don’t apply to the overwhelming majority of professionally produced texts or media products, which still

adhere to stuffy old things like copyright laws and require considerable technical and artistic expertise to make in the first place.

This is why if you read a novel, watch a film, or tune into quality TV, you'll find that the effect of digital technology on them is ancillary. Reading an e-book might be a bit more convenient than using a printed one, you might watch the film or TV series by streaming them instead of viewing them directly in a movie theatre or on TV, and the movies or series themselves will no doubt contain some neat digitized special effects. But if they really and truly are "haphazard" and "evanescent" you're not going to watch or read them very long. In fact, you'll find that quite the opposite is true: without exception they'll have been designed by highly skilled, explicitly credited authors with the goal of grabbing and keeping your attention using non-digital means like plot development, characterization, and narrative cleverness.

Alan gets around this by admitting that "it's possible to argue that digimodernist literature does not exist" (p. 218) and suggests that "digimodernist literature is yet to come" (p. 218). He does go on to point out the impact of digitization of marketing and promotion ("Amazon, Google Books, Kindle, *Oprah*, tours, book clubs, critic blogs" p. 221), but these, too, don't really change much about how the books themselves are written—writers have always been marketed and/or write with certain types of readers in mind. Digital communication means that more people will find it easier to access literature, but it's not really a qualitative change. From my point of view, this is a major problem of his basic argument. Whereas social communication has indeed been revolutionized by digital technology, it hasn't changed very much about how literary works, films, or art works are constructed and received by the general public.

A second point of agreement applies to Alan's description of certain aspects of digimodernist culture. For example, he singles out autism as a social phenomenon that is symptomatic of digimodernism's opposition to postmodern culture (I've arrived at a similar conclusion based on my analysis of contemporary books and movies on the subject—see my internet article "[Transcendence and the Aesthetics of Disability: The Case of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*](#)"). Alan suggests that the "2,500 per cent diagnostic rise" in autism (p. 231) has come about because autism stands for everything that postmodernism isn't. As he notes, it "valorizes truth, objectivity, and reason" (p. 232) and elsewhere he speaks of its "embrace of exhaustive knowledge, its love and recall of facts [...] its insistence on rationality" (p. 233). In his view, this is not so much due to digitization as to a reaction to that "which our society despises, marginalizes, and makes impossible, and is produced as the exact contrary of hegemonic social forces in a variety of contexts" (p. 231). I couldn't agree with this sort of analysis more—Alan is arguing that the turn towards autism is based on the rejection of certain (postmodern) social values and norms and not on technological innovation.

A Brief Summary

The theory of performatism as I've developed it is focused on the devices used by works of literature, art, cinema, and architecture to counter those of postmodernism. This doesn't mean that I'm not interested in the social, political, and economic conditions in which those works come into play. However, I'm careful about ascribing socio-economic "causes" to the things I describe. While it's fun to speculate on why this or that post-postmodern attitude came about, it's much harder to pinpoint the reason for it. Any rigorous attempt to do so depends on in-depth socio-economic research that has to be done by others. Of these "others," Neo-Marxists happen to be prominent in academia (though not of course outside of it). While I do respect the Neo-Marxist critique of capitalism for its ethical insights, I'm not going to become a Neo-Marxist myself until I see some form of non-dictatorial, non-bureaucratic socialism in the real world (perhaps I need to move to Kerala). I also prefer a cautious approach to media studies. While it would be interesting to apply performatism critically to social media, I have the feeling that Alan Kirby has already gotten there ahead of me. And, until digitization causes massive, heretofore unknown changes in the way we read or view narrative fictions, I'm going to stick to analyzing characterization, plots, narrative, and style while keeping in mind the relatively minor effects on reading or viewing exerted by digital technology.