



Introduction: After Postmodernism

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The essays in this issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature* propose new models for understanding contemporary fiction in the wake of postmodernism's waning influence. By now, as Jeremy Green notes, declarations of postmodernism's demise have become a critical commonplace (19–24). The intellectual historian Minsoo Kang provides a usefully succinct example, dating “the death knell of postmodernism in the US” on “June 18, 1993,” the date that the John McTiernan–directed Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *The Last Action Hero* brought “the standard [postmodern] devices of self-reference, ironic satire, and playing with multiple levels of reality” to the multiplex. “[I]n the US,” Kang wryly notes, “there’s no surer sign of an intellectual idea’s final demise than its total appropriation by mass culture.” In this formulation, postmodernism was done in by its own success. Postmodern writers had enjoyed a notorious and wild ride of radical challenge to institutionalized art and its generic categories in the 1970s and 1980s, but their ironic, skeptical, and knowing (yet celebratory) juxtapositions of high and low, and their rejection of objective (or political) reality as a significant object or limit for representation, no longer worked by the 1990s. Mass culture itself had appropriated the aesthetics of postmodernism, which—now playing monotonously on everyone’s television and computer screens—turned out to be as reproducible as its creators had contemptuously said all previous art was.

At least that’s one way to tell the story. But while there are good reasons, as the contributors to this issue show, for arguing that contemporary fiction is no longer adequately described as postmodern, this particular narrative of postmodernism’s decline has three interrelated problems. First and perhaps most obviously, it perpetuates a hierarchical view of culture that confuses aesthetic questions about literary form with sociological

ones about the constituencies for such form. This tendency to locate postmodernism's decline not in the waning of its forms but in their successful cultural diffusion points to a second problem with this narrative: its reproduction of the characteristically modernist investment—by and large carried over into high postmodernism—in difficult formal innovation as the defining characteristic of serious literature (Steiner 427–28). This is not to condemn formally challenging fiction in the name of some transparent realism, as Tom Wolfe, Dale Peck, and Jonathan Franzen have done,¹ but rather to criticize the elision of a certain modernist brand of self-conscious technical innovation with literary form in general. Wolfe, Peck, and Franzen ironically reproduce this elision in their own understanding of realism as opposed to, rather than a product of, authors' formal choices. Moreover, as I will suggest below, their polemics—while interesting as a symptom of postmodernism's waning influence—also participate in the inherently progressive and conflictual understanding of literary history that is the third problem with our story of postmodernism's decline. Although these authors champion a premodernist realism, that is, they evince a modernist understanding of literary change as grounded in periods of sweeping innovation that set aside their now-outmoded predecessors. While this model of literary history has been carried over into and codified in postmodernism, it in fact obscures the messy circumstances of postmodernism's own emergence and the parallels between this process and the contemporary state of fiction.

Kang, for instance, sees the current post-postmodern period of becalmed anticipation or “lull” as radically different from earlier periods of Western intellectual history characterized by intense conflict between dominant and emergent paradigms. But this assessment, while having some purchase in the field of cultural theory that spurs Kang's remarks, mischaracterizes the history of post-World War II American fiction. The current state of such fiction—in which postmodernism in the strong sense constitutes just one, no longer particularly privileged stylistic option among many—in fact resembles nothing so much as the state that followed the triumphant years of modernism. While American fiction after 1945 had clearly departed from the modernist path (unlike painting, where abstract expressionism constituted an Americanized extension of the modernist revolution), neither did it offer a clear alternative to modernism. As the essays that Marcus Klein collects in his 1969 volume *The American Novel Since World War II* suggest, critics in this period were

acutely concerned with the waning of modernism, which like postmodernism today had become institutionalized and routinized (albeit not in mass culture but in the still partly autonomous realm of the university). But these critics had not yet distinguished postmodernism from competing styles or identified it as the dominant mode of serious fiction. It is true, for instance, that Irving Howe uses the scare-quoted term “postmodern” in the 1959 essay included in Klein’s collection (137). But for Howe the postmodern remains a temporal rather than a formal category: he defines it with reference to an external condition (the rise of “mass society” [130] and the disappearance of the “fixed social categories” [137] upon which modernism battered), and he includes in his account authors (Bernard Malamud, J. D. Salinger, Saul Bellow) whose work we would now no longer consider postmodern. It is only toward the end of Klein’s anthology, and the period that it covers, that something like what we consider to be postmodernism comes into view, albeit under other names such as black humor (Feldman). And even the final essay in the volume, John Barth’s 1967 “The Literature of Exhaustion,” has—despite its status as a postmodern manifesto—more to say about Jorge Luis Borges than any of Barth’s contemporaries. Perhaps most tellingly, Thomas Pynchon gets only three entries in Klein’s index, compared to Bellow’s 28. Similarly, Tony Tanner’s classic 1971 study of contemporary American fiction *City of Words* gives authors like Pynchon and William Burroughs more or less equal space alongside such fifties stalwarts as Bellow, Malamud, and Ralph Ellison (although Tanner includes a speculative conclusion citing William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, and Richard Brautigan as examples of “how American fiction has moved, and is moving” [393]).

Like the narrative cinema that established itself over its rivals in the early twentieth century, though, postmodernism subsequently achieved a level of cultural hegemony that conferred upon it a retrospective inevitability. Beginning with Leslie Fiedler’s and Ihab Hassan’s early efforts to devise, in Fiedler’s 1970 words, “a Post-Modernist criticism appropriate to Post-Modernist fiction and verse” (271), postmodernism was rapidly institutionalized in journals like *Boundary 2* and in important studies by Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, and others.² This is not to suggest that postmodernism was merely a critical fiction. Authors like Barth, Burroughs, and Gaddis were clearly producing recognizably postmodern texts in the 1950s, and postmodernism’s prominence in the 1970s and 1980s was visible not only in syllabuses and academic jour-

nals but also, for instance, in the postmodern turn taken by a decidedly nonacademic author like Philip Roth. Even at its high point, however, postmodernism—and in particular the form of postmodernism defined around self-conscious literary experimentalism—was not the only or even always the dominant player on the literary field. In 1974, a year after the publication of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the original incarnation of the group that now calls itself Fiction Collective Two was founded to provide a venue for authors whose stylistic complexity even then made it hard for them to find commercial publishers.³ And Wendy Steiner has argued that this period in American literary history is in fact best understood not as purely postmodern but as characterized by the coexistence and frequent commingling of high postmodernist experimentalism, traditional realism, and an autobiographical strain related to both women's writing and the memoir (528–29, *passim*).⁴

By this point, I might seem to have undercut this issue's premise by invalidating any basis for distinguishing between contemporary fiction and that of the so-called postmodern period. For one thing, postmodern techniques—even if they no longer play quite the dominant role they once did—have hardly disappeared from contemporary fiction. Green makes a strong case for their ongoing relevance, which is also visible in the continued prominence of authors like Pynchon and DeLillo and the work of younger figures like David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and the writers associated with *McSweeney's*. Indeed, despite Franzen's antipostmodern polemics, his own writing continues to partake of a DeLilloesque "language of smart commentary" (Wood 208) that, we might speculate in the wake of his well-publicized contretemps with Oprah Winfrey, functions to offset the disturbingly feminizing implications of his turn to domestic fiction.⁵ Moreover, the heterogeneity of contemporary fiction has its own analogues in the postmodern era: for the middle-class realism of Susan Choi and Jhumpa Lahiri, the books of John Updike; for the comic-book magical realism of Jonathan Lethem and Michael Chabon, the more traditional version practiced by Toni Morrison; for the picaresques of Han Ong, Jonathan Safran Froer, and Benjamin Kunkel, those of Saul Bellow. Given this, one might feel compelled to say that either fiction was never postmodern—the nominalist position—or it remains postmodern, in Fredric Jameson's sense that "the play of random stylistic allusion" (*Postmodernism* 18) signals the triumph of pastiche and the "disappearance of the historical referent" (25) central to postmodern

culture.⁶ Crucially, Jameson rejects what he calls “merely stylistic” (*Postmodernism* 45) descriptions of postmodernism in favor of an account that escapes postmodernism’s own predilection

For breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the “When-it-all-changed,” as [William] Gibson puts it, or better still, for shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change. (*Postmodernism* ix; Jameson’s italics)⁷

In this regard, both the antipostmodern polemics of Wolfe et al. and the declarations of postmodernism’s end like Kang’s are, ironically, fundamentally postmodern gestures.⁸ Meanwhile, the transformation of capitalism that Jameson describes has, if anything, accelerated since the 1980s, and many of the qualities that he attributes to postmodern culture—the increasing integration of “aesthetic production . . . into commodity production generally” (*Postmodernism* 4), the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (18), the erosion of positions from which to resist or even interpret the dominant culture—seem no less relevant than when he first formulated them.

Yet the “merely stylistic” remains crucially important to those of us who teach and write about contemporary fiction and who face a situation in which (as Rachel Adams suggests in her essay in this issue) the postmodern style epitomized by Pynchon no longer provides a self-evident organizing principle for recent writing. Moreover, if we believe that stylistic shifts in works of literature presage, rather than merely symptomatize, larger cultural changes, then such shifts may have relevance beyond the aesthetic realm. The pleasure and the danger alike of thinking about contemporary literature lie in the tenuous nature of any hypotheses we might put forward—a fact that we should keep in mind but that should not stop us from proceeding.

Any effort to distinguish post-postmodern trends must, however, adduce specific aspects of fictional form that both occur across a range of contemporary writing and depart in some way from postmodern norms. One such formal feature occurs in the context of what might at first seem like evidence for postmodernism’s ongoing influence: the blurring of high and mass culture central, for instance, to Chabon and Lethem’s fascination with comic books or, from the other direction, the rise of the graphic novel to the status of a serious literary mode. But while

postmodernism embraced popular forms in ways that modernism never did, there is a difference between the transitional but still self-consciously “literary” appropriation of popular genres in the work of authors like Barth and Pynchon (and still relevant for younger writers like Colson Whitehead and Michael Cunningham) and a newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves. Lethem, for instance, has with his 2003 *The Fortress of Solitude* (the same novel that not uncoincidentally exemplifies what I have called his comic-book magical realism) definitively crossed the divide from genre writer to serious artist, bringing earlier works like *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) along with him. And certain science fiction authors—Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, William Gibson, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Neal Stephenson among them—increasingly garner critical attention of the sort that Richard Ohmann once described as conferring “pre-canonical” (398n2) status. Jameson himself has hinted that Robinson’s Mars trilogy (1992–1996) limns an emergent post-postmodern literary form (“If I find”).⁹ The graphic novel likewise represents a case of a formerly disreputable medium that suddenly finds itself elevated to the status of literature (an uneven transition registered, among other places, in contemporary graphic fiction’s tendency to insist on its own shameful relationship to established cultural forms [Worden 894–901, *passim*]).

From the opposite side of the cultural divide, authors with recognized high-cultural cachet now increasingly make forays into popular genres: the paperback romance in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Holder of the World* (1993); the historical thriller à la Caleb Carr in E. L. Doctorow’s *The Waterworks* (1996); the contemporary crime thriller in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* (2005); and the political potboiler in John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006). Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004)—which turns, in the wake of Roth’s elevation to the status of the only working fiction writer to merit a Library of America edition, to the science fictional sub-genre of the alternate history—provides a concrete example of how such recent deployments of genre fiction depart from high postmodernism’s use of mass cultural materials. Rather than incorporating genre elements into a nonrealistic, fragmented, and metadiscursive narrative, as Pynchon does with the political conspiracy in *The Crying of Lot 49* or Barth with the sentient supercomputer in *Giles Goat-Boy* (both 1966), Roth adopts the science fiction plot wholesale as a framing device for a fundamentally realistic story of his family as they might have been under different his-

torical circumstances. The “plot” of his title, that is, links the conspiracy in the novel to the pressure that the genre mode exerts on it at the level of form. Here it’s worth noting that in “The Story Behind ‘The Plot Against America’” Roth claims that “I had no literary models for reimagining the historical past” (10). Whether he speaks out of ignorance or disingenuousness (does, for instance, “literary” mean something more exclusive than just “in books?”), he retains enough of a residual commitment to the distinction between serious and genre fiction to either not know about or actively disavow the connection between his book and the huge corpus of science fiction novels—Ward Moore’s *Bring the Jubilee* (1952), Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Keith Roberts’s *Pavane* (1968), among others—that anticipate *Plot*. The point here is that Pynchon or Barth wouldn’t have to disavow their borrowings from science fiction, since these borrowings are so clearly subsumed into a properly “literary” framework.

We can see in this example a continuity with the postmodern project as it works its way back and forth between the production and criticism of fiction: postmodern fiction’s openness to mass culture begets the culturalist turn in criticism which begets not only the opening of the canon but also the expansion of what counts as literature in the present. Among younger authors this shift can be quite self-conscious. Thus Michael Chabon argues—at the same time that his fiction progresses from the early novels of alienated middle-class life through the transitional *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001) to *The Final Solution* (2005), a novella featuring an unnamed but recognizable Sherlock Holmes, and his own alternate history *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007)—that serious authors should return to genre fiction as an antidote to the dominance of “the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story” (6), a form he understands not as essentially literary but as itself a genre contingently elevated to high cultural status. Chabon’s trajectory suggests the way in which a movement within postmodernism has produced a potentially different formal possibility, even as it militates against thinking of this stylistic shift in epochal terms, as a dramatic break from everything that has come before. If focusing on the “merely stylistic” has any value it is precisely here, in reminding us that cultural sea changes only retroactively take the form of dramatic paradigm shifts, and appear first in processes of gradual, uneven, cellular transformation. This requires those of us interested in what follows postmodernism to look backward

as well as forward, to consider what might have been taking place under our noses for some time. If the embrace of generic forms is in fact symptomatic, for instance, then what do we make of an author like Joyce Carol Oates, who has been pursuing it on and off throughout her career (and directly under her pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly)? Does this mean that Oates, so far from pursuing a residual form of realism alongside the postmodernism whose career roughly parallels her own, was in fact pioneering an emergent form to which authors like Roth and Chabon have come only lately? Green points out that postmodernism retroactively transformed our understanding of modernism (22); the same will inevitably be true of whatever succeeds postmodernism.

I have focused on the changing status of genre fiction not because it is the only or even necessarily the most important shift in recent fiction (it tells us little, for instance, about Lahiri's traditional, highly crafted prose), but because in its very concreteness it exemplifies the uneven transformations taking place in the fictional field. One might point to other such shifts, and indeed the contributors to this volume do. If, as I have already suggested, American fiction has entered a phase of as-yet-uncategorized diversity similar to the one that prevailed following World War II, then the proper response to this shift consists neither of assertions of postmodernism's continued relevance nor of sweeping declarations of a potential successor but rather of concrete analyses of literary form and the historical conditions that shape it. Mark McGurl's recent essay "The Program Era" provides a compelling example of such an approach applied to the grand arc of post-World War II fiction. McGurl argues that the rise of creative writing programs played an as-yet curiously underanalyzed role in shaping this fiction. As his essay makes clear, such an approach need not disavow questions of periodization: indeed, he provides a refreshingly novel account of the "metafictional reflexivity" (111) commonly associated with postmodernism by relating it to postwar fiction's "production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment." Likewise, he expands our understanding of what constitutes the main line of postwar fiction, provocatively linking the "high cultural pluralism" (117) of the multicultural tradition and the "technomodernism" of "writers like Powers, DeLillo, and Pynchon" (121) as twin products of the institutional pressures shaping the postwar academy (117-21). Of course, like any process of selection, McGurl's model leaves some things out. His account of postwar fiction, for instance, does not promise to say

much about the Beats, whose stylistic contribution to postwar letters Ann Douglas has stressed. So too, McGurl's account of "technicity" as a displaced form of ethnicity created in the juxtaposition of writing and science faculties (121–24) does much to explain the elevation of an author like Neal Stephenson, but it doesn't necessarily exhaust our understanding of genres now emerging into respectability from amateur or otherwise nonacademic subcultures—a phenomenon we might instead wish to trace back to the eminently nonacademic understanding of mental labor in the work of Philip K. Dick. And what of chick lit, a genre whose respectability remains questionable for reasons having to do with both gender and its proximity to consumer culture, but which itself identifies figures like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë as progenitors (Harzewski 41, Wells 48–49, Ferris) and in a work like Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996, 2001) offers up something like the new social novel that Franzen says he wants but can only imagine as the impossible restoration of an outmoded form?¹⁰ Such qualifications can only arise, however, in response to McGurl's argument, and in this respect his account of postwar fiction is far more productive than those that deploy *postmodernism* as a portmanteau term or a category into which all contemporary fiction must be made to fit by main force.

The contributors to this issue apply a similarly grounded approach to works of the last several decades. They discuss which features of social life they see as formative for contemporary American fiction and how they understand fiction as registering and displaying those determinate features. In short, they describe the books they teach and read and what vision of American social conditions they deduce from them. Their essays share many things in common, though in the context that I have sketched throughout this introduction two ideas in particular stand out. First, if contemporary fiction is indeed post-postmodern, this does not exemplify some singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural transformation—the search for which in fact constitutes a postmodern preoccupation—but grows out of a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts that in some cases reach back into the postmodern period and can now be understood in hindsight as intimations of a new order. And as a corollary, these shifts can be apprehended neither in wholly aesthetic nor wholly historical terms but only in the intersections of specific stylistic and historical phenomena. With these thoughts in mind, the current volume seeks not to offer some new and sweeping theory of the post-postmodern but rather to begin to as-

semble the kinds of concrete evidence for its existence that may someday make such a theory possible. Periodization is a valuable goal, but pursued properly, it is a long-term process that builds on rather than preempts such specifics. If we can initiate a conversation about contemporary fiction and what comes after postmodernism, we will have accomplished our goal.

Notes

1. In his 1989 *Harper's* essay "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast," Wolfe scolds his contemporaries for isolating themselves in sterile language games and giving up what he sees as the larger purpose of fiction: coordinating the flux and flow of contemporary urban experience in a new social realism. Meanwhile, in his frequently cited review of Rick Moody's 2002 memoir *The Black Veil*, Peck takes to task what he describes as the

bankrupt tradition . . . that began with the diarrheic flow of words that is *Ulysses*, continued on through the incomprehensible ramblings of late Faulkner and the sterile inventions of late Nabokov (two writers who more or less sold out their own early brilliance), and then burst into full, foul life in the ridiculous dithering of John Barth and John Hawkes and William Gaddis, the reductive cardboard constructions of Donald Barthelme, the word-by-word wasting of a talent as formidable as Thomas Pynchon's, and finally broke apart like a cracked sidewalk beneath the weight of the stupid—just plain stupid—tomes of Don DeLillo. (185)

And finally Franzen, who expressed nostalgia for "the social novel" in a controversial 1996 *Harper's* essay ("Perchance to Dream" 37), has more recently used an essay on Gaddis as a platform for arguing against what he sees as the cult of difficulty for its own sake represented by "Pynchon, DeLillo, Heller, Coover, Gaddis, Gass, Burroughs, Barth, Barthelme, Hannah, Hawkes, McElroy, and Elkin" ("Mr. Difficult" 246).

2. For an extended account of postmodernism's rise to critical prominence see Green 29–34.

3. See Jerome Klinkowitz and the other essays that appear along with his in the special issue of *Symploke* titled *Fiction's Present*.

4. Green criticizes Steiner for what he sees as an antiexperimentalist bias similar to the one that I argue characterizes the polemics of Wolfe, Peck, and Franzen (25–28), although Green's account of Steiner's essay misrepresents her claims on several fronts. He argues, for instance, that she sets up a simplified

“dichotomy between metafictionists and realists” (28), an assertion that ignores her actual tripartite division of contemporary fictional strands. He contends, furthermore, that “This opposition disregards the antirealism or postmodernism of minority authors” (28), a claim belied by her argument that Morrison’s *Beloved* “mixes novelistic norms as violently as Don DeLillo in *White Noise*, mingling the ghost tale with the historical novel, dream narrative, and metatextory” (Steiner 516). Steiner’s reading of *Beloved* in fact instances her compelling description of the second-generation postmodernists of the 1980s (Morrison, DeLillo, and in one of his many reinventions, Philip Roth) as characterized by their expert blending of the experimental, realist, and autobiographical strands.

5. For a thorough discussion of Franzen’s writing in the context of the Winfrey debacle see Green 79–116.

6. Arthur Danto provides a different account of postmodernism as characterized by stylistic heterogeneity. Briefly, he argues that the history of Western painting up until about the mid-1960s goes through two phases, a realist or Vasarian one (after the Renaissance painter and biographer Giorgio Vasari) in which art is concerned with increasingly more exact approximations of visual experience, and a modernist or Greenbergian one (after Clement Greenberg) in which it self-consciously investigates its own conditions of production. With the Warholian revolution, however, art enters a phase “after the end of art” (12), which is to say after the end of singular, progressive narratives about art. In this “post-historical” period, which “is defined by the lack of a stylistic unity, or at least the kind of stylistic unity which can be elevated into a criterion and used as a basis for developing a recognitional capacity,” artists continue to work, but they are “liberated to do whatever they want to do” (125). In Danto’s chronology, postmodernism is not only “a certain style we can learn to recognize” (11) but also an overly broad periodizing term pressed into existence when it finally becomes clear—something that does not happen “until well into the seventies and eighties”—that the modernist project no longer adequately characterizes the range of contemporary art. Postmodernism is, in this second sense, something like the afterlife of an afterlife, which temporarily forestalls the realization that art production now proceeds in the absence of a single determinate narrative of what it should do. Contra Jameson’s stress on the ideological ramifications of heterogeneity in disabling analysis and judgment, Danto sees in this situation a kind of utopian foreshadowing of social diversity (125–28, *passim*)—a vision not entirely incompatible with Jameson’s, if we recall Jameson’s own insistence in his earlier essay “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” on the dialectical coexistence of utopian thought and ideology. While not unproblematically transferable to the case of fiction, Danto’s account interestingly parallels Steiner’s discussion of experimental postmodernism as an extension of modernism that became “a synecdoche for the whole period” (Steiner 428).

7. See also Green 19–24.

8. Kang's precise declaration of the time of postmodernism's expiration echoes, for instance, David Harvey's well-known statement placing "the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern [at] 3:32 p.m. on 15 July, 1972, when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis . . . was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed" (39). While Harvey locates the end of modernism in the destruction of a symbol of modern standardized architecture, and Kang the end of *postmodernism* in the mass diffusion of its worldview, this difference in the content of their statements obscures a more fundamental formal similarity: the urge to mark a shift in the way things are, or in the representation of the way things are, that postmodernism inherits from modernism (and in particular from modernism's characteristic nonfiction genre, the manifesto). It is, in this regard, fitting that many people attribute the use of Pruitt-Igoe as a periodizing marker to Harvey, even as he himself makes clear that he is citing the architectural historian Charles Jencks's earlier assertion (Jencks 9). And in fact both statements belong to a chain of periodizing claims reaching back at least to Virginia Woolf's 1924 pronouncement that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (4)—a statement that already, in the mid-1920s, demonstrates the "postmodern" fascination with the liminal event. The fact that postmodernism tends to reduce such declarations to the level of the gestural, to the content of a repetition compulsion, accounts for the anxiety of its own periodizing declarations, encoded among other places in the numerous ruminations on the derivative (post-something else) nature of its name.

Bill Brown's recent meditation on Jameson's theory of postmodernity, which opens:

When will we know that it was not the implosion of Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe complex in Saint Louis (15 July 1972) but, rather, the collapse of Yamasaki's World Trade Center in New York (11 Sept. 2001) that marked the advent of postmodernity, a postmodernity we've just begun to live? (734)

gestures toward this dynamic in what is arguably an effort to overload it and make it collapse of its own weight. Acknowledging the partial plausibility of claims—most notably Slavoj Žižek's—that the destruction of the twin towers marked the breakdown of the postmodern culture of the simulacrum, Brown nonetheless avers that "9/11 marks both a discontinuity and a significant continuity in the national and international landscape" (748n3) and suggests that the postmodern might best be thought of in terms that foreground its continual "reenactment" of such periodizing breaks and hence render ambiguous "the

relation between modernity and its others, what we call the pre- and postmodern" (735).

9. See also Jameson's discussion of Gibson ("Fear and Loathing"); Walter Benn Michaels's readings of Butler, Delany, Robinson, and Stephenson; and Mark McGurl's comments on Stephenson.

10. Bushnell's book, so far from prefiguring the formulas of the genre it helps inaugurate, is notoriously fragmented. Having famously begun as a series of sketches for the *New York Observer*, in which a first-person narrator details the experiences of a variety of New Yorkers (including an English journalist who serves partly as the narrator's doppelganger and partly as the classic narrative device of the outside observer), *Sex* gradually coalesces into a novel organized around a single character (Carrie Bradshaw) and her friends. But so far from constituting grounds for aesthetic failure, this aspect of the book conveys something of the eighteenth-century excitement of a literary form being fitted to a reality it is trying to encompass. And even with the dissatisfying new chapters appended to the book after the success of the television show, the 2001 edition still offers a conclusion that departs from the standard one invented by Charlotte Brontë: instead of "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 426), "Carrie is happily single" (Bushnell 243). For this account of Bushnell's book I am indebted to Michael Pfafsky, who taught me how to read and teach it in our Fall 2005 class Contemporary Fiction and the Publishing Industry.

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