

MODERNIST STUDIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY. *THE MODERN CONDITION* OR WHY IS POSTMODERNISM OUT OF THE PICTURE TODAY?

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Abstract The aim of the present paper is threefold. Firstly, in line with Stephen Ross and Susan Friedman's contributions in *Modernism and theory: a critical debate* (2009), our paper highlights how modernism survived throughout the second half of the 20th century in critical, literary and cultural theory. Secondly, it explains why postmodernism has failed both as a scientific (theoretical) discourse and as a periodization category. Lastly, the paper states the importance of both the achronological and non-historical category of "contemporary" and "the modern turn" in the Modernist Studies today, showing why these are major players in rethinking both modernism and the contemporary literature on the grounds of the former. Today, what we are witnessing is not the afterlife of modernism, but rather its full and "true" modernist life.

Keywords Modernism, Modernity, Modernist Studies, Postmodernism, Postmodernity.

To say that Modernist Studies have proliferated over the last three decades would be a truism. The question that we believe to be insufficiently addressed, and in any case not convincingly enough, is not *why?* but *how?*: how did the new Modernist Studies detach from the old ones and in what way are the former grounded on the latter, if at all? If we assume that in order to avoid the pitfall of perishable fashion and give the *new* Modernist Studies a profile *à longue durée*, it is important to know what the *old* fundament looks like and how it interacted with both Theory and the "new science" of postmodernism.

Modernist Studies nowadays acknowledge that cultural and social theory, for which literature is both an aesthetic object in the Kantian sense and a daily practice, in an anthropological sense, have decisively impregnated the discourse of literary criticism. Only such a criticism is able to manage the new aesthetic paradigm that contains the artistic production of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. A first moment of the

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theoretical reconfiguration in the socio-cultural direction is the reperiodization proposed as early as the '70s, a consequence of the rejection of the literary canon, from the perspective of feminist studies initially, then post-colonial, multicultural, LGBT, etc. A second moment, essential in the understanding of the socio-political and economic dynamics associated with modernism, is related to the revisiting of modernity against the backdrop of globalization and ecologization, both phenomena with an impact on the periodizing axes that give the dimension of modernity/modernization. For the first time in history, the concern for modernity unites and nurtures from the same sources the starting engines of humanities, on the one hand, and real and natural sciences, on the other.

Nonetheless, the interest in modernism was not in a limbo of literary history before the 1990s. Despite the widespread discontent with modernist elitism, intensified after World War II, both in terms of poetics and reception, we think that literary modernism perpetuated itself in the second half of the 20th century not only as a forbidden tradition, as an anti-model, but also as a battlefield of various theoretical attitudes. The missing link between the “old” and the “new” modernism [i.e. the new modernisms], says Stephen Ross, is the very “theory”.¹ Theory, according to Susan Friedman, in a thoughtful response to Ross’s article, is also responsible for dismantling old Modernist Studies and founding new ones.² Related to the transgression of literary theory towards *theory* and humanities in general, since the 1950s, this theory, frequently associated, in the footsteps of François Cusset, to post-structuralist thinkers and casually used both in critical and, more recently, in post-critical discourse, receives, in relation to modernism, multiple valences.

First of all, theory is identified in the interwar period with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, developed in parallel with modernism.³ A link in the first half of the century between a Europe of public intellectuals and an American space of academic enclaves, through the Institut für Sozialforschung, hosted by Columbia University in the mid-1930s,⁴ Critical Theory resurfaces today, through heralds such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, considered confluence points of the new Modernist Studies. While Adorno is being read for the redefinition of successive modernities that has taken place from the Enlightenment until today, the benjaminian legacy works in a double sense: his texts inspire as modernist literature in its own right and are also models for “critical readings of modernist history.”⁵

¹ Stephen Ross (ed.), “Introduction: the missing link,” in *Modernism and theory: a critical debate* (USA: Routledge, 2009), 12.

² Susan Friedman, “Theory,” in *Modernism and theory: a critical debate*, ed. Stephen Ross (USA: Routledge, 2009), 237.

³ Ross, “Introduction: the missing link,” 16.

⁴ François, Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 19.

⁵ Jean-Michel Rabaté, Angeliki Spiropoulou, eds., “Historical modernisms: Introduction,” in *Historical Modernisms. Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 16.

From the late 1930s to the 1960s, literary theory is synonymous, in The United States, with New Criticism, which, according to Ross' fine observation, does not "install" modernism, but "continues"⁶ and canonizes it through academic readings and debates. Establishing a method independent of socio-historical frameworks, based on an "intrinsic"⁷ and objective criticism of the work understood as a closed system, New Critics achieve something important in a cultural space where, as Cusset shows, theories are mostly imported in the first half of the 20th century: they add theoretical rigor to the study of classical literature and, above all, to that of modernist literature – "*Literary theory, an organon of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today*, Wellek and Warren claimed in 1949."⁸

Despite the insistence on decontaminating literature from everything related to authorial agency, structuralism has developed a discourse based on modernist legacy, but this time in Europe. Structuralism communicates with and also relies on either high modernism (1): "Canonical texts of high modernism seem (...) to anticipate the topics of structuralist poetics and narratology, through the manifest reference to their own writing codes or the overturning of archetypal narrative forms; it is not for nothing that Proust suggests concepts to Genette, or Mallarmé to Julia Kristeva,"⁹ or on late modernism (2), where a work like *Finnegans Wake* is considered by John Sturrock to be "the first structuralist novel."¹⁰ In Sascha Bru's terms, in both cases, the conjoined twinship between structuralism and modernism works as an indisputable parentage: theory (qua structuralism) is not only an "instrument" that facilitates the reading of modernism, but it is also a spatially locatable component, an integral "parcel" of Modernist Studies.¹¹

Euro-American modernism unfolds its first critical life in a closed, self-referential linguistic system dictated by New Critics and the structuralists. Although their thinking is associated in the post-war period with the Russian formalists and is understood whether philosophically, as an extension of Cartesian dualism through Saussure's semiology, whether socially, as "an extension of the Western technological mentality,"¹² which comes bundled "with its aggressive need to transform its world into objects,"¹³ the position of authority that the structuralists and New Critics came to hold in the field of textual analysis reflects on the everlasting respectability gained by the literature they explore and dissect. This status,

⁶ Ross, "Introduction: the missing link," 2.

⁷ Cusset, *French Theory...*, 48.

⁸ René Wellek, Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Cape, 1949), 49, as cited in Cusset, *French Theory...*, 67.

⁹ Adriana Stan, *Bastionul lingvistic. O istorie comparată a structuralismului în România* (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2017), 341-342.

¹⁰ John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 15.

¹¹ Sascha Bru, "Modernism Before and After Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 32.

¹² Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 130.

¹³ Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*, 130.

however, has done a disservice throughout the 20th century to a necessary reevaluation of literary modernity, leading to its billeting in the sphere of aesthetic autonomy and to a precocious classicization of a literature that had not yet exhausted its entire social and (re)creative energy.

The second life of modernism, one that this time advances on parallel rails with the discourse that legitimizes postmodernism, is forthcoming at the end of the '60s, when, as Friedman notes, feminist theories, first, then multicultural, class, racial or those that today we compress under the LGBT+ umbrella, short-circuited the canons on which literary studies were based and on whose filament they operated.¹⁴ Remarkable, however, in the wild [nineteen] seventies is that, in addition to challenging the establishment, the new (mostly feminist) cultural theories unveil certain ethically negative facets of modernism. Modernism thus becomes sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, imperialist, racist, anti-Semitic, or even fascist. By establishing connections with the historical, socio-political, cultural context, modernist literature, withdrawn in the first Modernist Studies from the world, continues to survive in the United States, unlike, for instance, Surrealism imported from France, dissolved against the backdrop of feminist theories.¹⁵

If the windows opened by the Civil Rights movement are reflected in Modernist Studies even today, the most visible effect of this socio-cultural upheaval of the '50s and '60s is different: the interest in literary modernity is suspended as a result of the rise of "French theory" (i.e. poststructuralism) in American universities. Two are the implications that we consider necessary to be highlighted in the relationship between modernism and poststructuralism. Firstly, their policies seem incompatible. Although partially rehabilitated in the '60s and '70s from an ethical and social perspective (mostly through feminist studies), modernism continues to carry two major burdens in the 1980s: the burden of aesthetic autonomy, on the one hand, and that of ahistorical immobility, on the other. Both of these traditions weaken it and make it appear rigid in front of a literature that French Theory sees as a battlefield of forces mobilised by recourse to the Marx-Freud-Nietzsche triad (itself a modernist one). Secondly, when the discourses of the two meet, in synergetic pairs such as Joyce-Derrida, Woolf-Kristeva, Stein-Barthes, which link High Literature to High Theory or "Strong Theory" (Saint-Amour), the symbiosis is carried out by modernist researchers interested in a possible reclaiming of ideas or strategies that can be shown to anticipate poststructuralism,¹⁶ as if the only valuable modernism was the one that contained *in nuce* the poststructuralist discourse.

It is true, as Jean-Michel Rabaté notes, that Derrida opened and updated "a library" of authors, some either neglected or problematic, from Plato, Heidegger, Bataille to Mallarmé, Artaud, and Joyce, and that he provoked and popularized a dialogue between literature and

¹⁴ Friedman, "Theory," 239.

¹⁵ Cusset, *French Theory...*, 24.

¹⁶ Friedman, "Theory," 239.

philosophy, which had been missing during the emergence of the human sciences.¹⁷ Nonetheless, this is not reflected on the chart of *old* or *new* Modernist Studies, but in the way theory begins to be understood with the revolution produced by the Derridean deconstruction. A year after the conference at Johns Hopkins University, which paved the way for the first theory (i.e. poststructuralism) born and raised in the United States, the Modern Language Association adds to the bibliographic categories of “aesthetics” and “literary criticism” a new label – “Literary Criticism and Literary Theory”:¹⁸ a significant moment of both separation and reunion between criticism and literary theory.

Responsible for the blockage of modernism in the '70s and '80s is not, however, the poststructuralist thinking – hence, not the theory in its new clothes – but the aggressive politics of postmodernism, which is not only resistant to modernism, but *mostly reductionist*. Linked to the birth of pop culture, the advance of technology and the social scaffolding built by capital, looking for fractures even in continuities, postmodernism, similar to avant-garde thinking by postulating the anti-aesthetic dimension of art, puts the pedal to the metal, towards a break that wants to erase from cultural memory not only modernist aesthetics and the critical discourse that accompanies and justifies it but also, additionally, the old opposition between theory and practice.

We must not forget that today we live in a time when the theoretical discourse, saturated with novelties and built on a progressive armature as a principle of evolution, backs away from periodizing alternatives in order to encompass and understand the last two centuries of artistic creation. A solution is offered by the “threefold historical schema,”¹⁹ which submits to a tri-temporal model of art: *avant-garde*, *modern* and *contemporary*. These “historico-temporal forms”²⁰ no longer match a narrative of successive unfolding, although periodization is inherent in any attempt to compress time, but rather to overlapping, simultaneous frames that capture “their conflictual coexistence as transcendental aesthetic aspects of processes and practices of subject constitution.”²¹

From this theoretical standpoint of communicating and overlapping temporalities, the belief of the postmodernists that a total immersion in the frames of a “contemporary”, post-historical and post-ideological present guarantees the capitalization and recognition of social, historical and individual *truth* at the same time, it appears to us as one of the reasons why today we are no longer discussing a future of postmodernism, but, rather, we are asking ourselves *what the reasons for its failure were*. An example of how the interest in postmodern culture turns into an analysis of modernity, even when the analytical intent is aimed at cultural manifestations framed by the former (i.e. feminist theory), is Rita Felski's book, *Doing Time*.

¹⁷ Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 7-8.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Bruss, *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), as cited in Rabaté, *Beautiful Theories...*, 4.

¹⁹ Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays* (London: Verso, 2018), 53.

²⁰ Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays*, 54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture, where the author acknowledges: “The terminological debate over whether feminism is modern or postmodern is ultimately of less interest than the actual task of thinking through feminism’s complicated relationship to modernity.”²²

The Self-Undermining of Postmodernism. A handbook of theoretical unsuccess

If the idea of postmodernity is almost entirely ignored in a century that (re)evaluates itself in relation to modernity, the modern and the process of modernization, postmodernism is even less taken into consideration today, when two theoretical gestures through which it has managed to discredit itself are increasingly apparent. A *first reason* for its vilification, which we are going to detail, is *the self-sufficiency* and at the same time *theoretical rigidity* of postmodernism. On the one hand, it assumes the role of an exhaustive theoretical field of post-war literary creation, in a movement from present to past: “Over the years a corpus of postmodern writing (or, more accurately, writing that is often referred to as postmodern) has thus emerged.”²³

The parody/the ludicism/the irony in the fibre of Anglophone metafiction from the middle of the last century are acts of remembrance of modernism that function, above all, as mechanisms of a critical gesture. Taken over by postmodern discourse, this literature loses contact with its existential, sober and “psychological” dimensions that postmodernism pejoratively calls modernist and on which it grounds its contestative fictional strategies. This dimension, reduced to stylistic stumbling blocks, becomes the perfect example for the way postmodernism managed to put a lid on modernism.

There is a detail here that is worth pointing out: while modernism extends in/through theory after the classification of the phenomenon in the 1940s, postmodernism is founded from the very beginning not as a movement, as a category, or as a “historical-hypothetical concept,”²⁴ as we often perceive it retrospectively, but as a holistic *theory*, for which the voluntarist act of denial is the only guarantee of vanishing the pre/inter-war literature. A possible breach occurs when, in an attempt to universalize the term grown and acclimatized on American soil, postmodernists look for precursors everywhere, excited by the image of an Americanization of the world. Along with two of the postmodernists’ favourites Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett or, in some cases, James Joyce become not solely export agents of postmodernism,²⁵ but messianic figures of the resurrection of modernism, facilitating new angles for its observation and understanding.

²² Rita Felski, *Doing Time. Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 205.

²³ Matei Calinescu. *FIVE FACES OF MODERNITY: Modernism Avant-Garde Decadence Kitsch Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 296.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 310.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 300-301.

However, a second sign of the methodological self-sufficiency of postmodernism appears in the symmetrical direction, from present to future. Here, postmodernism opposes normative hybridization, being autonomous and unmistakable compared to competing formulas: “though postmodernism and poststructuralism share many interests, they finally resist conflation.”²⁶ Two attitudes are relevant here, one of Ihab Hassan, the other of Fredric Jameson.

The first is to be found in the volume *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (1987), with essays spanning the 1970s and the 1980s, in which postmodernism is understood both historically and teleologically. We have here an epistemological postmodernism encompassing “the nature of contemporaneity,”²⁷ considered “the very condition of our existence in the world, to which postmodernism reawakens us in history.”²⁸ Although in Hassan’s understanding, this nature meets the pragmatism of William James by means of “pragmatic pluralism,”²⁹ he denies its existence as a “philosophical system”³⁰ and implicitly as a possible anchor for postmodern theory. Postmodernism is the one that “reawakens us in history”³¹ by creating a data system vast enough to frame contemporaneity. Nonetheless, the awakening is temporary since there are glimpses of a postmodern phenomenon seen in clinical death, left as a legacy to some “contending ideologies – neoconservative, neo-Marxist, poststructuralist, neopragmatist”, which “vie to appropriate the life of postmodernism even as that life begins to wane.”³²

The second attitude can be seen in Fredric Jameson’s chapter, *Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theoretical Discourse*, that includes the analysis of New Historicism and deconstruction. In the same possessive behaviour he associates with corporate industry, Jameson attaches deconstruction (i.e., poststructuralism) to postmodernism. He speaks of Paul de Man’s aesthetics in *Allegories of Reading* (1979) in terms of a “spectacle” of an “incompletely liquidated modernism,”³³ but reduces his thinking to the postmodernist thought by a weak statement: “the positions and the arguments are *postmodern*, then, even if the conclusions are not.”³⁴ Here lies the idea that postmodernism “speaks” to us against our will, an idea that cancels not only the freedom of creative agency, but the very idea of the plasticity of language. As in the liar’s paradox, where whatever he says, the liar lies, at the end of any active conceptual pathway is, at least as far as “theory” is concerned, the gaping mouth of postmodernism. Thus, poststructuralism, the “competing formulation”³⁵ already exhausted,

²⁶ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), xvi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

³³ Fredric Jameson, *POSTMODERNISM, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 255.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

was nothing more than “a subvariety of the postmodern.”³⁶ Poststructuralist theory, which Jameson prefers to call “theoretical discourse”, exists, in the author’s view, due to the postmodernist platform: “*theoretical discourse*” – has seemed unique, if not privileged, among the postmodern arts and genres in its occasional capacity to defy the gravity of the zeitgeist and to produce schools, movements, and even avant-gardes where they are no longer supposed to exist.”³⁷

The irony in the two approaches is quite obvious and resembles the contradiction of the modern constitution that Bruno Latour highlights in *We Have Never Been Modern*, when he talks about the ambivalence of the Moderns towards Nature and Society. On the one hand, it is a purifying action – postmodernist theory does not communicate with other “theories” (Hassan) except when it comes to an eventual one-way pollination (Jameson). On the other hand, when the postmodern phenomenon seems to be coming to an end (Hassan), for lack of foundation, family ties to “theory”, even if this originates entirely from modernity, become the absolute guarantor of its permanence, with all the implied risk of hybridization. Using the language of Jean-François Lyotard, we will say that the wilful rejection of a possible contamination with theory/“theoretical discourse”, understood as a rejection of the formalisms postulated by philosophical systems and/or “strong” theory – whether we are talking about poststructuralism, pragmatism or about New Criticism – is a double-edged “scientific gesture”, of both legitimization and delegitimization, depending on the needs of the cause: the validation of postmodernism both as a conscious choice, but ultimately contingent, in the face of the modern(ist) crisis, and as a necessity when it comes to the postmodern(ism) crisis. Thus, postmodernism is, above all, a “speculative statement”.³⁸ It establishes itself as a universal truth of today’s society and art and as a unique discipline, isolated from all others, capable of generating the knowledge necessary to apprehend contemporaneity. Receding from possible filiation with other systems of thinking – sometimes because of the connection they maintain with modernism – postmodernism can also be understood in terms of conformity to its own theoretical limits and therefore as a delegitimizing approach: “science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games.”³⁹

The paradoxes of postmodern novelty

For the same reasons why postmodern thinking considers that the break with theory paradoxically ensures an afterlife in the field of the theory it “resists”, the discourse of postmodernism engages in its legitimization the essentially modern category of the “new”: it is in this contradiction that *our second argument for the lack of theoretical credibility of*

³⁶ Ibid., xvi.

³⁷ Ibid., xvi.

³⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington, Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 38.

³⁹ Ibid., 40.

postmodernism lies. If, according to postmodern theorists, socio-philosophical theories, such as poststructuralism, the number one enemy, fail to account for the novelty of the technological and cultural realities of the second half of the last century, the “new science”,⁴⁰ although it affirms itself to be hyper-reflexive on all levels, fails to see that the novelty postulated in the body of its founding texts is identical to that of modernity, which it declares outdated. This novelty of the postmodernists, contained either in a “logic of renovation”, in a dialectical relationship with “radical innovation”,⁴¹ or in the Marxist thought of “a cultural and experiential break,”⁴² is one still connected to the present subjective time of the modern and of modernity, as these terms have been understood since the 18th century according to the German term *Neuzeit*: “a new time for a new world.”⁴³ Extending Osborne’s interpretation of the term, we will note that postmodernism overlaps with the idea of *Neuzeit*, given the fact that, simultaneously with the affirmation of a historical consciousness of the new (i.e. the new culture, the new science, the new literature, the new society), it is founded as a process of dehistoricization: “in its absolutization of the present as the time of the production of the new.”⁴⁴ In order to justify its difference from a historical temporalization of experience, which, perceived in its ambivalence, would undermine the relevance of postmodernist theory, postmodernity attributes to modernism (and not to modernity) an entirely inner and intertextual “new”, active only at the poetic level. The confusion produced in postmodernism is, among others, one of the reasons why post-war thinking separates modernism, as a textual reality, from modernity, as an era of finitude and contingency, and manages to lose sight of the novelty (i.e. novelties) that “the materialist turn” of the 21st century shed light on: social, technological, economic, political, colonial etc.

Since the Enlightenment, we have always tried to partition society into distinct and competing realities. We have matched the real, as modern real, into binary oppositions such as nature/culture, object/subject, science/religion, but we have not succeeded in revealing the hybrids that we, as moderns, operate with: a nature we access by means of the subjectivity of senses and the objectivity of scientific demonstration; a science constructed as rhetoric, brought to meta-truth by reflexivity; an objective reality separated from that of inner feelings which are stronger than any argument; and, in line with Bruno Latour’s thought, we would add, a modern novelty always recycled (thus denied) in the very act of its affirmation. Postmodern thought operates with the same modernist hybrids it simultaneously denies, trying to purge itself of everything that “new” and “modern” were supposed to mean by the 1960s.

⁴⁰ Calinescu, *FIVE FACES OF MODERNITY...*, 271.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴² Jameson, *POSTMODERNISM...*, xiii.

⁴³ Peter Osborne, “Modernism and Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Deborah Longworth and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 390.

⁴⁴ Peter Osborne, “Modernism and Philosophy,” 390.

We believe that in a theory of the contemporary resides the solution to resolve the contradictions of the postmodern “new”. The contemporary, as seen by Peter Osborne, presents two great advantages: on the one hand, it manages to escape the Hegelian logic of modern-postmodern dialectic, on the other hand, it does not compete with these two terms, which it can, however, re-evaluate locally in order to test their functioning. Trying to put together the aesthetic and political dimensions of contemporary creative practices, in a vision of art understood as an active principle in the constitution of an aesthetic dimension of political subjectivation (i.e. *the avant-garde, the modern, the contemporary*), Osborne proposes two complementary theses formulated in relation to the category of the new. The abstract, capitalized novelty of the modern is in a negation-based relationship with the politics of avant-garde (dominated by a historical novelty) through “the repetition of the new”⁴⁵ (the first thesis), while the contemporary implies a denial of the dialectical-Hegelian logic of the modern “new” “by a spatially determined, imaginary co-presencing”⁴⁶ (second thesis). The “new” from the interstices of the tri-temporalities, seen by the representatives of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School as an engine of consumption of the capitalist market, is to be understood in terms of “spatialized” contemporary, intertwined today with global capitalist modernity (and not “late”, as Jameson puts it). It is no longer a question of a historical “new” (avant-garde), nor of one that subordinates the first, in the order of repetition (modern), but of a “spatialized” “new” that holds together the two temporalities in the broad, contemporary framework of a “speculative or fictional co-presence.”⁴⁷

In other words, a first de-periodizing gesture, consists in opening up the novelties of each temporal category and treating them in a dynamic present of the New that carries the tension of the coexistence of tri-temporalities – avant-garde, modern and contemporary – in the very act of constituting the modern subject. If from the end of the 18th century onwards, each periodizing term (romanticism, modernism, postmodernism) comes to have dialectical attributes, implying both the avant-garde (“reactionary”), the modern (“progress”) and the contemporary, as a present moment of synthesis, this not only indicates the impossibility of escaping a tradition of renewal, but also the existence of an active principle of repetition at the core of any periodization approach. The hypothesis of the reflexive postmodernist “new” is not only unconvincing, but it further weakens a possible return to postmodernism after the search for modernities will have been exhausted. A relevant argument is that by postulating a hyper-reflexive new, postmodern thinking does not escape a classic disciplinary model, based on repetition and therefore differentiation (in the Deleuzian sense), used both in the strong

⁴⁵ Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition...*, 54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

sciences and in literary studies and, later, in the humanities, in order to legitimize itself: an attitude, which is essentially no different from that of structuralism.⁴⁸

Today we return to modernism not to shatter the myth of an active consciousness of modernity in the poetics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but to reread the literature that we call modernist especially through the relationship that it maintains to one of the most fruitful periods in world literary production, the one in which the Gutenberg galaxy had reached its peak. We cannot define our modernity – as a past and a present that belong to us – before making historical, aesthetic, theological, political, judicial, scientific, technological order in the modernities (critical or not) of transnational and/or planetary modernisms.

In the present volume, my goal was to show why Modernist Studies not only should not be underestimated but are the starting point to which we must return for a better understanding of the path forward in thinking about contemporary literature and artistic creation. Postmodernism and the idea of postmodernity tried and succeeded for a while to delegitimize both modernism, mainly aesthetically, and modernity, from an epistemological and political point of view. Although the 1990s were the golden age of postmodernism in Eastern Europe, against the background of the rise of neoliberal capitalism and the dismantling of the ideological block of socialist countries, they did not bring about the end of history, which would have led to an ultimately devitalizing relaxation (the “weak” thinking of Vattimo), neither the end of interiority, as Laurent Jenny announced, nor did they offer themselves as a guarantor for a postmodernist future in the 21st century.

Both the political as a worldly discourse and the psyche as a discourse of the individual are rethought today, in recent Modernist Studies, through approaches that try to find lost or neglected connections by the first modernist researches. Therefore, I will conclude by saying that we are not witnessing an afterlife of modernism today, since this idea does nothing but feed the hypothesis that modernism as such died at a certain point. Modernism, which continued to draw breath all across the 20th century, through both theory and attributes inherent in the modern (i.e. the new), is now living not another life, but a full life – the first, by the way –, in which the temporalities of the whole living space sometimes overlap and move away against the backdrop of modernity’s inter- and pluri-disciplinary rethinking.

⁴⁸ Alexandru Matei, “Objets de la science, science des objets : Roland Barthes et les sciences (cognitives),” in *Explorations cognitivistes de la théorie et la fiction littéraires*, eds. Sylvie Freyermuth, Diana Mistreanu (Paris: Hermann, 2023), 87-107.