"What was postmodernism?" asked the prescient John Frow in 1990. And as the twentieth century came to an end, he was likely not alone in wondering what had happened to the buzz-word of the last decades of the twentieth century. Despite valiant recent attempts to move "the postmodern critique forward" (Allan), to generalize it into a "theory of the contemporary" (Connor), or to pluralize it into the more descriptive postmodernisms (Altieri), the postmodern does indeed appear to be a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past. Now fully institutionalized, it has its canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories. We could even say it has its own publishing houses. (Routledge would be my candidate.) A Postmodernism for Beginners now exists; teachers' guides proliferate.

For decades now, diagnosticians have been pronouncing on its health, if not its demise, with some of the major players in the debate weighing in on the negative side: for people like Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris, postmodernism is certainly finished, even passé; indeed, for them it's a failure, an illusion. Perhaps we should just say: it's over. What we have witnessed in the last ten or fifteen years is not only the institutionalization of the postmodern, but its transformation into what Richard Terdiman would call a counter-discourse, and even more specifically, perhaps, the generic counter-discourse of the last years of the century, overlapping in its ends and means (but in no way interchangeable) with some theories of feminism and postcolonialism, as well as with queer, race and ethnicity theory. What these various forms of identity politics shared with the postmodern is a focus on difference and ex-centricity, an interest in the hybrid, the heterogeneous, and the local, and an interrogative and deconstructing mode of analysis. Each one of these, however, has had its own specific artistic and social history; each too has had a different politics. Postmodernism in certain art forms—say, fiction and photography—could be said to have been born of the particular confrontation between realist referentialism and modernist reflexivity, between the historical and the parodic, or the documentary and the intertextual. But this particular confrontation ended in a typically postmodern truce: no 'either/or' decision was required; the more inclusive 'both/and' prevailed.

That very inclusivity, however, became the mark of its potentially
complicitous critique and the beginning of the problems identity politics would have with the postmodern. Postmodernism was never simply a matter of style; it inevitably also involved the ideology of representation, including self-representation. It was over the issue of the access to and means of self-representation that the feminists and the postmodern first met in the 1980s; it would be over this same issue that the postmodern would make the acquaintance of the postcolonial (and others) in the 1990s. These fortuitous meetings worked not only to hone postmodern theory’s focus, but also to increase its reflexive awareness of its pragmatic limitations in actual interventionist arenas.

Even if the postmodern is over today, it is likely safe to say that it has persisted nonetheless as a “space for debate” (Malpas 1). This is true whether our focus is on postmodernism as an aesthetic phenomenon or on postmodernity as a general social condition. What studies of both of these angles of vision have shared is the impact of poststructuralist theory; in addition, everything from communications technology to multiculturalism inevitably spilled over from the general culture of postmodernity into the particulars of aesthetic postmodernism. Also, because of a mutual focus on ‘culture,’ it is always hard to draw the line between discussions of postmodernism in the arts and postmodernity in social or political terms.

In its early years, criticism on postmodernism seemed to focus primarily on fiction and architecture. The publication of Postmodern Genres, edited by Marjorie Perloff in 1989, may have acted as a kind of watershed for the broadening of interest that would culminate in later volumes such as Thomas Carmichael and Alison Lee’s Postmodern Times. But what was particularly striking, in retrospect, was the gradual increase in attention given to the performative. With the arrival of the work of Johannes Birringer and Philip Auslander, among others, the postmodern became a term with both resonance and relevance for drama, and in particular, for performance studies. From here the transition to postmodern media and film studies was an easy one to make. The study of popular culture in general came under the aegis of the postmodern, linked in many critics’ eyes to the increasing globalization we witnessed in the decade of the ‘90s. The rise of cultural studies during these same years has itself been seen as a postmodern phenomenon, and certainly as articulated by Stuart Hall, cultural studies shares the postmodern concern with representation and its politics. In Hall’s terms, representation plays a “constitutive, and not merely a reflexive” role in creating both group and individual history and identity, and has a “formative place” in political and social life for that reason (443).

It would likely be no exaggeration to say that, like all art forms (both ‘high’ and popular), all academic disciplines—from philosophy to sociology, from musicology to art history—have engaged in some way in
the postmodern debates in recent years. Even religious studies felt the impact of postmodern theory on its modes of criticism (see Adam); but, even more obviously, it saw the postmodern as a new age, a new way of living life (e.g., Breech; King). This is where postmodernism shifted to postmodernity. The work of Mark Poster and, before him, David Harvey, continued the moving of the debates into a wider social and political arena. New areas of study flourished, influenced to some extent by postmodern deconstructing impulses. Critical legal studies was perhaps one of the more contested of these areas. In the field of social theory, both Zygmunt Bauman and Jean Baudrillard continued both to explore new postmodern terrain and to have their own explorations expanded on by others. But when ideology critique became the subject of attention, the sense of the postmodern as something at once not new and yet now in the past, over, was strong. Many felt that postmodernity did not really mark a break with modernity, even if it did work to dissolve its foundations.

The political debates on postmodernity echo in many ways the very earliest debates between postmodernism and feminism, in part because one of the problems feminist theorists and practitioners had always had with the postmodern was with its complicitous critique, its deconstructing fence-sitting, its lack of a theory of agency—so crucial to the interventionist dimensions of working for change. Both feminism and postmodernism had been part of the same general crisis of cultural authority, as Craig Owens pointed out as early as 1983 (57), but not in quite the same ways. I do not mean to suggest that the debate between feminisms (in the plural and in all their complex variety) and postmodernism has in any way ended. But the possibility of a “postmodern feminism” (Hekman) or even a “lesbian postmodern” (Doan) was at last entertained, in part thanks to the important role of the work of Judith Butler in further legitimizing the role of parody in subverting and displacing discourses that create restrictive norms of gender identity.

Despite this continuing debate with various kinds of feminism, what the final years of the century brought to the fore was how much both postmodern theory and practice had remained caught in that earlier paradigm of not only maleness but American-ness. Sure, there were a few Europeans, Latin Americans, and even Canadians entering the fray, and some of us wanted to argue that we could not recognize a postmodernism that excluded, even by implication, non-American writers like Angela Carter, Umberto Eco, Christa Wolf, Patrick Süskind, Gabriel García Márquez, Manuel Puig, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Atwood—just to begin what could be a long list of fiction writers. The other problem with the dominance of American theorists of the postmodern was that it meant that a decentered phenomenon was effectively being theorized from the center. In Fredric Jameson's
influential, if rather imperializing, words, “The whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (Postmodernism 5). As a Canadian, I have had to become accustomed to having our nation referred to (in culturally defined, Wallersteinian terms) as the “semi-periphery of the American core” (Jameson, in Stephanson 64). Nevertheless, that peripheral—and, in national (economic and cultural) terms, complicitous—position has always seemed to me like a potentially good political vantage point from which to theorize a cultural enterprise like the postmodern that both participated in and yet still wanted to critique, among other things, the dominant capitalist culture of the United States.

But the postmodern was not only constructed as (and by) the male and the American; it was also predominantly white. It is not surprising, then, that an African American like bell hooks might find postmodern theory’s accounts of difference and otherness rather abstract (30-31). Bodies engage in daily human struggles, even if it can be argued that they are constructed across postmodern ideas of identity and difference (Bhabha 1-2). As Homi Bhabha has argued, the ‘post’ in postmodernism can potentially mean ‘beyond,’ thus creating a new space for negotiating both identity and difference (4-5). Or, I would prefer to argue, this is what the postmodern learned from one of the most important of the acquaintances it made in the 1990s. The meeting with the postcolonial was as momentous as that encounter in the 1980s with feminism, but in this case, perhaps even more confrontational because of the complicated politics of historiography—and the relation of historical memory to political action.

The more general issue of political efficacy surfaced early in the theorizing of the postmodern, most often provoked by the use of irony as a discursive strategy. For some, the irony of postmodern historiographic texts was what saved them from falling into a kind of sanitizing nostalgia to which some versions of antiquarian historicism certainly can fall prey. Where Jameson perceived irony as trivializing historical representation, I continue to see it as offering a critical edge to ward off precisely the debilitating nostalgia Jameson rightly locates in certain “fashion-plate historicist films” (Signatures xvii). But as Anne Friedberg has pointed out, what Jameson is really protesting in these films when he laments the “enfeeblement of historicity” (Postmodernism 130) is not nostalgic postmodernism at all but the distanced relation of every film from its historical referent (427). In other words, at least in this case, it is the medium itself and not the postmodern that gives the illusion of a “perpetual present interminably recycled” (Friedberg 427).

Nostalgia, insist others, really was the postmodern sign of the fin de
Despite the temptation of easy comparison that beset us all with the millennium, I now think that the end of the twentieth century actually bore little relation to the end of the one before it. Yes, the two had common doubts about progress, shared worries over political instability and social inequality, and comparable fears about disruptive change (Lowenthal 394-96), but so did many mid-centuries too. Nostalgia was an obvious consequence of the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle panic, as "manifest in idealizations of rural life, in vernacular-revival architecture, in arts-and-crafts movements, and in a surge of preservation activity" (Lowenthal 396). If the urge at that time was to turn nostalgically to the historical novels of Walter Scott and to Gothic Revival architecture, the cultural tendency at the end of the twentieth century also seemed to be to look back—but this time with irony—as in the historiographic metafictions of Timothy Findley or Salman Rushdie, or in the provocative architecture of Bruce Kuwabara or Frank Gehry. Gone was the earlier sense of the belatedness of the present vis-à-vis the past; the act of ironizing worked to undermine modernist notions of originality, authenticity, and the burden of the past (all so central to Jameson's theorizing), even as it acknowledged their continuing (but not paralyzing) historical validity as both aesthetic and 'worldly' concerns. Parody, postmodernism taught, can historicize as it contextualizes and recontextualizes.

It was here, however, that the postmodern overlapped with the ironic and reflexive cultural phenomenon of camp. Pamela Robertson admits that camp is nostalgic, but only insofar as it is also "a critical recognition of the temptation to nostalgia, rendering both the object and the nostalgia outmoded through an ironic, laughing distanciation" (267). To other theorists, camp actually perverts nostalgia to its own ironic ends. While accepting the oppositional value of this act, most agree with Andrew Ross and must address the political possibility of complicity; such is the danger inherent in postmodern practices. Yet Laura Doan has contested the necessity of falling into this danger, as indeed had other feminist theorists before her, pointing out that the postmodern had already offered lesbian theorists and artists "multiple strategies of resistance" (xi)—such as "self-reflexivity, ambivalence, contradiction, subversion, and the parodic" (x) in its "valorization of difference, sexual plurality, and gender blurrings/blendings" (x).

It is interesting that Doan deliberately uses the term 'lesbian' and not 'queer'—as one might expect in a discussion of the postmodern, since it has most often been queer theory/practice and postmodernism that have been seen as sharing ends and means. Both are based in poststructuralist theory; both use irony and parody in their artistic practices. Of course, the larger issue here that is of relevance to the final years of postmodernism is the distinction between the politics of gay and lesbian perspectives and the
politics of queer theory. Despite their similar challenge to the boundaries of normative heterosexuality, their differences surface in their attitude to power and their strategies for social change (Bredbeck 478). Gay and lesbian politics have involved an activist, interventionist dimension, in part enabled by feminism as a program of both social change and cultural theory (Bredbeck 474), in part provoked by a need to mobilize when AIDS appeared on the scene; queer politics have, instead, meant enacting “a constructivist model of identity, framing both sex and gender, against essentializing approaches as results of ideological interpellation” and most definitely not eschewing irony in the process (Cleto 14).

The trickiness of the politics of postmodernism did not only lie in its use of irony, however; it was also related to the broader issue of textualization. The negative argument was always that the self-consciously textual cannot “act” in the world, that is, it is fundamentally different from what Edward Said calls the “worldly.” The positive view was that the inscribing/undermining postmodern was self-reflexive and parodic in its reappropriation of existing meanings and its putting them to new and politicized uses, thereby allowing them to remain accessible and familiar—and powerful in a worldly way. This is one of the paradoxical ways in which, to borrow Jane Tompkins’ words, “literature has power in the world” and “connects to the beliefs and attitudes” of readers (xiv). But it is a measure of the strength of the theoretical denunciation of the postmodern as ahistorical and unconnected to the ‘world’ (by Jameson, but also by many others) that this paradoxically worldly textual dimension—of actual postmodern works of art—has remained understudied. Yet, it was precisely the lack of fit between this kind of anti-worldly theory and very worldly artistic practice that in fact drove me (and others) to write about postmodernism in the first place.

But it’s all over now—even if the postmodern shadow will be a long one. It seems to me that our concepts of both textuality and worldliness are in the process of changing—likely forever. Even before the new century began, we watched electronic technology and globalization transform how we experience the language we use and the social world in which we live. For many, these changes are simply further manifestations of postmodernity. But what if we considered these as the first signs of what has come after the postmodern? The intertextual, interactive aesthetic suggested by hypertextuality is related to the postmodern, to be sure, but is it the same thing? What if postmodern parody was merely the preparatory step to a ‘Net’ aesthetic, utopianly defined as a “non-linear, multivocal, open, nonhierarchical aesthetic involving active encounters” (Odin 599)?

The postmodern has left us with many questions, and I am convinced that the answers we’ll come up with will have profound political impli-
cations for both the textual and the worldly dimensions of our culture in the future. The postmodern moment has passed, even if some of its discursive strategies and most of its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempt to chart cultural change and continuity. Post-postmodernism needs its own label. Over to YOU.

Works Cited


