

**Delia Falconer**

## **The Challenge of the “Post-postmodern”**

Abstract:

Using Dr Alan Kirby’s essay “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond” as a starting point, this paper discusses his claim that we have passed from “postmodernism” into a “post-postmodern” era and considers what this means for the teaching of postmodern texts in creative writing courses within the academy.

Biographical Note:

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In a widely discussed 2006 article in *Philosophy Now* Dr Alan Kirby, a lecturer in English Literature at Exeter University, raised the problem of the “death of postmodernism”. What does the relative antiquity of the term “postmodern” — and its key texts, both creative and theoretical — mean for the teaching of both critical reading and practice? If we are indeed in a “post-postmodern” era — or at least in a new and historically original phase of late capitalism — how can creative writing courses be rejuvenated to recognise the pressure of new technologies and social forces? Taking Kirby’s paper as a starting point, I will approach these questions not as a theorist but as a writer and critic shaped by a 1980s university education when the idea (and ideal) of the postmodern was at its high-water mark. I will explore some of the new material forces bearing on contemporary life and examine the specific challenges they raise for any writer interested in engaging with the present. I will also discuss some of the new material and industrial conditions bearing upon the production of texts, along with some of the new textual formations that might be included and examined in writing courses.

Although there are a number of aspects of Kirby’s argument that concern me, particularly its nouveau-Frankfurt-school despair in regard to innovations in popular culture, it also struck a chord as it seemed to articulate things that I had been feeling but had not quite yet put into words for myself.

Kirby begins his article with a discussion of a module description for a course called “Postmodern Fictions” downloaded from the English Department website of a British university. The outline claims—and the description could stand in for the myriad other postmodern fiction modules taught around the globe—that “Postmodern Fictions” will introduce “the general topics of ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity’ by examining their relationship to the contemporary writing of fiction”. The outline assumes, Kirby writes, that postmodernism is “alive, thriving and kicking” (2006). Yet cut to the book list for this course, and you find a group of set texts—*The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), and *White Noise* (1985)—that have been written before most of the students’ lifetimes assuming most undergrads (in 2006) were born in 1985.

“It’s all about as contemporary as the Smiths”, Kirby writes, “as hip as shoulder pads, as happening as Betamax video recorders. These are texts which are just coming to grips with the existence of rock music and television; they mostly do not dream even of the possibility of the technology and communications media — mobile phones, email, the internet, computers in every house powerful enough to put a man on the moon — which today’s undergraduates take for granted” (2006).

For me, this paragraph produced an instant flashback to RMIT circa 1999, where I was teaching a course on novel-writing and had prided myself on providing my students with

an exciting and contemporary reading list. “Your tastes are really eighties, aren’t they?” one of them remarked.

Did I learn my lesson? Not entirely. While I have since made an effort to set more recent texts on my courses (David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), for example, or some of the self-reflexive short stories from anthologies like that edited by Zadie Smith and Dave Eggers, *Burned Children of America* (2003) or the new American journal *A Public Space*) it is, I have to confess, with less enthusiasm. Instead I find I cannot help returning to the postmodern fiction that constitutes my own reading heartland: Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), Bruce Chatwin’s factional travelogue *In Patagonia* (1977), E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), W G Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1993)... but is this such a bad thing?

Let’s return to Kirby for a moment. He claims that the problem inherent in teaching postmodern fiction is that the postmodern novel has passed its use-by date. It isn’t being written any more: “...buy novels published in the last five years ... and you can hardly catch a glimpse of postmodernism.” The same with theory, he argues, which is also no longer being produced in abundance: “...one can go to literary conferences ... and sit through a dozen papers which make no mention of Theory, of Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard. The sense of superannuation, of the impotence and the irrelevance of so much Theory among academics ... bears testimony to the passing of postmodernism. The people who produce the cultural material which academics and non-academics read, watch and listen to, have simply given up on postmodernism.” According to Kirby, any new postmodern text is a thus now a kind of throwback, no longer “modern” in the same way, and no longer commercially or artistically lauded (though was it ever so, one wonders?). “The occasional metafictional or self-conscious text will appear, to widespread indifference—like Bret Easton Ellis’ *Lunar Park*—but then modernist novels, now long forgotten, were still being written into the 1950s and 60s.” Most damningly, he claims that the only place where the postmodern is still extant is in children’s cartoons like “Shrek” and “The Incredibles”, as a sop to parents obliged to sit through them with their toddlers. “This is the level to which postmodernism has sunk; a source of marginal gags in pop culture aimed at the under-eights.”

There are a number of troubling aspects to Kirby’s argument here, especially his claim that postmodernism has been almost completely marginalised in TV and film. I would personally argue the opposite, though perhaps with an oddly similar conclusion: that postmodern techniques (at least those that Fredric Jameson identifies as typical of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*— a self-consciousness about textuality, irony, a suspicion about the trustworthiness of realism, pastiche) have in fact become so mainstreamed within contemporary TV and film as to now be our new “normal”. Think, for example, of the odd kind of postmodern magic realism that has become a staple of so many TV dramas, from “Ally McBeal” to “Six Feet Under” (dancing spectral babies and visitations by dead friends and fathers). Think

again of the surge in “postmodern” movies like Spike Jonze’s highly self-reflexive “Being John Malkovich”; Wes Anderson’s oddly anachronistic “The Life Aquatic”; the deliberately distressed 70s look of Quentin Tarantino’s “Death Proof”; or Japanese cult director Takashi Miike’s “Sukiyaki Western Django”, a celebration of the sukiyaki western replete with a cameo appearance by Tarantino and a lushly hyperbolic Tombstone-meets-Edo mise-en-scène. Then there are the baroquely unreal plots and glossy sets of other television programs like “Nip/Tuck” or “CSI” which savour the outlandishness of their hyper-exaggerated dramas. The novel is perhaps another matter, where self-consciously highbrow postmodern fiction such as Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being* as a bestselling phenomenon may be a thing of the past. Even if, like David Mitchell’s highly popular, baroquely Calvinesque fiction, the novel retains some of the trappings of the postmodern, the status of the novel has certainly changed — more on this later — so that it now inhabits a more middle-brow ground (there is little sense in the novel that Mitchell’s pyrotechnics serve a higher purpose).

It seems to me, then, that I find myself drawn to the postmodern writing of the eighties, that it is not because postmodernism is as absent from the contemporary scene as Kirby claims. Rather, the difference lies more in a structure of feeling around these earlier novels, a sense of postmodernism as something relevant, oppositional, and thriving; or rather, and this is an even more subtle distinction, as something that views itself as relevant, oppositional, and thriving. Indeed, it is the high seriousness of the postmodern novel’s playfulness that seems to have evaporated since the 80s: the urgency of Jeanette Winterson’s “I’m telling you stories — trust me” (*The Passion*) or our own fiction’s late-eighties and early-nineties fascination with Australian history as a web of “beautiful lies” in which postmodern and magic realist techniques were used to create a reactive counter-history, the kind of approximate, metaphoric effect that Werner Herzog has called, in relation to his own films, “ecstatic truth” (1999). Even the über-high seriousness of the most postmodern of more recent novelists, W G Sebald, seems, for all its tangential invocations of the Holocaust, almost self-parodic when read in a twenty-first century context; to have ratcheted up an intensely European sensibility of melancholy to the point, to use a Sebaldian metaphor, of vertigo. What appears to have evaporated from the writing of this new century for many different reasons (the mainstreaming of postmodern techniques in more “lowbrow” forms and the fragmentation, instantaneity and anatomisation of the internet, for example) is a sense that postmodern techniques in writing are oppositional, or that they somehow “matter”. Or rather, perhaps, the wider structures of feelings upon which these techniques depended for their force have altered profoundly, something that Jameson was already predicting in the eighties; a phenomenon that seems to be the true crux of Kirby’s paper.

My first point, then, in thinking about Kirby’s paper, is that postmodern writing is something that we now need to teach historically. This presents the new challenge of teaching in two directions at once, since the techniques of postmodern cultural products continue to thrive while postmodernism’s oppositional force as a collective and self-

aware entity wanes. In other words, teaching historically requires both conveying the continuing presence and use of postmodern techniques under new historical conditions while at the same time helping students to grasp the past affective power and uses of its earlier formations.

In teaching postmodern fiction as a historical phenomenon, I have found Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s" (1988) particularly useful. In this seminal essay he understands the cultural changes of that era as the result of its global abruptions, particularly the great wave of decolonisations as ex-colonies were liberated and new subjectivities simultaneously emerged onto the world stage (the subjectivities of native peoples writing back to the empire, but also, through a series of other internal decolonisations, of women, gays and lesbians). Through Jameson's work it is thus possible to understand many of the techniques of postmodern fiction as engaged responses to such huge worldwide changes. One can, for example, see novels like Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) or classics of Australian magic realism like Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985) as liminal texts: ones that stage a new and engaged awareness that the truth claims of accepted master narratives (the Bible and Australian history respectively) were never value-free. Both texts can be read as attempts to find a voice and form for newly sceptical subaltern (lesbian and postcolonial) subjectivities, while in turn strategically disrupting the authoritarian cohesion of the classical realist novel. It is also possible that such texts depended for their force on the era's seismic shifts, a momentum that is now in decline.

The difficulty when entering into such a discussion with students, however, is that one cannot depend on them to share the same awareness as those of us who went to university in the eighties or earlier of the canons (of both fact and fiction) that provided the oppressive counterweight to these texts. Earlier canonical texts must therefore also be included on any course on the postmodern (or post-postmodern), a challenge to already full curricula and, theoretically, to universities now exposed to market demands. Yet it is hard to attribute the decline in knowledge of the canon to its devaluing cultural capital outside the academy, since, in many ways, certain canonical texts are more than ever present and important (albeit decontextualised) in our popular culture — the boom in Jane Austen adaptations and appropriations, for example. The great many books that have appeared over the last decade on how and what to read (compilations of the top 100 books ever written, for example) also suggest some residual, even anxious, public desire for "authorised" or canonical knowledge. In a way, it is perhaps not so much the new cultural products of this stage of postmodernity that we should blame for the decline in students' canonical literacy, but the fact that English departments at both secondary and tertiary level have long since argued themselves out of a disciplinarity by — in their exclusive infatuation with the postmodern text — ruthlessly purging their courses of the canon. The becoming-historical of the postmodern thus almost demands a full-scale reevaluation of the new canons created by the new humanities.

These are not questions I am attempting to solve or put to rest in this paper; rather, I raise them in passing to make the point that in teaching postmodern texts as historical we have another interesting set of choices opening up before us. On the one hand, in taking the historical view, we could choose to scale down the teaching of the postmodern canon as itself superceded, at least in industry-orientated creative writing courses; or more conservatively, to reduce the special category status of the postmodern and reincorporate some of its key texts into longer genealogies of non-fiction or the novel. At the very least, there is a case for no longer teaching many of its manifestations as cutting-edge or commercial. This is particularly the case, I would have to say, with certain forms like “fictocriticism”. Fictocritical writing is frequently accorded a fairly central place on writing courses within the academy without historical contextualisation, with the result that students — as I’ve frequently observed — labour under the misapprehension that they can make a living in the commercial press by writing fictocriticism (and that it is a commonly used and understood term outside the academy!). Yet rather than dispensing with fictocriticism, it might be that it could be more honestly and productively taught in creative writing departments as a historically reactive, largely academic mode of writing that arose from the same cultural and historical moment as theory; that is, as the product of academics rebelling against the impersonal, non-subjective and supposedly value-free language of the traditional academic essay.

On the other hand, once positioned and understood in their original useful context, postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, textual self-consciousness and pastiche could be taught across creative writing courses and strategically imported into more commercial forms of writing. Given the widespread migration of so many of postmodernism’s tropes into the mainstream and their tendency to cross genres, close reading of their uses in different contemporary contexts is more than ever a desperately urgent endeavour that will empower students as both readers and writers. It is highly useful exercise, for example, for students to study the differences between the located, exaggeratedly personal and opinionated voices of a Michael Moore-style documentary or Helen Garner’s recent non-fiction writing, which throw any pretence of journalistic impartiality out the window while cultivating an idiosyncratic persona and, say, the considered, personally grounded commentary exemplified by Tom Griffiths’ historical writing that is sourced, referenced and scrupulously self-reflexive (a task many find surprisingly challenging, since in a culture that constantly makes available the personal and disclosive they cannot get their heads around the idea that the “I” of writing or speaking, can be to different degrees artfully constructed or be in the thrall of various discursive and generic debts). These may seem startlingly obvious points to make, yet a historical or contextual grasp of genre seems frequently to be missing from creative writing courses. For example, it is not unusual to encounter students working quite naturally within a fictocritical mode (or at least producing generically unidentifiable “texts”) who, at the same time, are incapable of distinguishing between an experimental personal essay and a piece of commercial feature journalism.

But Kirby's essay raises another major issue that I would like to address: the question of whether we have, in fact, passed beyond the "postmodern" into an era that might be called for want of a better term the "post-postmodern". Kirby argues that the "terms by which authority, knowledge, selfhood, reality and time are conceived have been altered, suddenly and forever" to the point that there is now a "gulf between most students and their lecturers akin to the one which appeared in the late 1960s, but not for the same reason". This, he says, is due to a profound reformulation in the conditions of cultural production, especially "the emergence of new technologies [which have] re-structured, violently and forever, the nature of the author, the reader and the text, and the relationships between them" (Kirby 2006).

Today's culture, Kirby continues, fetishises the recipient of the text; and here I don't think he means the shift in theory post-Barthes from the importance of the text to the reader or, in cultural studies in particular, to the expertise of user-groups. Rather, he seems more concerned by the proliferation of new cultural products in which audiences (albeit with a perhaps-illusory sense of power) are incorporated as "authors" into the texts themselves: he offers "Big Brother" and interactive computer games as examples. One can think of more: the incorporation of viewer feedback by way of SMS and email and comments left on websites onto programs like Australian Idol, or, perhaps more tellingly, the way MP3 users (whom Kirby mentions later) fragment and reincorporate albums into personalised and ever-shifting mixes.

Kirby describes such cultural products as "pseudo-modern". One of the challenges of these forms, he adds, is that they can offer a "far more intense engagement with the cultural process than anything literature can offer." More productively, I think, Kirby seems to suggest a historically-original difference in the reality-effect (and thus affect) of certain cultural products. For example, he remarks, many large blockbuster movies now actually work to make real action look incredible by making it resemble a computer effect (rather than trying to make the impossible appear credible). The computer game, he posits, thus becomes the model for cinema's relationship with the viewer. Yet by the time Kirby comes to the conclusion that such cultural products are more disposable and therefore endure less well he seems ready to join the ghost of Theodore Adorno in residence, as Lukacs quipped, in the Grand Hotel Abyss. The twenty-first century, he writes, confronts us with "a storm of human activity producing almost nothing of any lasting or even reproducible cultural value" (Kirby 2006).

Leaving aside the issue of the unevenness of any cultural evolution (it certainly seems that traditional forms are thriving alongside these other forms; that on the other hand Hollywood cinema and the novel have never been so dully mainstream) or the question of whether this isn't yet another phase of the unmoored irony without object that Jameson identifies as an aspect of late capitalism and thus postmodernism, there is again at the base of Kirby's critique a persuasive sense that there is something wildly different about

the emotional register both within and without many of our contemporary cultural products.

Certainly, many seem to play at fortissimo strength and without pause. If anything has been lost from contemporary cultural practice that we can most mourn, perhaps, it is the *longueur*, the meat-and-potatoes ordinariness or down-time against which the extraordinary can be extraordinary. Take the “extreme drama” (my own term) of the hospital and police series of the last decade and a half from “ER” to “All Saints”, in which jumping the shark is now the dominant, perhaps exclusive, form of dramatic action (a bomb and the outbreak of a rare epidemic and the entrapment of a soft toy sex fetishist in their plushie costume all in the one episode!). This tendency is also clearly apparent in the Hollywood blockbuster in which action tops action with maximum, hyperbolic force. But perhaps even in the contemporary novel, at its most contemplative there is a lack of simple quietness, a kind of steroidal generic self-awareness. This is an effect Zadie Smith tried to put her finger on in a recent essay on Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* in *The New York Review of Books* (2008). There is something almost disconcerting, she wrote, in the current dominant brand of lyrical realism that seems almost to parody itself in its seamlessness, that is “so perfectly done [and] ... so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis” (Smith 2008).

At the same time, there have been significant shifts in the material circumstances of book publishing over the last decade, whereby publishers seem to be acting more and more like archetypal Hollywood producers, cutting the rough-edged or unusual literary books from their lists and instead investing in the search for the crowd-pleasing middlebrow blockbuster. In addition, a populist discourse has seen the disappearance of the academic or “expert” critic from book programs and books pages, to be replaced more and more by blogs, people’s prizes, and amateur enthusiasts. This is something that my cultural studies background ought to encourage me to appreciate, as different users make their presence felt more and more not only as commentators but as anticipated readers within texts; yet, even while attempting to refrain from Kirby’s pessimism, one cannot but observe that this has been substantially gearing down the “difficulty” factor of books (something Malcolm Knox observed in his 2005 criticism of the critical celebration of Andrew McGahan’s unchallenging prose in *The White Earth*), as well as perhaps a commercial directive to writers toward more “feel-good” writing (“comfort history” according to historian Mark McKenna) such as Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*. Interestingly, a slew of cute book titles over the last half-decade seems to celebrate a new spirit of ephemerality or triviality around contemporary fiction by appending titles associated with more degraded genres to less layered fiction that performs some of the gestures of the literary novel: Marina Lewycka’s *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, for example, or Carrie Tiffany’s *Everyman’s Guide to Scientific Living*.

Added to this are the technical difficulties presented by the instantaneity and placelessness of our new century for any novelist writing about the present, as noted in recent essays by Jonathan Franzen (2003) and Joe Queenan (2008). Faced with the fluid yet cocooned societies of the present (in the first world at least), Franzen argues, the social realist novelist struggles to centre and contain action within the old tensions of the village that powered the Victorian novel, in which proximity forced all types to rub up against one another and action was fairly contained in place and time (2003). It is hard, in other words, to take a representative core sample from our society (which one?) in the same ways available to the great novelists of the last centuries. The result, in the case of Franzen's own *Corrections*, was a sprawling behemoth of a novel that ranged from the American mid-west to the coastal east to dodgy dealings in an ex-Soviet republic. Yet such an effort at inclusivity failed to satisfy literary critic James Wood who, in a now-infamous article in the *Guardian*, excoriated the sprawl, exaggeration, facticity and "glitter" in a slew of novels he grouped as "hysterical realism", by writers including Franzen, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith) (Wood 2001) —a more negative response than I would care for, but one which interestingly responds to something in the novel akin to what I have identified as TV and film's "extreme drama". In his interesting reflection on the Coen brothers' version of Cormac McCarthy's "No Country for Old Men", Joe Queenan noted how vital its setting in the 80s was to its success as a gripping drama, and observed, thought-provokingly, how much harder it is, in the age of the internet and satellite technology, to manufacture as satisfying a time-space of suspense. Understanding such broad changes in the landscape of publishing and the relationship between cultural production and the significant material shifts of the last decade are essential to the teaching of contemporary writing, whether we wish to see them as a new stage of postmodernity or a new era of the "post-postmodern".

I do feel that it is particularly our task as teachers of writing to be alert to the emergence of such new forms especially as they become more generically hybrid and the distinctions between them more subtle: "comfort histories" for example, the souped-up plots of "hysterical realism", or the Victorian retro-dreamings of steampunk. As practitioners, we also need to examine the challenges and possibilities of the genres we teach in the light of new social and material developments (the difficulties of writing suspense-based crime fiction, for example, when so much information is now instantaneous, and the erotics of information has in some ways replaced the long-haul of deduction).<sup>1</sup> In attempting to do so, teaching will become more challenging than ever, as the rapidly morphing development of new forms and hybrid genres demands the increasing broadening of our range of cultural references beyond written texts to phenomena as various as web publishing and subscription television drama. Not only do we need to view and read more widely, but the subtlety and fluidity of changes in contemporary texts requires more than ever a honing of our critical abilities in both practical and theoretical directions at

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, my discussion of this phenomenon in Delia Falconer, "Everything is Illuminated: My Love Affair with *CSI*," *A Public Space* 3 Winter 2007: 173-184.

once. In order to empower students, and to maintain our courses' artistic and social relevance, we need not only to develop our students' faculties of close reading, but also to immerse them in the genealogies and histories of the forms they use. This is a huge task, as university courses and disciplines continue to fragment — something that requires more than ever a united pedagogy across departments to structure courses that prepare for and build upon one another. At the very least, we can accept that we are becoming, as teachers, historical ourselves and try to periodise the now long history of the postmodern.

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