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## International Postmodernism: Global Mode and Local Moods

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Review of *International Postmodernism. Theory and Practice*. Eds. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996. ix + 581 pp.

*International Postmodernism* strikes me as one of the most comprehensive surveys and useful instruments in twentieth-century scholarship to have come out in years. It purports to map out a rich cultural territory of "late capitalism" and, as quite a few critics would have it, of contemporary culture at large. There have been, as is well known, countless attempts at taking stock of postmodernism. But such projects have almost with no exception been confined either to the West or to the U.S., or, to narrow down their focus even further, to certain cultural areas, figures, or practices. More often than not, postmodernism has been seized as an American, if not Americanizing, phenomenon and has been hailed or dismissed accordingly.

In this view, a group of Dutch critics including Hans Bertens, Douwe Fokkema—and, I should add, Theo D'haen, also a contributor to *International Postmodernism*—deserve the credit for standing over the last fifteen years or so in the forefront of critical and editorial initiatives to refine the concept and draw out its implications across formal, historical, and linguistic boundaries. They have started out in the mid-eighties with now "classical" anthologies, most of them reuniting proceedings of comparative literature conferences: *Approaching Postmodernism* (1986), *Exploring Postmodernism* (edited by Fokkema and Matei Calinescu [1987]), and *Liminal Postmodernisms* (edited by D'haen and Bertens [1994]), to name just a few. These collections have been published also by John Benjamins in its Comparative Literature Series or by Rodopi in the important Postmodern Studies Series edited by D'haen and Bertens themselves.

There are at least three conclusions that can be drawn only by glancing at the titles of these books, their tables of contents and the circumstances of their publication. First, they bear witness to what may be determined as the comparative literature moment in postmodern studies. Second, they still work with a largely Western, philosophically informed model of postmodernism, a model which **[End Page 236]** trades time and again on the "pre-postmodernity," if I may put it this way, of the "big four": Eliot, Joyce, Beckett, and Pound, true stumbling blocks in any attempt to historicize the postmodern. Third, the interest in the sociocultural, let alone political, bearings of postmodern aesthetics is here rather light, but this is now changing, as the last title in my enumeration above indicates (the book is undertitled *The Postmodern, the (Post-) Colonial, and the (Post-) Feminist*). Following the shift in the current postmodern conversation in the U.S., Bertens and Fokkema have been fine-tuning their explorations to the radical impact of identity studies on this dialogue, which has been carried on, in its "Ihab Hassan phase," mostly at a literary, playful, and, some might say, "apolitical" level.

This process also transpires in Bertens's historical survey of *The Idea of the Postmodern*, another source that I have turned to repeatedly since 1995, when Routledge published it.

The process has not been completed, however. Nor is this mandatory or necessarily desirable, one may want to argue. Bertens's and Fokkema's specific "location" wherein they carry out the anatomy of postmodernism is different than the statesiders' and therefore likely to yield a distinct perspective. That is, a viewpoint that should be respected, I would insist, in compliance with the "late postmodern" dynamic of the local and the global. Feeding off this dynamic, *International Postmodernism* reflects the persistence of the traditional, philosophically oriented discussion of postmodernism in Europe (both Western and Eastern) as well as the continuing pivotal role poetics and the comparative literature approach hold in this debate. While Bertens cannot avoid noticing in his historical account of "The Debate on Postmodernism" (3-14) the current erosion of this position primarily in the U.S., many essays in the volume hark back on the "early postmodern" style of philosophical, textual—and intertextual—analysis. Briefly put, they operate on a deductive model that look for regional responses to a fairly limited cultural paradigm in the West. These are reactions to either American postmodern fiction and poetry of the late-sixties and seventies with John Barth—the writer and essayist—as an absolute reference and criticism by Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale as convenient critical yardsticks, or to a fairly limited theoretical paradigm: Lyotard-Habermas-Rorty. The latter has been upgraded to include Jameson but it still leads routinely to a reexamination of the ties between postmodernism and poststructuralism within the legacy of a well-known philosophical trinity—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida. Thus theorized, "international" postmodernism risks coming off rather as the *internationalizing* of a cultural trend that heals and hurts local cultures simultaneously: on the one hand, its fundamental revisionism feeds into regional emancipation movements; on the other, it jams their discursive mechanisms as it tends to unify distinct modes of resistance, flattening out "cultural differences" in the very process of celebrating the "difference." Along these lines, the internationalization the postmodern may yield homogenizing, indeed **[End Page 237]** imperial(istic), effects, once again justifying some critics' refusal to accept postmodernism as a postcolonial phenomenon (or vice versa). In sum, the title, the notion underlying it and the assumptions at stake in this notion as well as in some of the contributions may appear to the same critics a bit problematic, politically and otherwise.

But does postmodernism internationalize/homogenize? Or is it rather more flexible, international in a positive sense? The title Bertens and Fokkema have ultimately decided on implies, I believe, the latter. As the editors specify in their Foreword, "the varying literary and cultural conditions in this world are bound to produce endless varieties of postmodernism" (ix). But if this is the case—and I think it is—it may make more sense to ask what we really mean by "international," taking into account, for example, that in some of the cultures here screened for signs of postmodernism modernity's project still needs to be completed, to recall Habermas's famous caveat. Which is to say, can we talk, as Noël Carroll does, about "global postmodernism" (98) when "late capitalism" is neither late nor capitalist enough in many of the areas that have been producing postmodern culture for quite a while? Again, I think we can do this, and *International Postmodernism* proves it by surveying an overwhelming quantity of postmodern works coming out of the U.S. and non-Western Europe. These works grow from particular traditions and lay bare intriguing patterns of "individual cultural productions" (98). Indra Nath Choudhuri's essay on Indian postmodernism (491-498) provides a good example in this regard. Central and East European cultures supply others, so much so that Carroll may be right on mark when suggesting that "historians in the future may place more weight on the events comprising the decline of socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe—events generally overlooked in the saga of postmodernism—than on the proliferation of Disneyland, once they are able to examine the present moment in light of its future at a sufficient temporal remove" (102). Now, this sounds like the kind of valuable contribution that the comparative approach can make to postmodern studies, and I must say that it sets off the comparative analyses in *International Postmodernism* that just try to apply the Western paradigm sketched out above to non-Western cultures, that is, to operate against the grain of their own subject. Section after section tilts this balance in various directions, but it seems to me that the "internationalizing" perspective outweighs the bird's-eye, largely formalist, pieces that tend, deliberately or not, to wipe out the differences.

Comprising essays meant to lay out the more general parameters of postmodernism, the first part's dominant critical model is historical poetics. In Section One, "Introductory Essays," Bertens, Fokkema, James McCorkle, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and other critics present postmodernism from a diachronic, literary, philosophical, and sociological perspective. Following is a series of articles that focus on "Postmodernism in the Other Arts," whereas the third section, "Renovations and Innovations in Postmodern Writing," brings **[End Page 238]** together analyses of postmodern literature's formal staples. This part breaks down into two chapters: discussions of genre conventions (the western, the detective story, the historical novel and utopianism, regional fiction, autobiography, and science fiction) and takes on "other strategies and devices in postmodern writing." A core part of *International Postmodernism*, the latter includes provocative inquiries into rewriting, intertextuality, self-referentiality, truth claims refutation, nonteleological narration, and magic realism by Matei Calinescu, Ulrich Broich, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Elrud Ibsch, Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, and Theo D'haen.

One could nonetheless read it—and the first three hundred pages of the volume for that matter—as a preface to the last section, "The Reception and Processing of Postmodernism." This is by far the most informative—and therefore, one may contend, the most useful, especially if one keeps in mind the scope of the book. But it is also the most challenging theoretically, in the sense argued in the opening of my review. For this is not just the place to register how postmodernism has been "received" and, at most, "processed" in various traditions, as the section's title seems to imply; it is also where, as the Introductory Note to Section Four states, the heterogeneity and several histories and usages of the concept and attending practices should be reconstructed. And I have to stress that different contributions accomplish this task differently. This is, again, bound to happen because the contributors undertake the "archaeology" of "their postmodernisms" (to paraphrase Kroetsch) in as many ways depending on the critical tools they use and the notions they work with. By and large, the "reactive" model seems to prevail, which is, of course, less of a problem as far as Western and Southern Europe go. But this does become *the* problem in the chapters on South America, Africa, China, and India. The critics covering these regions do reckon with it but when they cannot identify local sources of postmodern reformulations of their traditions they justifiably insist on regional resistances to the "internationalizing style." As such, the conflict between postmodernity and postcoloniality remains to be thoroughly articulated, much as the editors and their contributors are aware of it. From, say, a methodological perspective, this tension can be represented as the difference between a philosophical-aesthetic approach, clearly having the upper hand in the first part of the volume, and a cultural-political way of looking at things, postmodern or otherwise. The latter is far more present in the book's second half, and more so—and understandably so—in the essays dealing with postcommunist and postcolonial literatures. One could predict, if the content and structure of this very important collective enterprise are any indication, that cultural analyses of postmodernism will take the lead in international/comparative arenas as they have in the U.S. since the late eighties. For better or worse, of course, as critics of different allegiances might see fit to argue.

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