

The Presence of Postmodernism in Contemporary American Literature

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The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State. Timothy Melley. Cornell University Press, 2012.

Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past. Amir Eshel. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism. Jeffrey T. Nealon. Stanford University Press, 2012.

The year 2014 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Fredric Jameson's seminal essays "Periodizing the 60s" and "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" and the twenty-fifth anniversary of David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. More generally, the works that form the cornerstones of our understanding of postmodernism and its periodization, including seminal works by Linda Hutcheon, Ihab Hassan, Andreas Huyssen, John Barth, and Jean-François Lyotard, are by now on average 30–40 years old. Most of these macrotheoretical models of postmodernism that continue to influence analyses of contemporary literature mainly base their insights on cultural artifacts dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. Given the changes American literature has undergone over the course of the past five decades or so, this begs the question: can the term postmodernism and its associated concepts and debates offer us a relevant set of tools for the analysis of recent literary production? What might we stand to gain from talking about postmodernism now? Or, to put this question more awkwardly (though fittingly, as will become clear, for this essay will deal with a range of awkward terms and temporal and logical propositions): what is the time of postmodernism's presence?

Already in 1993 Raymond Federman proclaimed the end of postmodernism in his book *Critifiction*, and since the 1990s discussions of postmodernism's possible exhaustion and its aftermath have become increasingly frequent.¹ Still, as Andrew Hoberek argues, citing Jeremy Green, in his introduction to the 2007 special issue of

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Twentieth Century Literature dedicated to the status of postmodernism and its potential aftermath, while “declarations of postmodernism’s demise have become critical commonplace” (233), there exists no fully developed theory of what precisely distinguishes contemporary literature from postmodern literature. The three books that occasion this essay-review together offer us a set of insights into this problem. I say “together” since their positions are often disparate, if not contradictory, yet, read together and at times against each other, these studies by Amir Eshel, Timothy Melley, and Jeffrey T. Nealon highlight an important set of logical problems, historical determinations, and cultural changes that allow us to arrive at some fundamental insights regarding the status of postmodernism as both a moment in literary history and periodizing term, and of American literature in the present.

In *The Covert Sphere* (2012) Melley makes a passionate argument for the continued relevance of the term *postmodernism*. “The covert sphere,” Melley writes,

is a cultural imaginary shaped by both institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state. . . . It is a cultural apparatus for resolving the internal contradictions of democracy in an age of heightened sovereignty. . . . [T]he covert sphere is dominated by narrative fictions, such as novels, films, television series, and electronic games, for fiction is one of the few discourses in which the secret work of the state may be disclosed to citizens. (5–6)

One central contribution of his stunningly researched history of the covert sphere is Melley’s examination of the continued importance and specific function of culture in our moment that has not diminished but rather increased since the beginning of the Cold War. The covert sphere, Melley argues, is the crucial cultural terrain in which the process of developing, implementing, and supporting some of the most important elements of recent sociopolitical life in the US can be carried out. What emerges alongside Melley’s history of the covert sphere is a persuasive argument for the continued importance of cultural and literary study today that avoids those romanticizing and instrumentalizing notions of literature and culture that too often emerge as a consequence of attempts at defending artistic and literary critical production in the twenty-first century.

Indeed, Melley shows, it would be impossible to grasp fully the complexities of the rise and current functioning of the “National Security State” without examining the central ways in which its development and activities have relied upon the cultural sphere in general and literature in particular. “The covert sphere is thus much

more than simply the cultural ‘reflection’ of real covert actions or a collection of diversionary fantasies about secret government,” he emphasizes (5). The covert sphere “is an ideological arena with profound effects on democracy, citizenship, and state policy” (5). Literature, in other words, assumes a central role in the narrativization of knowledge, and in the construction and dissemination of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that make possible the functioning of the National Security State. Culture directly shapes lived reality and state policy, and it does so, Melley argues, in ways that very much correspond with our established understanding of postmodern culture. As a consequence, postmodernism helps us understand the covert sphere as much as the covert sphere in turn helps us understand the historical rise and concrete sociopolitical function of postmodernism.

Melley further suggests that the system of the National Security State characterizing US state policy since the beginning of the Cold War “has had major political and cultural consequences. It has inspired a large body of visual culture; generated cynicism about government; fostered skepticism about historical narrative; and contributed significantly to the rise of postmodernism” (6). The latter claim is particularly striking, as Melley forwards a new periodization of postmodernism itself and suggests that the rise of postmodernism was bound up with and should thus be understood in direct relation to the rise of the National Security State. The covert sphere required and can only continue to operate effectively via “a transformation of the discursive means through which the public ‘knows,’ or imagines, the work of the state,” Melley argues, a change that “provided a heightened . . . stimulus for the production of postmodernism” (7). The covert sphere is postmodern inasmuch as it requires the logic of postmodern culture and theory to accomplish its work and insofar as the covert sphere in turn played an instrumental role in the rise of postmodernism. And since the covert sphere is still very much with us—or, rather, as Melley shows so impressively, of course, since it assumes an even more important function in the context of the war on Terror—postmodernism is as well.

Initially, then, it would seem as though Melley’s account of the history and current status of postmodernism might stand in polar opposition to the addition to our periodizing vocabulary that Nealon’s book introduces: post-postmodernism. Following the central arguments of two of Jameson’s seminal essays, both published in 1984, whose aims and methodology he aims to replicate and update for our present moment in *Post-Postmodernism* (2012), Nealon suggests that “calendar markers are not the be-all and end-all of grappling with historical periods” (10). This seemingly simple point has far-reaching consequences for the ways in which he approaches periodization, since his project is at every moment marked by the desire to avoid

generating impoverished or narrow understandings of periods that emerge from the desire to reduce a period to a limited set of determinations, or to one dominant trend.

Like Jameson, Nealon therefore follows Raymond Williams' famous suggestion that historical periods are always multiple, defined by the relation between emergent, dominant, and residual structures and ideas, and that as a consequence periods can rarely be tied down to clear beginnings and ends that we can mark on calendars. Nealon accordingly tries to map the internal heterogeneity of the history of sociocultural, political, and economic developments since the 1960s to determine whether we ought to distinguish between postmodernism and a new period. What emerges immediately in Nealon's book, and what drives much of its argument, is the conviction that the vast differences between the 1960s—the period we often associated with the rise to dominance of postmodernism—and today suggest that we need such a new periodizing marker. Indeed, Nealon claims, the key distinction that sets apart the 1960s from the structures and culture of the new millennium begins to emerge in the 1980s: "if in the US 'the 60s' functioned politically as a kind of shorthand for resistance and revolution of all kinds, 'the 80s' most immediately signifies the increasing power and ubiquity of markets and privatized corporatization in everyday life" (10). The 1960s were a time of revolutionary upheavals that moved us away from Fordist modernity. In the 1980s, on the other hand, Nealon argues, capitalism itself concluded a revolution and transitioned into a new period. The transition into a new capitalist dominance emerging in the 1980s, that took hold in the Clinton-1990s, and that continues to determine our present requires us, to periodize the 1980s, which is, as Nealon suggests, at the same time an attempt at periodizing our present. "Among the tasks of periodizing the present, a collective molecular project that we might call *post-postmodernism*," Nealon writes, "is to construct a vocabulary to talk about the 'new economies' (post-Fordism, globalization, the centrality of market economics, the new surveillance techniques of the war on terrorism, etc.) and their complex relation to cultural production of the present moment" (15).

From the beginning, however, Nealon notes that his periodizing distinction may carry more force on the level of economics and for theoretical debates (the book is largely concerned with the latter) than for cultural analysis: "[o]n further reflection . . . maybe it's not so much that the '80s are back *culturally*, but that they never went anywhere *economically*" (4). And this is no doubt true. After all, while it clearly is the case that the 1980s are back today, this retro wave cannot really be raised to the status of a periodization of culture lest we embrace a nostalgia mode version of periodizing cultural

styles and forms. The main intervention of his book lies in Nealon's examination of the historical limits of systems of theoretical thought that continue to influence our present but that, for reasons Nealon lucidly lays out, should no longer do so. Yet, while Nealon largely foregrounds the plane of theory as opposed to culture, and while he admits that "post-postmodernism is an ugly word" (ix), he applies this periodizing marker to cultural history in part precisely due to its awkwardness. Nealon wishes to point toward new developments, without committing to a full periodizing break with postmodern culture:

the least mellifluous part of the word (the stammering 'post-post') . . . is the thing that most strongly recommends it, insofar as the conception of post-postmodernism I'll be outlining here is hardly an outright overcoming of postmodernism. Rather, post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism. (ix)

In spite of what initially seem like diametrically opposed positions regarding the current status of postmodernism, there is, thus, a space of congruence between Melley's and Nealon's arguments. That is, since Nealon's account of post-postmodernism is less invested in a categorical distinction between postmodernism and its aftermath than in identifying two moments within postmodernism—its emergent stage and its dominant stage, each of which, Nealon argues, are bound up with different theoretical and cultural forms—what we get from each book is a version of a long postmodernism.

There is, as Nealon also senses, something awkward about such a notion. Whether it is via the argument of an intensification in Nealon or a continued, direct relation among culture, politics, and postmodernism in Melley, the tension between the 1960s and today that results from the stark differences between both moments in (cultural) history increasingly complicates potential points of connection in both models. Nealon embraces this tension openly, recasts it as intensification, and thereby transforms it into the constitutive basis of what he calls post-postmodernism. Melley, however, partially overwrites this tension. In his attempt to establish the National Security State as "the crucible of postmodernism" Melley radically contracts postmodernism to versions of epistemological skepticism, matters of troubling distinctions between reality and fiction, narratives of amnesia that replace engagements with history, and so on. What we get in Melley, therefore, is an often almost stereotypical version of early postmodernism whose well-known aspects of formal and epistemological experimentation are carried over into the present. And if Melley notes that the periodization of postmodernism has recently

come under question, he does not engage with such debates, instead wishing to “concentrate on what seems largely settled about postmodernism” (21). Insofar as his project is a historical one that makes claims not only about the history of the covert sphere but also about the history of postmodernism itself (he even offers a new way of thinking the beginning of postmodernism in relation to the rise of the National Security State), the problem cannot be side-stepped quite this easily. Thus, in order to introduce time into the covert sphere, Melley paradoxically mobilizes the concept of postmodernism alongside the covert sphere’s own complex history (which arguably might carry more force if it simply stood on its own, as it is an important and utterly convincing history that in many ways does not require the less convincing connection to postmodernism Melley seeks to forge throughout his book). In the process Melley creates a homogeneous, virtually timeless postmodernism, reduced to a few constitutive epistemological and formal qualities that move through history seemingly without change and temporality.

The site of overlap, the notion of a long postmodernism, indicates something important about the origin of the awkwardness that seems to introduce itself virtually inevitably into both periodizing models: the awkwardness emerges from a constitutive problem that is bound up less with the historical process Nealon and Melley wish to trace than with the relation between the terms *postmodernism* and *postmodernity* themselves. *Postmodernism* and *postmodernity* are set up as periodizing terms in ways that assumes a temporally parallel, dialectical connection. After all, what we mean by postmodernity as the material period that postmodernism in turn culturally and theoretically mediates are structures that, as Nealon shows so convincingly, did not actually begin to achieve structural dominance until, at the very earliest, the mid-1980s. By the time these structures reach dominance, in the 1990s and the new millennium, culture has shifted and, as we shall see in more detail, it distinguishes itself quite clearly from the culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Put differently, we are faced with a situation that suggests that postmodernism is not simply contemporaneous with postmodernity. Instead, postmodernism corresponds to postmodernity in its incipient stage. Once the material structures we associate with postmodernity rise to dominance, culture begins to depart from the forms we ordinarily associate with postmodernism. It seems, therefore, that a more precise account of the temporality of postmodernism and postmodernity would also have to trace the temporality that emerges from the tension between these two terms, as they describe different periods and different dominant structural and cultural forms. The awkwardness that drives Nealon’s analysis, therefore, emerges in part from the noncontemporaneity of postmodernism and postmodernity as periodizing terms—from what we can describe

as a situation of uneven development between postmodernism and postmodernity.

The discussion of literature, literary history, and temporality in Eshel's *Futurity* (2013) provides us with an important lens through which we can observe this relation of noncontemporaneity in more detail. Additionally, as indicated above, once read together, the three books with which I am concerned, through their points of contact as well as through the contradictions that arise from their disagreements, forward a periodizing model for literary history after postmodernism that also reperiodizes postmodernism itself. The point of departure for Eshel's project is the general sense of a pervasive crisis of futurity that marks recent Western culture. "The modern era created a sense of new time, filled with immeasurable promise," yet, Eshel suggests, this sense of futurity seems to have disappeared (2). More recently, the excited anticipation of a different future has given way to the belief that "there may be no future at all for the human race, whose only choice lies between different kinds of endings" (2). While we need only think of the current boom of the post-apocalyptic culture industry to appreciate this point, in particular in its third part, "Futurity and Action," Eshel's book illustrates how contemporary critical and theoretical discourse is fundamentally and pervasively shaped by the understanding of "our era as lacking a sense of human agency and as deprived of futurity altogether" (176). For Eshel it is precisely here that literature can intervene, as it is a crucial site for developing a new vocabulary allowing us to engage with a world that elsewhere "closes in like a trap" and with "a language that diminishes" as a result of "the sense of a world deprived of a future" (3). One point of overlap among the three books that already begins to emerge here is that literariness is understood by all three critics as, in part, deeply connected to literature's ability to generate a new vocabulary, new forms of thought, and new modes of knowledge via which we cannot only come to terms with the present (or which, as in Melley and Nealon, must be understood as instrumentally bound up with creating our present world) but with which we can also think and move beyond it.

For Nealon, this crisis of futurity is directly related to ascendance of post-Fordism and neoliberal finance capitalism since the 1980s. In the current moment, Nealon argues, "[t]he future of capitalism . . . rests not on the extraction of profit from commodities or services but on the production of money directly from money—making profit by wagering on an anticipated future outcome. And the future, it seems, is now" (26). Precisely here, then, do we encounter another version of Nealon's argument that underwrites his distinction between postmodernism as a period of revolutionary change and excited futurity that is also centrally expressed in culture, and post-postmodernism in the

context of which we see the emergence of very different cultural narratives as a consequence of the disappearance of this sense of the future. Yet, as suggested above, this disappearance of postmodernism's sense of the new then gives way to a widespread crisis of futurity once the new reveals itself as nothing other than the now of contemporary capitalism, in turn, suggests the noncontemporaneity of postmodernism and postmodernity. Indeed, once postmodernity rises to dominance, postmodernism exhausts itself, and its trademark futurity and experimental move toward the new and away from the structures of Fordist modernity collapses into the sense of a seemingly inescapable, omnipresent now. In this context, Nealon forwards a sobering, if not utterly pessimistic, appraisal of the current status and possibility of literature:

[p]ost-postmodernism . . . seems to take 'intensification' . . . as its paradigmatic ethos, with globalization as its primary practice—all access all the time. . . . To put it crudely, in a world of economic globalization . . . it's not clear that mediated representations or signs matter as much as direct flows of various kinds—money, goods, people, images. (150)

Consequently, he argues,

much of the literary world's response to this colonization of everyday life by this emergent post-postmodernism has relied on a kind of linguistic nostalgia, clinging to the life of the hermeneutics of suspicion. If literature has any 'use-value' or offers us equipment for living after postmodernism, that value remains primarily thematized as a kind of spoiling move, an antiquarian slowing down of all the superfast flows that characterize the post-postmodern world. (150)

While Nealon accepts this absence of futurity as a dominant given and proclaims the virtually complete exhaustion of the literary in its context, Eshel presents in some ways the inverse of such a conclusion and suggests that, whereas mainstream culture is defined by the reproduction of this notion of an absence of futurity, literature is defined as an artistic medium today partly for its ability to work through this purported impasse. While there certainly are numerous examples of how literature remains complicit with the general crisis of futurity, Eshel advocates a more nuanced approach, arguing that "[t]he charge that Western culture of recent decades lacks 'any thinking of time', as the French philosopher Alain Badiou puts it . . . flies in the face of numerous works of contemporary fiction" (11). In this context, Eshel defines futurity in direct relation to the literary, whose ontology today consequently is for Eshel at its heart a matter

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of temporality and futurity, indeed, “futurity marks the potential of literature to widen the language and to expand the pool of idioms we employ in making sense of what has occurred while imagining who we may become” (5). Eshel’s engagement with US fiction is largely limited to his reading of Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night* (2003) and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006)—after all, his book engages with world literature and reads magisterially across a wide range of Western literary traditions—yet an extended examination of recent US literature would concur and trace Eshel’s argument back to the 1980s, the decade to which Nealon rightly ascribes such great importance for our understanding of contemporary American literature. Within Auster’s work itself, for instance, we can trace the emergence of this engagement with the possibility of literature, and with its time and presence in the context of a crisis of futurity back to his 1987 novel *In the Country of Last Things*, which centrally revolves around a post-apocalyptic scenario in which words and thus the human world are beginning to disappear, and which deserves to be revisited in detail in the context of Eshel’s important argument.

Indeed, as Nealon argues persuasively, our attempts at periodizing the contemporary more generally should assign the changes that begin to emerge in the 1980s more precise attention, as the decade marks the rise of literary forms and narratives that leave behind the logic of time and futurity of postmodern culture. One could even suggest that this change of narratives centrally revolves around contemporary literature’s engagement with the move beyond postmodernism and the attempt to rethink postmodernism’s ontology and function, in particular postmodernism’s own commitment to presence and nonteleological temporality, at the moment at which the world finds itself in a situation of actually existing postmodernism. This situation reveals that postmodern culture and theory’s constitutive wishes and dreams were granted, albeit in a sobering form not as a revolutionary new present but as a revolution within capitalism that in turn reveals that postmodernism’s central ideas have been realized in the form of the present stage of capitalism. We can trace this movement from postmodernism’s new to contemporary capitalism’s now, for instance, within the work of authors such as William Gibson, particularly in the move from his 1984 cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer* and its protagonist Case to his 2003 realist novel *Pattern Recognition* and its protagonist Cayce. In fact, this internal mobility and temporality of the work of individual authors makes a label such as “postmodern author” difficult to maintain, as it tends to overwrite the temporal and formal heterogeneity of the work of authors such as Gibson.

What is more, many of the novels that stand at the center of our postmodern canon were published at a moment that, as we have seen,

may be more accurately associated with the beginning departure from postmodernism and its exhaustion, a suggestion that the narratives and formal engagements with time, futurity, and postmodernism's central concepts of some of these canonical novels underwrite. To name only a few, we might briefly turn to the mid-80s and the year to which Nealon rightly ascribes such great importance: 1984. After all, 1984 saw not only the publication of *Neuromancer* but also of Samuel Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* that strikingly forecasts what it calls a "cultural fugue," or what we might describe as precisely the cultural and temporal singularity around which Eshel's book revolves. Likewise, 1985 saw the publication of Auster's *City of Glass* (which signals the departure from postmodernism's anti-Oedipalism and the beginning of a very different engagement with paternalism), as well as novels such as E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and William Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic*, in which we witness the emergence of literature's engagement with time and temporality that Eshel associates so centrally with the contemporary novel.

More generally, however, Eshel's argument is crucially important for our understanding of recent US literary production, which in no small part revolves around precisely this tension between a timeless present and literature's particular relation to time. The novel in particular emerges in this context as one of the most important artistic forms for our time: alongside Eshel's discussion of *Oracle Night* we might thus place other 2003 novels such as Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, both of which stage the problem of omnipresent contemporaneity and the need for a new theory of time, for new ways of thinking futurity. In more recent years, a beginning archive of fictions of US time and presence might include works such as Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), which so impressively reimagines literature and the novel in the present as the interplay of "chronodiegetics" and the hunt for the subjunctive mood.² Put differently, Eshel's project allows us to highlight not only a notable strand in recent US literary production, but it also allows us to highlight as a particularly salient site for investigation one of the most vibrant, inventive aspects of the contemporary American novel that an overly general and cynical appraisal of the current struggle with temporality and futurity would simply overwrite.

Although Eshel largely aims to avoid an extended discussion of periodization, the logic of his argument makes the need for an account of postmodernism's exhaustion at times unavoidable. "The contemporary shift to dealing with time and history through creative modes of commemoration," Eshel observes for example in reference to the work of Eelco Runia, "does not reveal a postmodern cultural

desire to find refuge from unpleasant social conditions in a stylized past” (179). There is, then, a sense that contemporary literature has moved beyond postmodernism. Yet the second “post-” Nealon introduces to mark this literary shift remains awkward in part because one of the fundamental aspects of contemporary literature is its struggle with a pervasive crisis of futurity, with the inability to imagine an “after” as postmodernism’s new rises to the status of contemporary capitalism’s now. If we take our cue from Eshel who locates the central function of contemporary literature in its ability to wrest the seeds of futurity from the grasp of both the past and the quotidian, from what appears elsewhere like omnipresent contemporaneity, we might in fact suggest that a better designator for the change in literary history with which we are confronted is already contained in the term “contemporary literature,” which in our situation does not mark a historically neutral temporality but instead acquires a distinct periodizing logic.

The intensification Nealon seeks to make legible, therefore, may be better captured by a more precise understanding of the noncontemporaneous relation between postmodernism and postmodernity. After all, we are not faced with an intensification of postmodernism but instead of postmodernity. What intensifies in Nealon’s view is the economic side of the relation, postmodernity, which begins to emerge in the ‘60s but which does not rise to dominance until the ‘90s. Postmodernism, in turn, wanes rather than intensifies at that moment, and we see the emergence of new literary forms and narratives driven by an inward turn of sorts that is motivated by literature’s inquiry into its own possibility in the era of the omnipresent now, in the age of actually existing postmodernism. We might thus benefit not from an expansion of the concept into a long postmodernism but from a shorter, more precise definition of postmodernism as the period of incipient postmodernity, of the transition away from crumbling Fordist modernity.

Such a temporally more modest account of postmodernism would then allow us to increase the visibility of its massive historical function as the cultural and theoretical plane that facilitate the transition into a new capitalist structure, as well as the rise of macrosystems of sociopolitical life such as the National Security State, as Melley shows. Such a short history of postmodernism and its exhaustion in the mid-‘80s also allows us to trace postmodernism’s central role for the developments within contemporary US literature, as the latter is in part marked by its engagement with its own postmodern past and postmodern culture’s complicity in bringing about the present moment and its attendant crises of futurity, politics, and literature. Together, the most recent books by Eshel, Melley, and Nealon provide us with one crucial point of departure from which we can launch

a rehistoricization of postmodern literature and a beginning historicization of contemporary literature, which is, as Eshel shows, at the same time an inquiry into the possible futures of literature.

Notes

1. See Raymond Federman, *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays* (1993).
2. Similarly, the list might include Kim Stanley Robinson's narratives of climate change and the environmental crisis of futurity in his *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004–2007) and *2312* (2013), as well as novels such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010); Karen Thompson Walker's *The Age of Miracles* (2012); Lauren Groff's *Arcadia* (2012); Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013); Peter Dimock's *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time* (2013); Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013); Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013); and Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (2013).

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