

"Postmodernism": A Challenge for Literary History

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Summary

This article questions the usefulness of the term and concept "postmodernism" in comparative literature and literary historiography. It reflects upon the possibilities of a structural-semiotic approach relying on the Peircean triadic sign-model to counter the problem of the vague and inclusive character of both term and concept in different cultural situations and environments. A model for the analysis of the global communicational situation is suggested, in order to realize an integration of the literary discourse into the encompassing social discourse and the registration of the "period-code-consciousness" which enables and orientates the discussion of contemporaneous data, views, sensibilities and conventions in their specific contexts. Such a broad and penetrating scanning and analysis must rely upon strongly interdisciplinary research.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bevraagteken die bruikbaarheid van die term en konsep "postmodernisme" in vergelykende literatuur en literêre historiografie. Dit oorweeg die moontlikhede van 'n strukturalisties-semiotiese benadering, wat steun op die Peirciaanse tekenmodel, om die probleem van hierdie vae en inklusiewe karakter van sowel die term en die konsep in verskillende kulturele situasies en omgewings teen te werk. 'n Model vir die analise van die globale kommunikatiewe situasie word voorgestel ten einde 'n integrasie te bewerkstellig van beide die literêre diskoers in die omvattende sosiale diskoers en die registrasie van die "periode-kode-bewussyn" wat die bespreking van kontemporêre data, gesigspunte, sensitiwiteite en konvensies in hulle spesifieke kontekste moontlik maak en oriënteer. So 'n breë en indringende ondersoek en analise vereis die steun van 'n stewige interdisiplinêre navorsing.

In this paper my interest in postmodernism is located in the field of the theory and the methodology of the historical study of literature. My argument emerges as a result of the numerous discussions concerning the utility of the concept and the term "postmodernism" for literary historiography. Whether the term is useful or not, one is confronted with a kind of inevitability, since the label has become central to a large part of current literary research and discourse. A primordial problem springs from the confusion provoked by conceptual and terminological vagueness. Its polysemy may even lead to contradictions if the term is used as a general designator, without a critical analysis of the precise content (and set of connotations) in a defined context and area of application. Wayne Hudson quite rightly signals not only the confusion in books and articles between postmodern/postmodernist and post-modernism/postmodernity but also the hardly reassuring fact "that post-modernity is currently characterised inter alia as: a myth, a periodisation, a condition or situation, an experience, an historical consciousness, a sensibility, a climate, a crisis, an episteme, a discourse, a poetics, a retreat, a topos" (Hudson, 1988: 186-187).

The terminological practices in different cultural and linguistic entities have

been marked by an apparently endless process of proliferation and nowadays cover a lot of thinking and feeling in the areas of aesthetics and arts, architecture, cultural sciences, philosophy and theology. The term seems to be productive as a catalyst for new discourses and discussions in a worldwide expansion, strongly supported and promoted by various mass media.

The generalization of this terminological (ab?) use creates a pressure in the different limitrophe cultural domains to consider the term and the concept as an element of reference, a coordinate, but functioning as an "alibi-qualificator", an often unreliable net to catch "the spirit of the era", "une condition de notre culture", or simply "un tempérament ou sensibilité". Such holism is deceptive and must lead to ineffective description and analysis (e.g. the frequent assimilation with poststructuralism). The common denominator is not encompassing and the different numerators are sometimes even contradictory. The characterization of postmodernism as a gigantic phantom haunting the media, maximally overproduced and fully overexposed (Boomgaard & Lopez, 1985: 7) may obviously be helpful in understanding the "cosmopolitic migration" (as Janet Paterson termed it) and the "unitary sensibility" (Susan Sontag) of postmodernism. But this must not prevent the historian from being aware of the spatio-temporal differences, shades and shifts that are manifest in the production, distribution, transfers, reception and refraction of the so-called postmodern discourse. Historical studies such as Michael Köhler's (1977), Wallace Martin's (1978) or Hans Bertens's (1986), provide convincing evidence of the differences in scope and conceptualization and in the terminological practices of some authors who have been quoted over and over again and whose works are considered as seminal. Who would not recognize the distance, for instance, between Irving Howe (1959) and Harry Levin (1960) and the viewpoints of Leslie Fiedler (1965) and Susan Sontag (1964), who concentrate on the sub- and anti-cultural aspects and aims of the postmodern phenomenon and its liberating eroticism, or the intellectual and philosophical orientation and revolutionary ambitions indicated by Richard Wasson (1969) and William Spanos (1977). The semantic instability of the term, to which Ihab Hassan refers in his essay *The Question of Postmodernism* (1980), was caused by the growing tendency to conceive postmodernism not only as a particular artistic style or as a label to be applied to some post-world war two cultural phenomena, but as an inclusive concept and term which had gained an epistemic status. This evolution is most clearly illustrated in the writings of Ihab Hassan. In *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodernist Literature* (1971) and in his later publications, such as *The Right Promethean Fire* (1980), *The Question of Postmodernism* (1980), *What is Postmodernism? New Trends in Western Culture* (1984) and *Making Sense: The Trials of Postmodern Discourse* (1987), Hassan is involved in a process of incorporating ever more elements into the concept. This appropriation of a mass of constitutive elements means that one is incapable of pointing to a stable and well defined centre, as Bertens and Hoffmann have noted.

Globally speaking, Hassan's features of postmodernism are to be related to the concept of a decentered world we know from deconstructionist and

poststructuralist theory, and they express a fundamental and radical epistemological and ontological doubt, captured in the two principal traits of 1. "indeterminacy": "referring to all ruptures, all ambiguities, affecting postmodern languages, knowledge, society", i.e. the total loss of ontology and 2. "immanence", being "the secular capacity of mind to generalize, extend itself through languages, media, new technologies", which finally means that "we have become part of an immanent semiotic system" (Hassan, 1987: 445).

From the point of view of literary historiography the inclusive nature of the concept of postmodernism is very problematic. Hassan's preference, for instance, for working with sets of characteristics brought together in binary oppositions reflects his vision of cultural periods as mental constructions that are to be articulated in terms of continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony, revealing the dialectical nature of the relations between the distinctive features that are accentuated. However, finally he does not manage to escape the pitfalls of oversimplification. His model of cultural evolution manifests the reductionist weaknesses of so many structuralist and even poststructuralist approaches when they refer to a merely contrastive combination of two "moments/situations" fixed diachronically. Such a mechanistic approach emphasizes the aspects of rupture and distance, but does not sufficiently account for the historical process, namely, the diversity of anticipatory élans and moves as well as the creative impulses of retro-modes, recuperation and rewriting practices (das Gleichzeitige des Ungleichzeitigen); the generative co-existence of apparently opposite elements in their fundamentally dialogic-dialectical contexts; and (especially) the contemporaneous collective awareness of the changes that occur and the articulation of this consciousness in literary and social discourse.

The more inclusive the concept has become, the more it has tended to claim the status of a general paradigm, revealing an almost obsessional preference for contrastive typology. Fredric Jameson's study of the replacement (in his view a degeneration) of the modernist parody by pastiche in postmodernism offers a fair example of this kind of approach (Jameson, 1984: 53-92). The case is even more clear in Hassan's *The Right Promethean Fire*. Starting with a previously constructed model he involves himself in a procedure of recuperation, making his moves in two distinct directions. Firstly the blurring of different contemporary cultural domains, artistic idioms and forms (so that the traditional difference between high and low, canonized versus trivial artistic performances is largely eliminated) and secondly, a lot of elements from the past are recuperated for integration or ironical manipulation.

Thus, we create our own godfathers and nephews in history according to our own concept of postmodernism. This transhistoric strategy, related to Foucauldian archaeological and genealogical procedures, must lead to a basically ahistoric view. Pointing to the postmodernist tendency to push historical boundaries ever further, Umberto Eco noted in his *Postille a Il Nome della Rosa* that postmodernism has become a *passe-partout* as a concept and as a term ("Malauguramente 'post-modernismo' è un termine à tout faire"), and that we cannot use it to designate an historically defined current. Consequently, Eco proposes that postmodernism should be considered a

meta-historic category: the modern label, he suggests, for manierism (Eco, 1983: 37–38).

Another characteristic of the binary-type approach is the predominance (mostly in Anglo-Saxon criticism) of the dichotomy postmodernism/modernism. There are perhaps valuable arguments in favour of such a reductive opposition with the Anglo-American academy although even Hassan expresses his doubts concerning a polarization of the type concerning whether postmodernism should be regarded as a radical rupture with modernism or whether it should be taken as the fulfillment and the apogee of modernism. When confronted with the Western-European cultural situation, one has to acknowledge that “modernism” (the label as well as the concept) no longer points to the same content. Both Susan Suleiman (1986: 255–270) and Helmut Lethen (1986: 233–238) have shown that the Anglo-Saxon concept of modernism is not an historically distinct and homogeneous phenomenon, unless one forgets and excludes the continental avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. Lethen ironically states “that the postmodern situation created the possibility to see modernism as a closed and rather rigid entity. If you want to deconstruct, you have to homogenize your object beforehand so that it becomes deconstructible”. In this type of dichotomous approach history gets narrowed to a set of diachronic transformations within a fixed structure. One must prevent oneself from using texts and discourse as clearly demarcated depositories of defined meanings which acquire an historical dimension by merely relating them diachronically. Regarding the text as not exclusively a system of signs, but also and primarily as a totality of sign-productive potentialities, the historian will considerably enlarge his scope and the object of his analysis. Moreover, he will engage more completely with the discursive aspect of history. He will be obliged to include the investigation of the different forms and media of communication into his research in order to realize a history of the mental structures which co-determine the production and reception of texts as constitutive elements of the communication process: “a history of collectivities . . . a history of the distribution and transformation of the frame-constituents of social knowledge” (Gumbrecht, 1985a: 227 & 1985b). It is, however, not only a set of external relations that is at stake, but a kind of individual and collective historical self-consciousness as well. In this respect an interdisciplinary approach based upon a combination of the principles and aims of a “history of mentalities” (as projected within the frame of the French “Annales”-school) and a structural-semiotic study of literature look promising.

In a discussion of the possibilities and advantages of the “Nouvelle Histoire” in the field of historical comparative literary studies at the McGill Conference on *Renewals in the Theory of Literary History* (Montreal 1982), three fundamental points were noted: 1. the necessity of an integrated multidisciplinary approach, 2. the valorization of the reception and communication element in the analysis of literary systems, and 3. the rejection of a linear chronology in favour of “la conscience nette de la pluralité du temps social” (F. Braudel), which would facilitate a more developed contextual approach (Duju, 1982 & 1984).

On the other hand, important theorists of the "Nouvelle Histoire" (such as J. Le Goff, M. Vovelle, R. Mandrou, G. Duby, P. Ariès, K. Pomian, et. al.), basing their studies on interdisciplinary methods to realize their goal of an "histoire totale", continually refer to literature and literary studies. For a history of mentalities it is not only "l'imaginaire" of the literary production (e.g. Duby, 1978 or Le Goff, 1985) which contains valuable historical information, but also the views, the evaluation and the communication of literary forms, as well as their institutionalization and functioning within the range of the socio-cultural context. Since the historiographical practice of the *Annales*-historians focused on mental structures¹ rather than on rigorously factual elements (*l'événementiel*), their theoretical presuppositions and methods inevitably attracted special attention from literary scholars who were interested in a structural-semiotic study of literary texts and literary evolution.

Traditionally a double objection has been formulated by historians against semiotics as a constituent for historical analysis: 1. its abstract-formalistic nature, tending to a certain "logicism" and straight objectivism; 2. a subsisting opposition between synchrony and diachrony, which necessarily reduces the notion of structure to a system of fixed transformations.

In response to these objections Peter Haidu (1982) sketches a conceptual basis and a possible strategy for a so-called "historical semiotics" (a study which has provoked lively discussion and commentary in the U.S.A.). Haidu starts from the assumption that it is the very structured character of texts which manifests their historicity. Owing to the extent of its technicality and formalization, the semiotic model of investigation prevents the "monumentality" of the text from being reduced to a mere documentary status. The rigorous formal aspect of semiotic analysis, however, does not exclude the investigation of "values". Values, Haidu states, are the "semantic bits", the uniting of which makes language and other semiotic systems meaningful:

Values are what actions are about: their creation, captation or exchange. History and narrative are the incorporation of 'values': hence the appropriateness of their semiotic study. History as the narrative of human values being created, transformed, captured or exchanged, and history as a history of such events, are entirely 'natural' objects of analysis for a narrative semiotics.

(Haidu, 1982: 191) In this respect the primarily social character of the code-concept should be made evident when it is used in an historical approach to texts: the network of connotative codes locates the denotative system in its socio-cultural context. The importance of intertextual elements is equally evident in registering the processes of integration of earlier codes into new ones (that is, a diachronic element of the synchronic analysis). Intertextuality is not simply a matter of recognizing concrete text fragments, but "rather a general cultural space . . . that functions as the repository of cultural codes on which individual texts may draw their self-constitution" (Haidu, 1983: 196).

Haidu's project of "historical semiotics" is incontestably founded upon a dyadic semiotics of Saussurean orientation (the signifier-signified sign-model) and relies heavily on the dichotomous logic of the Greimassian square. For that reason, history in his scheme is narrowed to a set of diachronic trans-

formations within a fixed structure. In a critical review of his proposal Marike Finlay-Pelinski (McGill) mentions the inadequate association of history with mere diachrony and deep structure in his bipolar semiotic model. Diachrony conceived of as a sequential transformation neglects history as act or as conditions of production.

A triadic sign-model, on the other hand, as it is to be found in Peirce's semiotic theory, offers many possibilities for a pragmatic theory of meaning which enables one to dynamize the system of transformations of meaning kept in hostage inside a system of fixed binary oppositions (Reiss, 1980 and Parret, 1983). A pragmatic approach allows a description of the constitution of meaning as a continuous, infinite, open and social semiosis (Veron, 1977). Moreover, the valorization of the contextual elements has the advantage that one can more accurately take into account the limitations of the structural formalizations, which are abstractions of lively and constructive processes in the domains of nature and culture (Piaget, 1970: 35; Denzin, 1986: 339). Thus, the complexity of the empirical world falls within the range of semiotic analysis. History is no longer the mere totality of facts from the past, but equally (and perhaps above all) the consciousness, the awareness of those facts as a semiotic network of temporal and dynamic relations, including the "humanly constructed environment as a system of signs" as Donald Preziosi (1979) terms it. The pragmatic dimension clearly shifts the central focus from the semantic isotopies and referential transfers to the discursive element and to the communicative domain. Texts should be thought of as active elements of a continuous production of signs. Their historical dimension may be located rather in the meaning-constituent factors than in the fixed and defined representations or meanings themselves. In other words, their historical relevance may be posited rather in the pragmatic than in the semantic field.

In the current discussions concerning the theoretical and methodological fundamentals of literary history, the pluridisciplinary approach has become central. The term "social history of literature", which is often used in this regard, no longer primarily refers to the representational qualities of literary production, but to the communicational and contextual factors as active elements of the development of literary systems (Rusch, 1985; Schmidt, 1985; Ort, 1985). The specific attention paid to pragmatics is, of course, not exclusive to today's literary historiography. The Prague School structuralists – especially Felix Vodička – combined their structural theory of literary evolution with a semiotic conception of the literary work into quite effective investigative models (Galan, 1979; Sedmidubski, 1982).

A structural-semiotic approach to literature, relying on the Peircean sign-model, proposes a concept of literature which may be really constitutive for the notion of "mentality" as it is proposed and used by the scholars of the "Annales", Robert Mandrou and Georges Duby (Mandrou, 1968 & Duby, 1961). Besides manifesting a certain autonomy, literary systems are also functionally integrated into the socio-cultural complex. (Compare this with Mukařovský's view on the fundamental and immanent dynamics of the artistic structure as the totality of the "esthetic objects" or Yuri Lotman's description of the "self governing mechanism"). For that reason literature cannot be

compressed or confined to the corpus of so-called literary texts, which should then be treated by the literary historian as quasi-independent and a- or super-temporal objects. On the contrary, they are bound to actors and their socio-cultural acting conditions. S.J. Schmidt puts it this way:

... texts are not regarded as 'possessing' their meaning, and 'being' literary; instead subjects 'construe' meanings from texts as literary phenomena in their cognitive domain by applying the linguistic norms and conventions they have internalized in the process of socialization in their respective social groups. (Schmidt, 1985: 289)

History is not only the representation of the image of a cultural memory, but also the analysis of the historical consciousness and the semiotic means and processes.

This leads us to the priority of combining a semiotic analysis of literary texts as segments of the literary communicative situation with a systematic investigation of the whole field of communication concerning literature and the media used for that purpose. The literary-communicative situation is a complex phenomenon, located on different levels and running along different channels, means and instances. First, the literary texts can be regarded as specific symbolic practices operating within the topology of different discourses including the question of how literature works upon the "déjà-là" of the systems that represent the world and social life (Angenot, 1985; Berger & Luckmann, 1973: 149-183). Considering that the literary fact is both an interdiscursive act and a textual specificity, one can agree with Marc Angenot's definition of the text as an interdiscursive and intertextual disposal ("un dispositif"): "qui absorbe et réémet de façon spécifique (la textualisation, le travail fictionnel, l'effet de texte, l'aspect valeur du texte, le travail sur la langue et en particulier sur le signifiant) et singulière les représentations du réel présentes dans le déjà-là du discours social" (Angenot, 1985: 80-81). But there is also the huge mass of metatexts that must be studied by way of close examination and systematic inquiry, such as literary critiques and reviews, general and specific theoretical studies, biographies of authors, correspondence, interpretations of texts, reports of the juries at literary contests, awards and prizes, minutes and accounts of academies and learned societies, journalistic coverage of literary manifestations and happenings, programmatic writings and manifestoes, introductions and prefaces, translations and anthologies with their commentaries, treatises on poetics, schoolbooks, programs and instructions for teaching and literary education (university and minor levels), advertisements and other promotional texts, legislation and official texts concerning cultural (especially literary) policies, historical surveys, and so on.

A correct analysis of these metatexts, however, is feasible only if they are situated and integrated into the network of the media-system of a defined society at a specific moment. One needs to know about the structure, the operating procedures and the impact of these mediating elements on the communicational situation. Moreover, we need to gain insight into the social,

political, economic and aesthetic-cultural positions of the people and groups who dispose of and control the media-systems. This is the only way for the researcher to approach the texts ("literary" and metatexts as well) as components of the mediation between literature and society (Bourdieu, 1971 and 1982; Dubois, 1983 and 1985).

However, literary communication must not be narrowed to the interchange of clear-cut prefabricated concepts and judgments concerning so-called canonized literary production. By involving the literary system in the total complex of cultural activities the historian has to operate with an open conception of literature and to widen his scope to include the field of conscious and unconscious interactions between literary activities and the larger complex of socio-cultural functions and values (Vlasselaers, 1984). The investigation of such a rich web of metatexts will guarantee a better comprehension of the implicit and explicit intentions, motivations, needs and expectations shared by both authors and recipients, embedded in the subjacent, comprising and penetrating "social discourse" of a society at a specific moment in its development. I use the concept of social discourse as it is given in Angenot's definition:

Le Discours social: Tout se qui se narre et s'argumente, le narrable et l'argumentable dans une société donnée. Ou plutôt: les règles discursives et topiques qui organisent tout cela, sans jamais s'énoncer elles-mêmes. (Angenot, 1984: 20)

To prove the theoretical consistency and the methodological usefulness, Angenot demonstrates to what extent the literary historian has to enlarge not only the ambit of its object but also the interdisciplinary nature and status of his approach:

Voir de nouveaux objets, identifier des objets plus anonymes et plus labiles; apercevoir ce que tout étude sectorielle tend à occulter; pénétrer dans les lieux triviaux de la presse avec les méthodes subtiles de la sémantique historique, de la narratologie, de la typologie des genres; traverser les hiérarchies des formes canoniques et des formes vulgaires et dire comment cela se définit en s'opposant; retrouver la topique dominante dans des discours censés marginaux, signaler des enjeux communs à des pratiques antagonistes; repérer les ruptures où les mailles du réseau vont se défaire. (Angenot, 1984: 42-43)

To conclude, I shall lift one element out of this vast complex and discuss it in terms of an exemplary item which I earlier referred to as "period-codeconsciousness" (Vlasselaers, 1984 and 1985: 9-20). If we are dealing with the concept of mentality as a common matrix of social knowledge and social attitudes (Bourdieu, 1985; Dubois, 1985) it is of great importance, from the semiotic point of view, to distinguish and to diagnose the codes that are operative within a community at a certain moment. It is evident that we have to understand and use the notion of code in its pragmatic aspect. It is the conscious and/or unconscious consensus concerning bundles of interpretants (in Peirce's understanding of the term) which enables and orientates the discussion of contemporaneous data, views, rumours, conventions and con-

texts: "We can say that cultural units are physically within our grasp. They are the signs that social life has put at our disposal: images interpreting books, appropriate responses interpreting ambiguous questions, words interpreting definitions and vice versa" (Eco, 1976: 71). The discursive character of the context necessitates a repertory and a study of the conceptual and connotative arsenal of the literary communication. This operation allows the investigator to discover and to circumscribe the basic elements of the actual period-codeconsciousness, to sketch their syntagmatic connections and to scrutinize the inscription of the social discourse into the literary texts and the literary discourse in general.

In the first part of this article I demonstrated how the term and the concept of postmodernism has become more and more inclusive and holds a central position as a kind of new paradigm or a new episteme in numerous discussions not only regarding architecture, art and literature, but also concerning social and economic theory and practice, political doctrines and strategies, science, technology and ecological problems, philosophy and ethics, and even theology, religious views and church affairs. For a correct analysis and evaluation of the "model-building capacity" of this basic concept for the "mentality" (see Lyotard's "condition post-moderne") of the present, and in view of a balanced measuring of the pragmatic impact and the semantic load, the integration of the literary discourse into the encompassing social discourse turns out to be an absolute necessity. The following topics seem to be of prime and evident importance, in order to set up an historical investigation of literary postmodernism:

1. The chronological and spatial positioning of the concept and the terminology: the earliest manifestations of their use and circulation in communicative evolution (when, where, the users, in which and what sort of publications, first reception and reactions . . .)
2. The question whether the semantic components have a high degree of precision on the theoretic-conceptual level or whether the discussion remains a semi-intuitive discourse (an amalgam of vaguely related concepts and sensibilities). Is the terminology used in programmatic enunciation or/and sloganizing? . . .
3. Socio-ideological dynamics: postmodernity as an existential value ("the postmodern" as individual)? Phenomenon of social grouping (structures-stratifications-status)? Awareness of marginalization or intended isolation? Psychological and ideological position towards the current and dominant ideologies inside and outside the immediate surroundings.
4. Literary discourse: postmodern consciousness and sensibility as a constitutive and significant element of characterization in fictional narrative texts? Specific treatment of the narrative categories of time and space? New/alternative hierarchical typologies and taxonomies of authors, works, genres? Conscious elaboration of own specific writing practices: semantic and syntactical peculiarities, imagery and metaphoric systems, speech representation, critical distance (irony-parody-pastiche-collage)? Intertextual techniques and strategies of transcoding and rewriting? Fiction or/and history?
5. Study of the creation and development of the channels and systems of

production-distribution-reception: publishing houses, periodicals, pamphlets, tracts, salons, meetings, congresses and symposia, exhibitions, awards, collective works and anthologies, translations, teaching programmes, etc . . .

This list of research items is of course by no means complete. As a matter of fact, a structural-semiotic approach of literary historiography must base itself in a thorough and encompassing analysis of the global communicational situation and accordingly requires exhaustive scanning with solid pluridisciplinary support.

Note

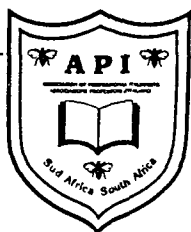
1. See Lucien Febvre's notion of "outillage mentale" in his book on Rabelais's religious conviction and behaviour (Febvre, 1972).

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