

Part 4 Interregnum, 1989-2001

Introduction: After the Fall, 1989

Brian McHale and Len Platt

Postmodernism “changed tense” from present to past, Raymond Federman once wrote, on the same date that Samuel Beckett did — December 22, 1989, the day of Beckett’s death.¹ That year, while proposed in a spirit of serious play, nevertheless has multiple resonances, often construed in geopolitical terms. The breaching of the Berlin Wall one month before Beckett died marked the symbolic, if not actual, end of the Cold War. As Christian Moraru writing in this volume puts it, the fall of the Wall became “shorthand” for a “world-event,” one which set “in train a radical, epoch-making *Wende* (‘change’ or ‘turn’).” The dissolution of the Soviet Union and its empire; the bloody suppression of the democracy movement at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square; the release of Nelson Mandela and the beginning of the end of apartheid — collectively such events certainly *seemed* to herald the end of one thing and the onset of something else. The U.S. administration of George Bush the elder thought 1989 marked the beginning of a New World Order in which America, as the sole remaining superpower, would inevitably take the global lead, as it did in the First Gulf War (or “Operation Desert Storm”) in 1991. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama put himself notionally on side when he dramatically associated 1989 with the Hegelian (or Kojévian) “end of history.”²

But American triumphalism, like Fukuyama’s place in the media spotlight, did not last long. Political liberalization in places like Taiwan, Chile, South Africa, and Indonesia, and market reform in such countries as China and Vietnam carried with it

“difficult” and often “unexpected” outcomes. The millenarianist culmination of “reform” also shared uncomfortable synchronicity with terrible geopolitical crises and genocides — the Yugoslav civil war of 1991-95, the first intifada in Palestine and the Rwandan civil war — which the New World Order seemed quite incapable of “managing.” A serious economic slump, in Japan and South East Asia, for example, in the later 90s, also rained on the parade, undermining emerging “neoliberalism” in pretty well all respects. Indeed, from the perspective of 2015, the abrupt disappearance of the polarized world of the Cold War in 1989-91 now appears to be less of a decisive break and more of a hiatus — a political interregnum broken by the equally abrupt emergence of the newly polarized (or *re*-polarized) world of the post 9/11 War on Terror.

From such perspectives it becomes clear that history did not end in 1989 as Fukuyama imagined it would and neither did postmodernism. On the contrary, from some perspectives this period was where postmodernism appeared to come into its own — to become mainstream. It almost seemed as though what postmodernism had been anticipating and preparing for all along became the state of things in the nineties, especially in relation to new technologies. Here the year 1989 appears to mark certain kinds of acceleration rather than decisive endings. In 1989 the first of twenty-four satellites that would eventually form the Global Positioning System was placed in orbit; also in 1989 the 486 series of microprocessor was launched by the Microsoft Corporation. Along with spreadsheet, word processor, database and presentation software, this innovation took personal computing out of SF and seriously into the homeliness of everyday commodification. In Japan Nintendo made the first Game Boy machine in 1989 — the sales figures for Game Boy, combined with those of its successor

Game Boy Color, amounted to nothing short of 118.69 million units, the new platform supporting one of the most recognizable avatars of the 80s and 90s — Mario. In the same year, and perhaps even more suggestively, Tim Berners-Lee made the first successful communication between a Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) client via the Internet.

Access to computer technology and networked connectivity, still severely limited at the end of the eighties, exploded in the nineties with the World-Wide Web in particular undergoing a utopian and communitarian phase before succumbing to the frenzy of commodification and monetization that was the Dot-Com boom. The transformative effects of the new digital media were so radical and pervasive that by the turn of the millennium speculation was rife about the approaching end of the codex book and the culture it sustained. All that was solid seemed to be melting into air (or pixels), with cascading cultural side-effects, including the emergence of new media of entertainment, new art-forms, and (arguably) new models of “cyborg” or “posthuman” subjectivity which in turn produced new “writing” — the subject of Dave Ciccoricco’s chapter in this volume, “Digital Culture and Posthumanism.”

The sense of acceleration characterizing the period between the end of the Cold War and the onset of the War on Terror, found clear expression in the cultural production of the nineties interregnum — and not only in relation to technology. The nineties were the years of multiculturalism’s flowering, amplified and diversified by the arrival of new waves of immigration from the global South and East, but those same years were also characterized by the backlash against multiculturalism in the so-called “culture wars.” Ellen G. Friedmann’s contribution to this volume maps these territories, where subcultural and paracultural alternatives — grunge, gangsta rap, indie films, New Age

spirituality, Internet culture — proliferated, each enjoying its brief heyday before being swept up into the market economy and becoming “mainstreamed” and made subservient to a mainstream cultural optimism. Here “an awareness of borderland identity and of fluidity in subject positions” led to the hope of a sense of “weness, not in the sense of unified community but in the sense of acceptance of difference or fluidity between the subject positions people occupy in a pluralistic democracy.”

Riding the wave of economic globalization and new digital technologies, postmodernism achieved planetary reach in the nineties. A sense of solidarity with the planetary ecosystem and concern for its preservation had already emerged by the end of the sixties, but the succession of environmental disasters over the course of subsequent decades (Three Mile Island, 1979; Chernobyl, 1986; Fukushima, 2011) and a growing awareness of the threat of long-term climate change heightened the urgency of environmentalist and eco-critical discourses by the nineties. The same technological prowess that jeopardized ecosystems also gave environmentalists powerful new tools for imagining, representing and communicating their “sense of the planet.” This planetary imagination increasingly found itself at odds with economic globalization and its competing vision of the planet as resource and market.

Also symptomatic of the nineties interregnum were science-fiction thought-experiments involving a world order *without America*. American triumphalism was hardly the only imaginative response to end of Cold-War bi-polarization; another alternative was to try to imagine a world in which American global leadership, rendered redundant by the disappearance of its Cold-War adversary, simply disappeared along with its opposite number. What, or who, might fill the gap?

Japan, first of all — the subject of the chapter which opens this section. An economic powerhouse at the beginning of the interregnum phase, Japan appeared to some observers to be the epicenter of global postmodernism. A world dominated by Japan and its allies had already been imagined by Philip K. Dick as early as 1962 in his novel of alternative history, *The Man in the High Castle*, but a preoccupation with the future cultural dominance of Japan only comes fully into its own in the cyberpunk fiction of the Eighties. Glimpsed in Ridley Scott's highly influential science fiction film *Blade Runner* (1982), the model of a "Japanized" future emerges definitively in William Gibson's two trilogies of the Eighties and Nineties. Takayuki Tatsumi's contribution in this volume charts the complex multi-directional dynamics behind cultural transfer and exchange as it operated in the real world, one focused across contemporary aesthetics, Japanese tradition, new technologies and the rise of a "global visual culture."

Speculation about a "Japan-centric" world cooled after the Japanese real-estate bubble burst in 1991 and Japan's economy lapsed into its Lost Decade. What took its place in futuristic fiction was China. Among the most ambitious and provocative of the "China-centric" speculative fictions was the British SF novelist David Wingrove's cycle of eight immense novels appearing under the collective title of *Chung Kuo* (1990-97). Wingrove imagines a future planet Earth entirely covered by seven continent-spanning megacities, each governed by one of seven ethnically Han co-emperors. Han civilization dominates everywhere, having submerged or eradicated all other world civilizations, including the European and American cultures. Though traces of paranoid fantasies of Asian domination and a certain amount of exoticizing Orientalism linger in Wingrove's fiction, his sympathies are very evenly divided between the Han overlords, who struggle

to maintain order in a world on the verge of chaotic breakdown, and the submerged populations, some of whom are beginning to resist the Han world-order.

Again, in the real world, one of the great transformations of the nineties was the reemergence of China on the global stage, not only as an economic and geopolitical powerhouse but also as a cultural presence, the subject of Wang Ning's chapter in this volume. China underwent "postmodernization" only belatedly, during the New Period of 1978-1989. An important catalyzing role in this process was played by Fredric Jameson, whose lectures in the mid-eighties introduced Chinese academics and intellectuals to the concept of postmodernism. By the later nineties, as Wang Ning shows, the process had advanced to the point where China was re-exporting postmodernism to the West, especially in the form of visual art, which enjoyed an international vogue.

A kind of capstone of the decade's imagination of the interregnum was Kim Stanley Robinson's novel of alternative history, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002). Here Robinson imagines an alternative past in which the fourteenth-century pandemic of bubonic plague destroyed, not a third of the population of Europe (as it did in real-world history), but 90% of it. World history, in this alternative reality, develops without the Europeans or the Euro-Americans. Thus, it falls to the Chinese to discover the New World; Renaissance science emerges first in the cities of the Silk Road, between the Islamic and Chinese cultural spheres; the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution begins in South India instead of Great Britain; the Great War of the early twentieth century is fought not among the European powers, but between China and Islam; and so on.

Robinson's speculation about a world without Europe reflects the interregnum sensibility, but arrives belatedly in 2002. By then, the depolarized world of the post-Cold

War interregnum had already been *repolarized* — to the manifest relief of some, who welcomed a return to the Manichaean certainties of a new (or renewed) “clash of civilizations,” albeit one differently oriented than the old one. *The Years of Rice and Salt* stands as a monument to the monstrous and sublime experience of alternativity and multi-directionality of the in-between years, foreclosed by the War on Terror. Does this return to business-as-usual in the imagination (and practice) of geopolitics coincide with another mutation in postmodernism, or mark its true end??

A number of chapters in this final section of *The Cambridge History of Postmodernism* — Stephen Burn’s “Second-Generation Postmoderns,” Christian Moraru’s “Postmodernism, Cosmodernism, Planetarism” and Andrew Hoberek’s “Epilogue —: 2001, 2008 and After” explicitly grapple with mapping the territory of what comes after the postmodern. By the beginning of the nineties, the very term “postmodernism” was becoming debased coinage, applied so indiscriminately that serious cultural producers no longer wanted to be associated with it. As Burn explains, a younger generation of postmoderns — including William T. Vollmann, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Lethem, Karen Tei Yamashita and Colson Whitehead, theoretically astute and sometimes impatient with their elders’ lingering influence — started making their presence felt on the cultural stage, and some observers began to speculate about the emergence of a “post-postmodernism” and to pose the question, “What *was* postmodernism?” To some the claim that nineties culture had somehow already passed beyond postmodernism to some kind of “post-postmodernism” seemed problematic. Impatience with postmodernism, and eagerness to get “beyond” it, pervasive in the early nineties, was not the same thing as actually breaking through to the

“post-post,” as the novelist David Foster Wallace’s career seemed poignantly to demonstrate. Indeed, some mounted the argument that the very *resistance* to postmodernism in the nineties could be seen as one of the late forms that postmodernism itself takes.³ Burns himself, however, takes a more nuanced line, noting that “the generational divide at issue is not the clean split implied by some explanatory labels, nor the fluid continuum implied by others.”

Andrew Hoberek writes directly about 11/11, recognizing that for many it registered as a decisive break, marking among other things “the end of the twentieth century.” At the same he doubts that this event in “world history maps easily onto the history of literary and cultural production, and in particular onto the emergence of what observers increasingly describe as post-postmodernism.” Moraru would go further in the direction of imagined continuities, arguing forcefully for an assimilation of postmodernism and globalization — the “dissonant landscape of accelerated globalization”, he claims, gave postmodernism “a chance to globalize itself.” Here Moraru sees the “cosmodern imaginary” as the extension of the ethical and relational impetus in much recent philosophy, theory and imaginative literature *across* cultures, globally. Cosmodernism, as the “cultural logic of late globalization,” comprises in Moraru’s controversial account all the forms of dialogue and interaction among cultures, all the varieties of *call-and-response*, that the hyper networked condition of the turn of the millennium makes possible.

In these ways all three chapters attempt the task of reconstructing forward, as it were, from the 90s, but they inevitably look backward too, toward an interregnum which defines the contemporaneities of a new millennium. From this double perspective, does

1989-2001 constitute a break, signalling the onset of a new period — perhaps the long-awaited *post*-postmodernism, its hour come round at last — or does it constitute a period in itself? The answer of course is both and neither.

Notes

¹ See Raymond Federman, *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

² See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

³ See Andrew Hoberek, “The Novel after David Foster Wallace,” *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 211-21.