

Modernity After Postmodernism

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Introduction

Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009) was a French linguistic theorist, poet and translator. A founder of the experimental university at Vincennes alongside Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, he is best known for his theoretical magnum opus *Critique du rythme* as well as his translation of the Hebrew Bible. The essay below, ‘Modernity after Postmodernism’ is an excerpt of his book *Pour sortir du postmoderne* (Editions Klincksieck 2009) which attempts to pinpoint — via humor and anti-scholasticism — the meanings of modernism and its off-shoot, the ‘postmodern’.*

Translation

What we call ‘*modernism*’ refers to the problem and place of the fundamental conflicts that have dominated the world for about one hundred and fifty years.

The word *modernity* intimates as many significations as it does strategies. These either commingle or confound, often without regard to consequence, modernity in art, technical and industrial modernisation, and the transformations of society that result from modernisation and

* The original essay title is ‘La modernité après la postmoderne’, *Pour sortir du postmoderne* (© Klincksieck, 2009) pp. 7–11

industrialisation. Or, they merely overlook what is at stake in art solely for the preservation of its 'modernity'.

Despite the trend that seems to have rendered modernity outdated, the problems that it poses remains as important as ever. Its internal heterogeneity and the vagaries to which it is subject constitute the necessary points of departure for constant reflection.

Postmodernism has not eliminated these problems. On the contrary, it has only masked them, having, in effect, contributed to all the confusion. Postmodernism thus harkens a dual-evaluation — an evaluation of modernities as well as an evaluation of postmodernism itself. This dual-evaluation must inevitably take into consideration the critiques of those who view modernity as a malaise, as an illness of society that ceaselessly proclaims both its failure and its end.

The problems at hand are epistemological, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic; and these are intertwined with one another. They are as geo-poetic as they are geo-political, considering both their globalisation and their specificities.

Such is the justification for an interrogation of the permanencies and transformations of modernity. Bearing in mind identities and non-identities, the organizing principle here is an examination of masks, of characters and of shortcomings.

This reflection will not be able to consider the possibility of a representation of the present and the future of societies that is as lucid as possible, nor of the role of art and literature in society, since it is ill-equipped to ponder the reciprocal implications and interactions (if it did it would transform each element of such a relation) of a theory of language, a theory of art and literature, and a theory of ethics and politics.

The point of departure, today and everyday, will thus be the confusion of significations that have given way to the terms *modern* and *post-modern*.

This is what inscribes the conflict between past, present, and future; between Europe and the europeanisation of the world, with its reactions;

between the autonomy of politics and the non-autonomy of politics with its interchangeable variant — the autonomy and non-autonomy of aesthetics. It brings into play their genealogy but also their current mode of activity.

What is at stake, then, is the intelligibility of the present and our preparation for the future — the humanities, but also humanity. For each concrete scenario [what is at stake is] myth or history; thought as either playful or ethical.

It is a reflection that can help us understand that the ideas of myth, like those of the West and the East, exercise a nefarious power on historicity and the conscription of values. We should have realized the necessity of carefully constructing a universality whose possibility has been left open by a debate that is far from over, one that seeks to reinvent — without end — modernity.

This is the reason that within the usual distinction made between *modernism* and *postmodernism*, the latter is capitalized: it is a sign that reminds us that the concept of postmodernism is primarily derived from architecture, and this is indeed the crux of the matter; to understand that it is an issue concerning art.

Among the first few individuals to have situated *postmodernism* in relation to architecture was David Kolb in *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition*.

One of his primary referents is Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as Mies van der Rohe, in the context of the ‘simulacrum’, a term made popular by Charles Jencks in his book *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*. It is through architecture that Kolb understands history, between that which ‘already’ exists and that which ‘will be’.¹ Here, the functionalism of so-called ‘modern’ architecture had ‘obstructed the past’,² and deconstruction is used in an architectural and urban sense, a stark contrast to what had

¹ David Kolb, *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

occurred in literature or painting, with their uses of ‘ironic historicism’ in defiance of modernism’s prohibitions.³

This is incomparable to the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. In literature, Kolb situates modernity towards the end of the nineteenth century; among the thought of general society, in the sixteenth century. This is generally what is accepted by historians. In architecture, *postmodernism* refers to a clear rupture with *modernism*. The end of modernism, according to Kolb, began in 1979.⁴ Self-referentiality, parodies, eclecticism, collages of various modes of ironic historicism came to articulate modernism as ‘restrictive’.⁵

In literature, what appears to dominate is a mix of vague Cartesianism and the philosophy of sensation of the eighteenth century — the confused notion of the philosophical subject and the psychological subject. It is, as Yves Bonnefoy says, in his introduction to the poetry of Mallarmé, ‘this surplus of the sensorial on the intellect that characterizes the markedly modern approach of the object’.⁶ Moreover, Mallarmé becomes ‘the most radical of the moderns’⁷ because ‘God is dead’.⁸ Modernity transitions from Cartesianism to Nietzscheanism.

Postmodernism is self-evident, and historically, reactionary. It responds to the modern it opposes. It can, by this very gesture, become reactionary. What this demands, of course, is that we define that of which we speak, including the term ‘reactionary’.

Let’s begin with the funny side of thought — for we do not know enough about it; thinking is, perhaps, a way of laughing, not at others, but at the very adventures of thought (I am trying to make audible — the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ Yves Bonnefoy, ‘Préface’, *Poésies*, Stéphane Mallarmé, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. viii.

⁷ *Poésies*, p. xvi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

serious being so precisely at once distressing and unwittingly comical — the laugher of thought). I will start with Jacques Attali, in his *Dictionnaire du XXI^e Siècle*. For him, utopia preserves as much pessimism as it does optimism: ‘Let us cease looking for meaning in History. It does not have any meaning [...] to wager at a small chance at eternity, since we cannot predict the future, what remains for us is to intervene’.⁹

But for what concerns us here, everything proceeds quite swiftly: ‘Modernity: Never out of style’, and ‘Postmodernism: A grab-bag designating the future without taking the risk of a prognosis’. The question is resolved before it is posed.

There is an irony and sarcasm, which, upon reflection, treat the twenty-first century positively. Besides, like everybody else, I do not have any other choice than to reflect modernism and postmodernism in a mirror, which, as Cocteau says, adds intensity to reflection.

Georg Simmel, in *Philosophie de la modernité*, provides a framework containing noteworthy elements and others that, on the contrary, fall into traditional cliché. For Simmel is, above all, a nominalist: for him, it is a matter of ‘viewing the universal in the individual’.¹⁰ But there exists also for him an ‘essence of man’,¹¹ a ‘dualism between the real psychological world and the ideal world of truth’.

What Simmel understands by ‘modernity’ comes from his ‘secular way of seeing the world’, says Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron in his preface.¹² For Simmel, ‘individualism is an essential component of modernity’¹³ and ‘that which connects the great city to modernity’.¹⁴ It is a way of defining modernity that is both sociological and psychological: ‘For the essence of modernity is the sum total of psychologism, the fact of experiencing the

⁹ Jacques Attali, *Dictionnaire du XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), p. 18.

¹⁰ Georg Simmel, *Philosophie de la modernité* (Paris: Payot, 1989), p. 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

world and giving it the true meaning of the interior world, in line with the reactions of our interiority'.¹⁵

There are, according to Simmel, stages to the distribution of subjectivity: The Renaissance against the theological and scholastic Medieval Era, then Enlightenment and Romanticism. Modernity, comprises, thus, an element that radically opposes essentialisation.

But according to Simmel, there is also the dualism between the soul and the body, which 'opposes the world of life to the world of art'.¹⁶ Plato remains his favorite philosopher.¹⁷ There exists, for him, a 'Germanic essence'.¹⁸

This is a strange ambiguity on the part of Simmel, but indeed one characteristic of the state of affairs. A total absence of poetic thought.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 267.