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Historicization without Periodization: Post-Postmodernism and the Poetics of Politics*

Abstract: A large number of recent scholarship in (American) literary and cultural studies is devoted to describing the contemporary moment as a monumental break from the previous (or current) period, postmodernism, by hailing our contemporary times as the era of post-postmodernism, late postmodernism, metamodernism, cosmodernism, or of a similarly termed construction. In these different proclamations, we recognize a pervasive tendency to periodize, an attempt to separate phases of human existence and cultural creation into neat stages that ‘logically’ follow after one another to form a supposedly coherent narrative. This practice of periodizing comes with a number of pitfalls that many of these studies seem not fully aware of, and it in turn speaks to (and characterizes) the contemporary moment as one marked by a desire for the boundedness of such clear divisions. In the following pages, we chronicle the quandaries that follow from such implicit and explicit efforts of periodization by focalizing them through three different ‘creation myths’ of the contemporary that such efforts at periodization typically subscribe to. As a way of sidestepping these, we accentuate the strengths of more ‘local’ critical lenses, approaches that historicize without periodizing. As one such lens, we suggest to engage the contemporary moment through the ‘poetics of politics,’ a historical discursive formation in which literary and popular texts’ desire for political relevance is matched by a recognition, in politics, of the (meta)textual quality of political action.

In the introduction to his 2010 book *The Passing of Postmodernism*, Josh Toth speculates that “[p]erhaps the fall of George W. Bush’s cynical administration [...] and the massively popular rise of Barack Obama’s overtly ‘sincere’ administration [...] finally signals the culmination of a grand epochal transition” (2). Toth’s remarks exemplify a recurrent dynamic in scholarship on contemporary US literature and culture, a dynamic shaping much of the work done in American studies and beyond. First and foremost, they reflect an intense desire to capture the contemporary moment as one marked by a “grand epochal transition,” an end (or ‘death’) of one period and the beginning of another. Whatever the specific terminology employed —‘post-postmodernism,’ ‘late postmodernism,’ ‘digimodernism,’ ‘metamodernism,’ ‘cosmodernism,’ or the like¹—the desire to periodize the present runs strongly in

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1 There is a litany of different terms used to describe such an allegedly new epoch. ‘Post-postmodernism’ may be the most widely used term for this phenomenon and appears, for instance, in the studies by Robert L. McLaughlin, Jeffrey Nealon, and Nicole Timmer, but other terms include Alan Kirby’s ‘digimodernism,’ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s ‘metamodernism,’ Jeremy Green’s ‘late postmodernism,’ and Christian Moraru’s ‘cosmodernism.’

contemporary scholarship. Secondly, by tying his argument to two US presidencies, Toth implies that the recent watershed in literary and cultural styles is intimately connected with the realm of politics. Like many other scholars and writers, he suggests that what distinguishes the present period from the previous one unfolds at the intersection of aesthetics and politics. Thirdly, however, he uses a conspicuously cautious language to make this point, extensively reflecting on and problematizing the very gestures of periodization on which he nonetheless builds his argument. In an ironic twist, Toth's and other critical texts, in their desire to 'end' postmodernism and to discover a renewed 'seriousness' in contemporary texts, thus become entangled in a very postmodern quandary of periodization, diagnosed by Fredric Jameson as a "crisis" in which the concept and categories of periodization "seem to be as indispensable as they are unsatisfactory for any kind of work in cultural study" (*Political Unconscious* 13).²

To thus periodize the present, we suggest, is problematic not only because it duplicates contemporary culture's own narrative of itself, it also comes with a number of epistemological limitations and drawbacks, some of which we will trace in the following. Rather than periodization, we advocate a different conceptual response to the developments in literary and cultural production observed by Toth and others, one that counters the *grand récit* of periodization with a 'local' interrogation of the contemporary moment. This kind of local approach to historicization—pursued by a number of recent literary histories like Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors's *New Literary History of America*—programmatically refrains from organizing historical developments into periods, i.e., clearly demarcated, coherent entities whose definitions inevitably resonate with one or the other grand narrative of history.³ Instead, it explores "points in time and imagination," spotlights that—rather than being enlisted in linear, teleological conceptions of history—are juxtaposed in ways that aim "to set many forms of American speech in motion, so that different forms [...] can be heard speaking to each other" (xxiv). This approach, in other words, abandons the notion of bounded and

2 Iterating one of his standard moves of postmodern critique, Jameson particularly takes issue with the 'totalizing' effects of periodization: "[A]ny rewarding use of the notion of a historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization, a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, 'expresses' some unified inner truth [...]. Yet such an impression is fatally reductive" (*Political Unconscious* 12). In fact, problematizations of one's own gestures of periodization seem to have become standard topoi in (periodizing) discussions of contemporary literature and culture. On the most self-conscious end of the spectrum, Christian Moraru, in his introduction to the *American Book Review*'s special issue on *Metamodernism*, uses an "automotive parable" to "[convey] the ongoing predicament [...] of the historian of post-Cold War literary-aesthetic traffic," asking "if this passing equals a neatly demarcated exit and thus the end of an era" ("Thirteen Ways" 3).

3 Cf. Besserman, "Challenge" and especially Patterson for critical discussions of periodization as a method of historical inquiry.

homogeneous periods separated by turns in favor of a focus on moments at which particular historical dynamisms surface.⁴

We suggest that the intersections of textuality and politicality can serve as a promising field for such a ‘local’ approach to historicizing the present—a field enabling historical investigations of the contemporary that circumnavigate the pitfalls of periodization both on the diachronic level (where periodization requires a teleological narrative of historical evolution that often entails highly reductive reformulations of the periods) and on the synchronic level (where periods emerge as homogeneous, ‘total’ entities).⁵ In addition, engaging in such a ‘local’ historicization of the contemporary moment not only affords different textual forms a way of “speaking to each other” (Marcus and Sollors xxiv), it also brings together and puts into dialogue the disparate strands of scholarship that have engaged with this moment. In the following, we will briefly outline our notion of a poetics of politics before more specifically engaging these disparate strands as intellectual endeavors that perform the contemporary moment as much as they describe it.

The Poetics of Politics

As an analytic focus, the poetics of politics puts front and center the crossroads of literary and political cultures, of textual aesthetics and political aspirations or effects, and these crossroads loom large in contemporary American culture. It takes its cue, on the one hand, from the many literary scholars who have argued that American fiction around the turn of the millennium has rediscovered politics and shows a renewed interest in addressing issues of social concern. These scholars typically observe that the contemporary moment is marked by an effort to “reenergize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world” (McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodern Discontent” 55), and that this project is closely tied to questions of (literary) form. Engaging the contemporary moment by way of the poetics of politics draws explorative momentum from this widespread observation while avoiding its tendency to fix the poetic dynamics of this rediscovered social role—an impulse projected by the framework of periodization that typically culminates in the question whether contemporary literature has broken with postmodernism. On the other hand, this explorative momentum is reinforced by discussions in and of contemporary politics that reflect a new

4 Jameson himself proposes the concept of the “cultural dominant” as an alternative to the bounded and totalizing notion of the period, introducing it as “a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features” (*Postmodernism* 4).

5 The distinction of these two dimensions also owes to Jameson’s discussion of the crisis of periodization (cf. *Political Unconscious* 13).

interest in matters of (meta)textuality. The field of electoral politics is only one among several political contexts that have recently hosted (self-conscious) reflections on the narrative construction and constructedness of the issues that are communicated there.⁶

This resonance between a political interest in literature and a poetic interest in politics extends an invitation to broaden the scope of critical explorations beyond the perimeters of narrow concepts of Literature (as in fictional writing bound to the medium of print) and Politics (as in tied to political institutions). Indeed, the politicality of texts and the poeticality of politics, discussed individually by so much recent scholarship, become most productive not at these narrow poles but at the crossroads of the poetic and the political, a crossroads that informs texts whose poetics cover a broad range of media and genres and whose politicality unfolds on many different levels.

While suspending questions of periodization, the poetics of politics is a conceptual angle that nevertheless affords historicization. It focalizes a dynamism that marks the contemporary moment and that contours an area in which a variety of historical forces come together to fuel US cultural production around the turn of the millennium. In other words, the poetics of politics illuminates a moment at which texts across a broad cultural field (self-consciously) engage with politics and assert their own political relevance while (self-reflexively) confronting the textual boundedness and mediation of political projects and their effects. At the same time, this conceptual vantage point throws into relief the multiple ways in which contemporary engagements with textuality and politics are deeply anchored in previous cultural traditions—traditions bound, e.g., to developments of and within particular genres or to particular modes of writing. Indeed, much of the vibrancy of contemporary culture seems to be tied to the ascendancy of particular genres or modes that, in turn, each build on specific histories. Rather than defining a break between the contemporary and what came before, and rather than delineating the boundaries of some homogeneous contemporary period, the poetics of politics illuminates a quality of the contemporary moment that becomes characteristic through its very heterogeneity.

Focusing on the poetics of politics as one ‘local’ historicization, then, also brings together disparate strands of scholarship that have addressed the contemporary moment,

6 To give just a few examples from very different venues, cf. President Barack Obama’s observation that “the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism” (qtd. in Boerma), Frank Rich’s discussion of the importance of the “true Katrina narrative” for the George W. Bush administration (201), or the US Army’s *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*’s assertion that the “most important cultural form for counterinsurgents to understand is the narrative” (United States, Dept. of the Army 93).

strands that proceed from different conceptual and disciplinary vantage points and that tend to limit themselves to fairly narrow corpora of contemporary texts. Sidestepping the idea that periodization is the ‘proper’ critical response to recent developments in American literature and culture opens up a new meta-perspective on the critical moves employed by contemporary scholarship and on the resonances and convergences between them. Such a perspective can both dialogue previously isolated lines of inquiry and reflect on their respective potentials and limitations. It thus serves as a key springboard for the kind of local approach to historically sensitive scholarship we wish to advance. These resonances and convergences particularly emerge around the breaks or turns that scholarship invokes to draw a boundary between the contemporary and what came before, the ‘creation myths’ it employs to define the present as a period. We identify three such explanatory narratives that run through scholarship, partly structuring its diversity but also overlapping at times in individual lines of inquiry.

Narratives of Periodization: Creation Myths of the Contemporary Moment

First, there is the narrative—mostly in the context of literary studies—that developments in late-twentieth-century society and culture compel contemporary texts to (re)aspire to social relevance, to “intervene in the social world” (McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodern Discontent” 55). Some of the scholars who advance this narrative refer to particular events—most frequently the end of the Cold War or 9/11—as triggers for this change,⁷ others invoke broader sociocultural developments. In Christian Moraru’s conception of cosmodernism, for instance, it is the accelerating globalization of the late twentieth century that compels changes in literary aesthetics (*Cosmodernism* 34); for Nicole Timmer, the watershed of post-postmodernism owes to new constellations of subjectivity that emerge at the century’s end (13). The break in literary aesthetics that is traced to these events or developments is typically described in a language that oscillates between the ethical and the political, diagnosing a new sense of ethical responsibility in literature, a new commitment to engage with and intervene in social reality. McLaughlin, as noted above, observes a “desire to reconnect [literary] language to the social sphere [...], to reenergize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world” (“Post-Postmodern Discontent” 55). Contemporary post-postmodern literature, he argues, coheres in an aspiration to speak to and about social reality in ways that are both

7 Cf. Josh Toth and Neil Brooks’s claim that “if postmodernism became terminally ill sometime in the late-eighties and early-nineties, it was buried once and for [all] in the rubble of the World Trade Center” (3). They also refer to a number of other events that “seemed to herald the end of postmodernism as the reigning epistemological dominant,” such as “December 22, 1989 – the day Beckett died” or “Tom Wolfe publish[ing] his ‘Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel’” (2, cf. also 2-3).

truthful and sincere. Along similar lines, Moraru sees the post-1989 literature he subsumes under the term cosmopolitanism characterized by a particular “ethos,” a dedication to investigate the “relational” dynamics of life in a globalized world (*Cosmopolitanism* 55). Finally, Timmer also posits a socioethical turn as foundational for post-postmodernism, describing it as “‘a turn to the human’, [...] [a] focus on ‘what it means to be human today’” (361).⁸

The narratives of a fundamental break in literature that this scholarship employs need a foil, and for all the scholars just discussed, this foil is postmodernism. Their efforts to define the contemporary as a literary period that is marked by an interest in societal referentiality and relevance, by an urge to sincerely speak about issues and sensibilities of contemporary concern, notably intervene in particular conceptions of postmodernism: They implicitly forge postmodernism into a period characterized by literature’s disavowal of politics and social referentiality, by writing ‘narcissistically’ concerned with itself, by writing whose pervasive irony prevents it from any serious and sincere engagement with social reality.⁹ Critics like McLaughlin reflect a considerable amount of unease about this retrospective (re)definition of postmodernism, caveating and qualifying it as a (necessary) generalization that threatens to gloss over many nuances in postmodern literary production.¹⁰ Still, the creation myth of post-postmodernism advanced in this scholarship inherently entails such generalizations, turning not only the contemporary moment but also the frame of reference against which it allegedly reacts into homogeneous literary systems. The homogeneity that is enforced in this case is particularly problematic because it tends to reduce postmodernism to the work of primarily white male writers who reflect an interest in poststructuralist ideas. It purges the canon of American postmodern literature, for example, of the minority writers who both partook of the postmodern literary aesthetic and pursued emphatically political projects in their writing, very much manifesting a “desire to [...] intervene in the social world” (McLaughlin, “Post-

8 The lines of argument advanced by McLaughlin, Moraru, and Timmer reappear throughout scholarship, inflected through different methodological registers. For instance, Philip Leonard’s *Literature After Globalization* also delineates contemporary literature as a response to “the emergence of [a] global culture” (3). Mary K. Holland is another scholar who traces the end of postmodernism to an ethical turn in recent literature, which—she argues—“displays a new faith in language and certainty about the novel’s ability to engage in humanist pursuits that have not been seen clearly since poststructuralism shattered both in the middle of the past century” (1-2).

9 It seems ironic that while Linda Hutcheon, in her seminal work on metafiction, used the term “as a defence” against precisely the notion that metafictional literature was simply self-absorbed (1), the term nevertheless has come to be appropriated to suggest just that.

10 In a symptomatically complicated remark, McLaughlin notes: “[P]ostmodernism, despite its wordplay for the sake of wordplay, its skepticism toward narrative as a meaning-providing structure, its making opaque the process of representation, nevertheless does not as a rule abjure literature’s potential to intervene in the social world” (“Post-Postmodern Discontent” 59).

Postmodern Discontent” 55).¹¹ Ironically, this purging takes place even in projects that work to criticize an alleged male white bias in postmodernism, projects that thus advance a progressive agenda but that, in doing so, homogenize postmodernism into a project it never was. The framework of periodization that controls this creation myth of the contemporary moment thus entails totalizing effects that, more often than not, work against the gist of the canon debate. What is more, it invests scholarship in erecting boundaries around the distinctiveness of the contemporary, boundaries that are frequently drawn on the basis of haphazard dichotomies—between writerly sensibilities framed as ironic vs. sincere, between self-referentiality and social referentiality. This investment in boundaries and the practices of dichotomization on which it builds not only result in fairly narrow corpora of texts that fit the respective conception of the contemporary moment, they also conceal the multiple points of continuity and dialogue between supposedly postmodern and post-postmodern aesthetics and their political valency—continuities that not least reside in the poetics of politics.

This fundamental drawback of periodization also informs the second creation myth that emerges in scholarship, a myth closely related to the former one and also circulating primarily in the field of literary studies. In this narrative, it is an exhaustion of literary form that causes breaks between literary periods. This aesthetic logic typically implies a teleological necessity that surfaces, for example, in how Garry Potter and José López emphasize that “a new and different intellectual direction *must* come after postmodernism” (4). In this line of thinking, the playful language games identified with postmodernism as much as its once “outrageous” and “radical propositions” (4) have exhausted themselves or have become commonplace. Now that “postmodernism as a literary strategy no longer pertains in the way it once did” (Rebein 15), now that it has come to perfuse culture entirely, scholars following this logic see the need for an aesthetic mode that is sufficiently different from this cultural dominant, that has enough of a “subversive edge” (Toth and Brooks 6) to still have an aesthetic effect. Curiously, they often turn to various brands of ‘realism,’ usually inflected via an additional adjective or prefix, as the appropriate response. Whether referred to as ‘critical realism,’ ‘transcendental realism,’ ‘dirty realism,’ or ‘neo-realism,’ this new aesthetic mode, however, is difficult to pin down.¹² After all, ‘realism’ as a term evokes both an epoch (marked by

11 For instance, Robert Rebein, when discussing the importance of minority writers for the emergence of post-postmodernism, implicitly reduces postmodernism to a predominantly white, male, poststructuralist project, noting in particular that Toni Morrison is one of the “writers we would not normally associate with literary postmodernism” (7). Along similar lines, Ramón Saldívar ‘whitens’ postmodernism in an argumentative context where he dwells on the cross-fertilizations between poststructuralist and ethnic strands in post-World War II literature (4).

12 The terminological variety used to describe this mode mirrors the various ways scholarship has devised to label the contemporary period. While Potter and López speak of a ‘critical realism’ related to an earlier

literature's claim to social relevance and an interest in the mundane, the bleak, the everyday) and a literary mode (marked by conventionalized reality effects meant to create the illusion that a story was 'simply' about the 'real' world), and it alludes to questions of representation where it denotes a (presumed) absence of mediation, a portrayal of the real as it 'really' is. In discussions of a new post-postmodern aesthetic, the attraction of realism, then, seems to lie precisely in the overdetermination of the term, in its quality as an alloy of these very different aspects. As Josh Toth and Neil Brooks describe it, a narrative of aesthetic succession often casts postmodernism as marked by "ostentatious [...] metafiction," a foil against which a new realism promises to be simpler, "more grounded (or 'responsible')" (5).

There is, of course, a particular irony in how this narrative enlists, of all things, an exhaustion of literary form—an idea so fundamental to postmodernism's beginnings—as the root cause of its demise. Yet there are other ambivalences and unspoken presuppositions in this line of thinking that come to the fore if one abandons a totalizing interest in periodization, ambivalences that stem not least from the effort this narrative expends in keeping apart an older epoch, postmodernism, from the current one. First of all, a logic in which the exhaustion of aesthetic novelty and subversion, its widespread circulation in popular culture and the everyday, necessitates a radical break in aesthetic form presupposes a notion of Art as standing apart from and complementing other forms of cultural expression. Indeed, the question of the elitism of particular aesthetic modes does figure prominently in these debates. Curiously, however, it most frequently makes its appearance in the allegation that postmodernism was an elitist, academic, and, ultimately, writerly project. In this sense, postmodernism often ends up being blamed for two contradictory faults: for being too widespread and popular to still be subversive and for being too elitist to matter in readers' lives. At the same time, this rejection of the academic reader/writer seems to encourage a 'resurrection' of the author as a privileged and revalidated source for the kind of new realism this narrative calls for.¹³ Ultimately, however, it is this notion of a new realism where the

'transcendental realism,' Rebein focuses on a kind of 'dirty realism,' and Toth and Brooks mention an "apparent shift to a type of neo-realism" (8). The propensity to identify a particular type of realism as marking the contemporary runs through other scholarship as well—for instance, Saldívar "propose[s] the term 'speculative realism' as a way of getting at the revisions of realism and fantasy into speculative forms that are seeming to shape the invention of new narrative modes in contemporary fiction" (3), and Mark C. Taylor terms his study to "explore pressing contemporary issues that the nexus of religion, literature, and technology illuminates" in the works of contemporary American writers *Rewiring the Real* (5).

13 Cf., for example, McLaughlin's point: "[T]he challenge of the post-postmodern author," he expands on a remark by David Foster Wallace, "is to write within the context of self-aware language, irony, and cynicism, acknowledge them, even use them, but then to write through them, to break through the cycle of self-reference, to represent the world constructively, to connect with others" ("Post-Postmodernism" 215). This perspective reads literature after postmodernism as something that will come to us from the serious novels of serious writers, not from the resources of everyday, commercial, or popular culture.

ambivalences of this narrative figure most strongly. In looking for an aesthetic mode that is markedly different from postmodernism, it often glorifies realism as promising simpler, more mimetic, and more transparent representation. By implication, it characterizes postmodern writing as inherently disinterested in reality and only concerned with representing representation. In doing so, this narrative often seems to respond to and express a deeply ambivalent longing for a presumed ‘state of innocence’ before the crisis of representation that it, simultaneously, knows does not exist.¹⁴ The ambivalence of this desire is expressed in the adjectives and prefixes complicating the realism that is proposed—critical, transcendental, dirty, neo—but it ultimately remains unresolved: an oscillation between postmodernism and realism as a form of searching that cannot come to an end at either pole.

The third creation myth takes more diverse forms and is hosted by a greater variety of disciplinary contexts, all of which define the break that demarcates their variously conceived contemporary phenomena on the basis of changes (with)in the media used for cultural expression. Evoking a historiographic model in which cultural change is not simply expressed in but driven by developments in particular media, they diagnose specific transformations in the contemporary media landscape as triggers of categorical, epochal changes in textual aesthetics. Media scholar Jason Mittell provides one example of such an effort to define contemporary textual production as a delimitable period: Focusing on the medium of television, he invokes a framework of “historical poetics” (30) to “consider the 1990s to the present as the era of television complexity” (29). In his perspective, it is especially “[t]echnological transformations” (31) that have provided the impulse for television to evolve new forms of “narrative complexity.” Such digital media “enable viewers to extend their participation in these rich storyworlds beyond the one-way flow of traditional television viewing” (32), thus prompting television to develop textual strategies that (often self-consciously) play with the established conventions of TV narrative. This complexity, delineated as a response to media change, comes to define the contemporary as an “era” in Mittell’s account. Cultural scholar Alan Kirby focuses on the importance of technology and media in a similar manner in his discussion of digimodernism as “the twenty-first century’s new cultural paradigm” that “has decisively displaced postmodernism” (1). He argues that this new period of digimodernism “owes its emergence and preeminence to the computerization of text,” and he ties this new textuality to a number of effects, including “infantilism, earnestness, endlessness, and apparent reality” (1), that, for him, mark digimodernism as a distinct period in cultural production. This pervasive idea that the periodicity of the

14 Cf. Rebein’s praise of realism as at least “struggl[ing] for clarity and simplicity” (5).

contemporary results from aesthetic responses to changes (with)in media also informs discussions in literary studies. Especially McLaughlin's conception of post-postmodernism draws on it, arguing that "[b]ecause the televisual culture has co-opted postmodernism's bag of tricks to deleterious effect, writers of fiction [...] need to find a way beyond self-referential irony to offer the possibility of construction" ("Post-Postmodern Discontent" 65). Here, too, boundaries are drawn by pointing to media developments—the new competition that television poses to the institution of literature—as triggers of categorical aesthetic change.

This third narrative of contemporary periodicity, then, invokes a model akin to a base-superstructure mechanism to draw its boundaries in ways that threaten to totalize complex dynamics of change into formal responses to media-technological development. In this model, developments in the 'superstructure' of culture follow from changes in the technological and medial 'base' in an almost mechanistic manner, with one determining the other. Such models tend to overlook feedback loops between these two spheres and prevent an understanding of the relationship between them as more dialectical. Even more significantly, they often depict cultural and aesthetic development as strictly sequential, as following the more teleological progression of technological change and development. In all its diversity, this scholarship authorizes emphatically teleological depictions of cultural 'evolution' by anchoring aesthetic in media change: Invoking this straightforward stimulus-response model helps McLaughlin to frame the contemporary as a period in which the ostensibly old-fashioned novel 'strikes back' against the popular media's incursions into its cultural territory, and it allows Mittell to depict the contemporary as a period in which television has matured to poetic sophistication. In addition, this creation myth seems to encourage a curious insularity of approach: While the change to which most of the scholars point as instigator of an aesthetic watershed is one of media convergence, to use Henry Jenkins's term, they tend to trace it only in individual media. The inter- and transmedial dynamics of the developments they discuss drop out of sight: The new complexity that Mittell discerns in contemporary television deeply resonates with some of the properties literary scholars identify in turn-of-the-millennium literature; Kirby's conception of digimodernism, developed on the basis of "'reality TV' [...][,] Hollywood fantasy blockbusters, [...] Web 2.0 platforms[,] [and] the most sophisticated videogames" (1), echoes aspects discussed in the contexts of literary post-postmodernism or new realism. Ultimately, desires closely tied to the media that these scholars discuss seem to fuel their use of this narrative of periodicity, informing the boundaries they draw around the contemporary.

* * *

A broad range of scholarship has felt compelled to attend to the distinctiveness of American textual production around the turn of the millennium, a distinctiveness measured—with varying emphases and from different conceptual angles—both in how contemporary texts work and in how they speak to and about social reality, in their poetics and in their politics. The scholarship discussed above conspicuously narrates this distinctiveness in terms of a recurrent ‘master plot’ that proceeds from the idea of a categorical break with or turn against formerly dominant forms and patterns in American culture—a previous dominant chiefly identified as postmodernism. This master plot, as we suggested, controls, in often limiting ways, the conceptualizations and analytic explorations undertaken in much of the existing research. The creation myths of the contemporary that it begets tend to funnel complex dynamics of change and continuity and of cause and effect in diachronic developments into rigorously bounded and teleologically framed periods.

Next to effecting this general drawback of periodization, the underlying master plot’s investment in a radical break of the present with what came before appears to be generated by the very culture it seeks to theorize. Bespeaking a desire to ‘be done’ especially with postmodernism,¹⁵ it does not only do analytical work. Instead, it seems to work through a complex love-hate relationship with the postmodern condition. In effect, then, to pronounce American literature and culture at the threshold of some “grand epochal transition,” in Toth’s phrasing (2), performs the contemporary moment at least as much as it describes it.

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15 In his discussion of contemporary scholarship on ‘late postmodernism,’ Jeremy Green similarly identifies a “desire to be done with postmodernism, to declare it finished and of purely historical interest, a late-twentieth-century phenomenon that can now be jettisoned” (24).

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