

Whatever Happened to Postmodernism? (2016)

Alan Kirby wrote about the death of Postmodernism as early as 2006. Kirby stated that Postmodernism was still alive in university libraries, but dead outside them. Now I can declare that it is dead in the academic library too.

I checked some statistics this week, a little job I'd been meaning to do for some time. I found that the word 'postmodern' rose steadily from 1972, peaking at around 1990, before waning as gradually as it rose. References to 'postmodern' stutter after 2008 and then fall off to almost nothing in 2016 (see Appendices). Now, in late 2016, it is dead in the university.

Poetically, the top result of my university library search for 'postmodern' is the 2016 *Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*. What we are dealing with here, what I can see on the graphs, is a 'geist bubble'. A zeitgeist that rose, trembled and then popped completely leaving only a damp circle.

Initially, I used Google Ngrams to map this curve from 1970 to 2008. Anyone can do this online. However, I was much more curious to see what happened to the discourses of Postmodernism after 2008, but the public Google Ngrams only cover up to and including 2008. I then switched to the library stats at the two main universities I am affiliated to, to check this part of the curve. A combined search for '(postmodern) AND (postmodernity) AND (postmodernism)' yields a graph that also tallies with the Google Ngrams.

The end of this bubble sees Postmodernism utterly collapse as an academic discourse. Hegel's idea that live history passes into system has often been applied to the processes of Postmodernism, but Postmodernism itself is ultimately as culpable to Hegelian 'aufheben' as any historical discourse. 'The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature'. Here we are.

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Guidance for Citations

Hanson (2016) 'Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?' a Working Paper, from drsteviehanson.wordpress.com/wp/

I also began to see, in this geist bubble, from years of teaching the subject, the different phases of Postmodernity, in statistical data that I had only previously tracked through my reading. I began to speculatively apply these phases to the graph curve.

First comes the 'avant garde phase', 1972-1985, which matches Charles Jencks' assertion that Postmodernity begins at the dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis, on March 16, 1972. Mass planning is dead. Modernism is over. This phase is also characterised by events such as the New Spirit in Painting Exhibition of 1981, where Modernism no longer fits as a term and so new ways of explaining fragmentary approaches are suddenly required.

We then see Postmodernism as a 'rising discourse', 1986-1996, a period coinciding with the Big Bang of financial markets in the UK. Postmodernism moves away from its avant garde phase, as those initial experiments are used as resources by consumer capital, buoyed up with cheap credit for both producers and consumers.

Here, the preparatory avant garde archive effectively becomes an unwanted but intensive R&D exercise that can be used by consumer capitalism. The same thing happens with outmoded military technologies, the radio, the internet.

Next, we hit the millennial peak, 1999-2000, which sees Postmodernism as a new kind of orthodoxy. A cipher moment for this period might be the appearance of the term on an episode of The Simpsons in 2001. Then we see it as a gradually waning discourse in 2004-2006.

What follows is what I have called a 'Publisher's Interregnum', a stuttering, jagged rise and fall. Books sometimes take a whole year and even longer to move from an accepted manuscript to the library shelves. This, I think, explains the gap after 2008, before we can finally detect how Postmodernism passes from a live discourse to a completely historical one. Because of this I think it is perfectly legitimate to move the graph curve back a year or so at which point it will begin to rise more distinctly around 1972.

In 2008 the global financial crash occurs and by 2016 references to Postmodernism are back to nearly nothing. This final piece of data is the most interesting and important. I have long speculated that Postmodernism was produced and upheld by the huge credit bubble that begins around the late-1980s and only fully collapses around the turn of 2007-8.

Of course, I wondered what was coming after Postmodernism and as yet no big over-arching 'ism' has been declared. Ten years ago, Kirby ventured 'pseudo-modern', an internet-driven, infantile trance state. It is hard to deny. But I think now, in late-2016, as well as being able to see the death of Postmodernism, finally, statistically, in the university library as well as outside it, we can also see what is coming to replace it and it is much darker. Darker than even the narcissistic internet trance Kirby rightly diagnosed.

I can sense the objections already, that 'Hipster' is the continuation of Postmodernism, with its infantile picking up of old objects to be resold with a cool twist. But during the height of Postmodern Orthodoxy, people didn't go to gentrified ironic cafés en masse to put their windows through. A new name is required.

After-modern

Kirby's replacement term 'pseudo-modern' is interesting because a minor cult of New Modernism has been rising for some time. We have Owen Hatherley's *Militant Modernism* and the following popular books and the various Modernist Societies. But these good intentions arrive via a nostalgic rearward view, a turning away from the present into a past seen as more caring, something which actually characterises trauma. They project utopian flights forward and are often very critical of Postmodernism. But the New Modernists often present us with a contemporary collage of Modernism, a positive, celebratory version, without its horror, madness and war. All of these things are evangelistic and nostalgic at the same time.

Modernism seems to contain the idea that it is exceptional. That it is exempt from nostalgia. It isn't. Like St Paul on the road to Damascus, they have been struck by the revelation that Modernism has gone, but it is always with us. The New Moderns are Pauline. They wait, yet it has already arrived. It has been torn violently from us, that which we love. But wait, it is also all around us. This in fact shares with Derrida the wait for deferred meaning in 'Différance', something that sat very well with Postmodern discourses.

I could argue that once we had Postmodern, now we have neo or pseudomodern. That Postmodernism is dead and now we have some 'after-moderns'. But I am not going to argue that. I expected the Modernism Ngram sets to peak in the 1960s, but they don't. They peak around the same point as the Postmodern sets. Post-modernism does have to be discussed in relation to what it comes after, Modernism, but this cannot fully account for the unexpected data.

The reality is that we no longer have an over-arching explanatory framework. These intrinsically religious Militant Modernisms - and the diagnostic ones from Kirby - are in some ways being created to shield their users from this horrible truth. We are in a dead year, on the levelled floor of sheer grey ruin. It isn't 'year zero' because the beginning, as Gillian Rose explained, is swallowed by the fractured centre ground. In times like these, we find ourselves in Rose's Broken Middle.

So, to sketch this New Modernism in as a rising discourse would be wrong. Because the data doesn't exist at any useful scale yet and it is easy to distort the importance New Modernism has on the wider discursive cultural and media landscape.

Let us then turn to this wider landscape. John Hayes, the UK government transport minister has just condemned brutalist architecture. He argues that "it is "aesthetically worthless" and embodies a "cult of ugliness." In a speech he declared that the Government would be the 'vanguard of a renaissance' in architecture by 'rebuilding a Doric arch that stood outside London's Euston station before it was demolished in 1962.' He said the public 'crave harmony' in architecture and that 'people don't like 'modernist architecture'. I don't agree with him, but that isn't the point of this article.

Hayes neglected to explain that here also is a return to neoclassical power architecture. This statement was also made in the sheer vertiginous horror of a national housing crisis. People die in doorways and some doorways are being fitted with spikes to stop the homeless from sheltering there in the first place. The next announcement along declared that Buckingham Palace will be given a £369m refit.

The New Dark

The declaration of 'pseudo-modernism' or New Modernism as a replacement for Postmodernism is simply not strong enough. Kirby's characterisation of pseudo-modernism's effects on the subject are real. But further work needs to be done on contradictions such as the building of a Doric arch in a time of unnecessary human abjection.

These contradictions are dialectical. Might I suggest that we begin again with 'The New Dark'. Under it are an array of terms such as 'Dialectic', 'Fascist', 'Slum', 'Exploitation', 'Surplus' and 'Class War'.

People like Hayes will dictate what your environment looks like, not New Modernism. The aesthetics of Modernism, like the gloss of Postmodernism or Political Correctness, arrive without any guarantees. The Doric arch contains dialectical tensions within itself, that can and probably will explode it. Ideologically, the adoption of the classical style presented early Christian society with a problem, that of assimilating essentially pagan representations. Because those fluted columns come from pagan Greek temples such as The Acropolis.

This was problem was overcome, the process of transition from Pagan to Christian symbolism was then encoded in neoclassicism as a triumph in itself. Later, this congealed into neoclassicism as the default architecture of power. A fluted column as a cipher for hundreds of years of rule over the masses under whichever orthodoxy happens to be prevalent.

This is the Neoclassicism that is set to return in the UK, alongside the continuing global rightward political shift. Can we declare that the one remaining monotheism of Capitalism equally has no trouble assimilating a modernist aesthetic with a socialist appearance into itself? I think so. In the Financial Times there are 'modernist heritage' articles. The prices of the houses and art will fluctuate in response to them.

The truth is that there is a new kind of structuring under way that doesn't have a name yet. No academic will give it one. The new structures of feeling are rising from other condensations of what Spinoza called the 'Sad Passions.' They are extremely ugly. A new moment of 'conjuncture' is coming, a term coined by Stuart Hall, who in some ways I am glad is no longer here to witness it.

Quantitative research is not the point of this preliminary, speculative working paper, beyond its initial, illustrative use. This is a thumbnail sketch. A flag planted in the new desert for others to regroup around, as dissenters, if required. Much more detailed research into different data sets are needed to provide a richer picture. But what is clear is that Postmodernism as a discourse has waned since the turn of the millenium and then sharply collapsed after 2008, and that Modernism can't be explained as simply a discourse that rides along with Postmodernism. However, it is a rising discourse again, albeit a nostalgic one.

We knew in our bones that Postmodernism was dead, but now we have the final affirmative absence of a pulse. The other thing we now have that Kirby didn't, when he made the call in 2006, is this sense of what is coming. But what is coming is The New We Do Not Know What. The Neunknown, The Pseudovoid, and it is not 'sublime' because there is absolutely no beauty in it.

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Fig.1: Google Ngram; 1970-2008

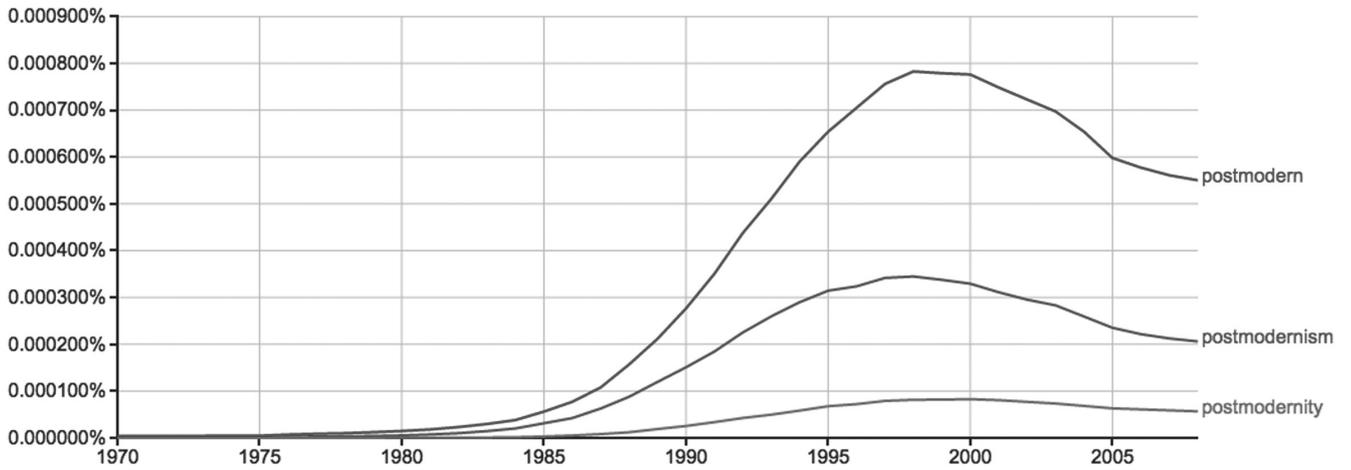
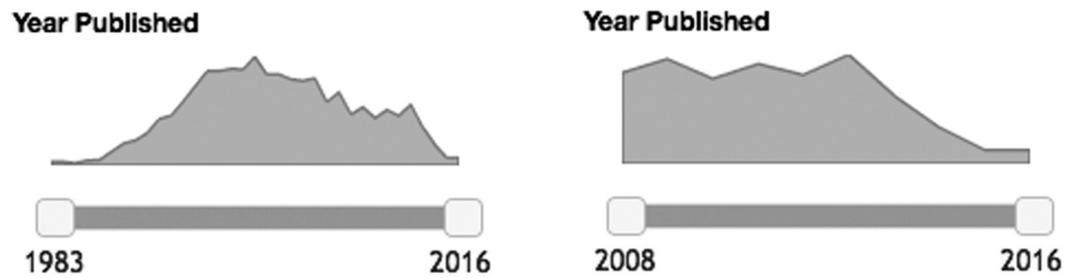
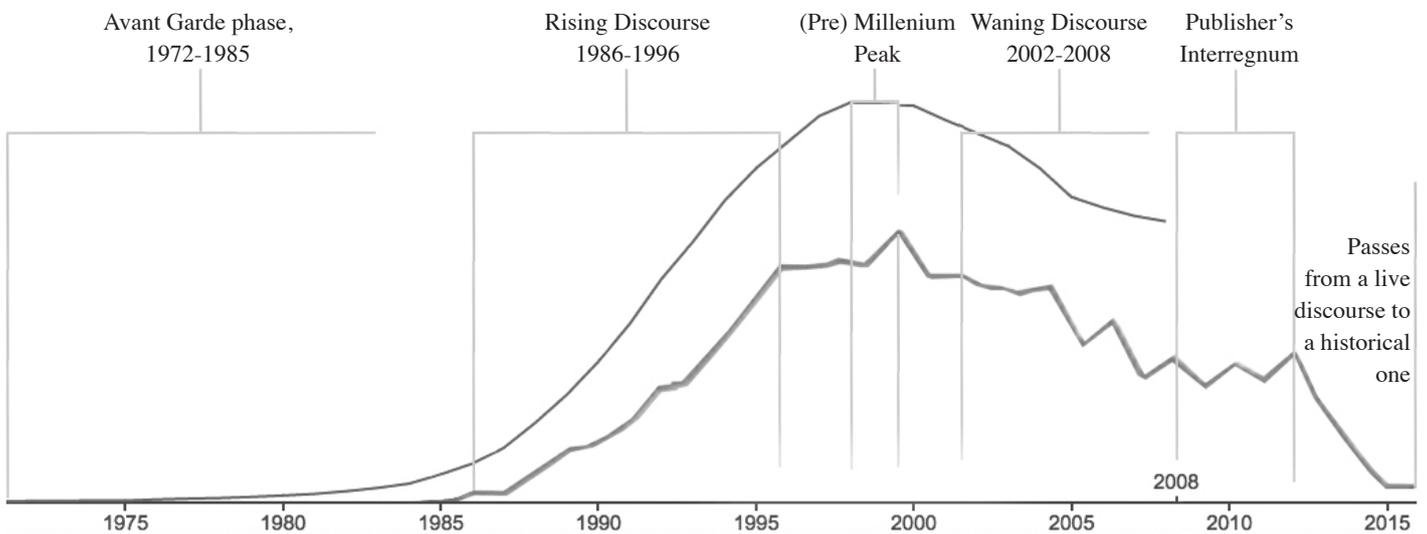


Fig.2: Library Data; 1983-2016



Combined search for the same terms: (postmodern) AND (postmodernity) AND (postmodernism)

Fig.3: Google/MMU combined with commentary; 1970-2016



Term: (postmodern)