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Evolution of Postmodernism from Genre to Mode: A Reading of Three American Postmodern Novels

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Abstract

This paper is an application of contemporary genre theory to two generations of American postmodern novelists -- Kurt Vonnegut as one of the early pioneers of American postmodernism and Don DeLillo and Bret Easton Ellis as the second generation of postmodern writers in America -- in order to better understand the contested category of literary postmodernism. The paper argues that between these three writers postmodernism evolves from functioning at the level of genre to the level of mode. In order to illustrate this thesis the most well known and representative novel of each of these three writers has been selected -- Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five, DeLillo's White Noise and Ellis' American Psycho.

Keywords: Genre theory; Mode; Postmodernism.

Introduction

Defining Genre and Mode

First let us try to define some of the terms that we will be using. It is easier to understand the difference between genre and mode using historical examples. Elegy, for example, in classical literature was any poem composed of elegiac distichs. It had a clearly defined formal structure. However since the 16th century it has come to mean a "poem of mourning for an individual or a lament for some tragic event" (Cuddon). The defining feature changed from formal to thematic. In the first sense Elegy is a genre while in the second sense it becomes a mode. Modes are used as adjectives while genres are not. Pastoral had specific generic features like the georgic or the eclogue, but used adjectivally, as a mode, it can be applied to any

genre that deals with idealised country life.

Another example would be that of the three most recurrent categories in Western literary theory since Aristotle -- epic, drama and lyric. These three terms, at different times, have been used as both genres and modes. Interestingly, as modes, they have also been theorised as philosophical systems. For example, for Hegel, "the epic mode is the vehicle of an objective disclosure of the exterior universe, and it corresponds to the childhood of human race; lyric is the subjective disclosure of the inner world of particularised individuals, and it has to do with the separation of the personal self from the community; and drama is the synthesis of the two, the objectification of subjectivities in dialogue and action" (cited in Frow 60). Here, used as mode, the three terms are larger than the individual genres of epic, drama and lyric proper. It is in this adjectival sense that genres become mode. Therefore we can speak of something like dramatic lyric (Browning's dramatic monologues) or dramatic epic (A Tale of Two Cities) or lyrical drama (The Tempest). Following John Frow we would like to define genre as a "specific organisation of texts with thematic, rhetoric and formal dimensions," (67) and mode as, "extensions of certain genres beyond specific and time-bound formal structures to a broader specification of 'tone' [...] modes therefore start their life as geres but over time take on a more general force which is detached from particular structural embodiments." (65).

Defining Postmodernism

Now let us come to postmodernism. The term has three derivatives -- postmodernity, postmodern and postmodernism. All are very interrelated terms and it is often counterproductive to quibble over their minor differences, but just to get it out of the way, postmodernity refers to a particular historical period, postmodern refers to the cultural styles, techniques or attitudes emerging out of those historical conditions and postmodernism refers to theoretical or philosophical account of both the historical as well as cultural aspects just mentioned. The term is very hard to define since it has a broad usage across a variety of disciplines. One way to look at it, in the realm of philosophy, is to see it as a coming to self-consciousness of modernity. As one critic has put it, "modern thought typically opposes the authority of tradition in the name of universal reason. Postmodernism begins with the insight that the sociohistorical context of tradition and its authority is inevitable, even in modernity. Modernity can no longer take itself for granted when it recognizes itself as a tradition that is opposed to traditions" (Cary). This coming to self-consciousness

of modernity is the moment of postmodern insight. It is the response to this insight, either by admitting the inevitability of irrationality or by locating diverse forms of rationality in various traditions, that constitutes postmodernism proper.

This narrative of postmodernism in philosophy cannot be applied as-it-is to postmodernism in literary and cultural realm, partly because modernism has a much narrower meaning in literary and art history than it does in philosophy and history of thought. Nevertheless these two usages of the term are also not entirely different. Self-consciousness remains the defining characteristic of literary postmodernism. A postmodern text is conscious of its status as a text and acknowledges its constructed nature by foregrounding its frames.

Postmodernism as Genre

Postmodernism, it would appear, resists generic classifications since it lays so much emphasis on formal experimentation. This is a misunderstanding which emerges partly from an older understanding of genre as a prescriptive taxonomy and thus a constraint on textual energy, and partly from confusing postmodernism with avant-garde. The generic features of postmodernism can easily be codified. At the heart of postmodern culture lies self-reflexivity or ironic knowingness (Nicol 13), with metafiction and intertextuality being some of the strategies used to represent this self-reflexivity in literary texts. Let us look at Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five, a well known postmodern text, and see how postmodernism is situated at the generic level.

Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five

The novel emerges from the author's own experiences in the second World War. He had witnessed the often underreported bombings of the East German city of Dresden by Allied forces. In the first chapter he tells us that he had thought, "it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen." But by the end of the chapter he confesses that the novel turned out to be so, "short and jumbled and jangled [...] because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead [..] Everything is supposed to be quiet after a massacre." And the novel indeed is very jumbled and jangled. It is about two incongruous events in the protagonist's life -- his experiences at Dresden and his kidnapping by aliens from the planet of Tralfamadore. Along with this, protagonist Billy Pilgrim also comes unstuck in time, meaning that he stops experiencing

time in a linear order and starts jumping back and forth to different periods of his life at random. This leads to a very convoluted narrative in which Billy's experience at war is continuously interrupted by his later life as well as by the time he spent at Tralfamadore. These jumps in time are sometimes very frequent and justify the author's blurb on the cover, "this is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore". This anti-realist narrative technique is further explained in the novel when Billy asks the Tralfamadorians about their novels. They say:

We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.

It is this experience of "all at once, and not one after the other," that the author seeks to recreate as we get to experience all the aspects of Billy's life almost simultaneously. There are also some hints in the novel to suggest that all this coming unstuck in time and being kidnapped by aliens is nothing but the deranged imagination of man traumatized by the war.

Non-linear narrative is a very common feature of the postmodern novel but it is neither unique nor essential to it. Modernist novel had already started drawing upon the non-linear subjective experience as opposed to the objective perspective of the realist novel. What makes this novel truly postmodern is its self-reflexivity. The first chapter is very important in this regard. It is basically about how the author came to write the novel. He tells us how he plans the novel on a roll of toilet paper in multicoloured pens, how he meets an old war friend in an attempt to recall some incidents, his conversation with his editor etc. He also tells us how he came upon the subtitle and the epigraph of the book. This entire chapter is therefore metafictional, which can be defined as fiction about fiction (or about the fictional/constructed nature of fiction). Chapter two begins with the story of Billy Pilgrim, whom we assume to be the authorial substitute because there is no mention of the author for a long time. This seems to cast a doubt over the metafictional nature of the narrative as the first chapter can now be explained away as a substitute preface. But in the third chapter, when we are being told of the death of an old colonel, we are hit with this line, "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare." These authorial intrusions then become frequent. We find the

author at the margins of the main events, often a part of the crowd. One particularly humorous intrusion occurs when everyone in the group but Billy suffer from diarrhea:

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.

This sudden breaking of frame is a common trope in postmodern novels. In his French Lieutenant's Woman John Fowles, after having spent twelve chapters portraying a detailed world in a realist style breaks the illusion by informing the reader that the story is all in his imagination. Similarly B.S. Johnson, near the end of his 1966 Albert Angelo, having begun in a conventional narrative style, "Albert lazed at his drawingboard before the great window. Nearly seven weeks' summer holiday lay ahead of him ..." breaks down, "--oh, fuck all this LYING!" (quoted in Nicol 22). This technique bares the mechanism of the novel and renders the text self-conscious. The novel is shown to be constructed rather than inscribed.

Another common feature of the postmodern novel is intertextuality. Modernist writers often also use an intertext, for example Homer's Odyssey was the intertext to Joyce's Ulysses. These intertexts served as key, often providing some sort of meaning or structure to the text. But postmodern texts offer the reader an abundance of intertextual references and illusions without any of them necessarily contributing to the meaning or understanding of the text. In this novel one of the main tasks for the author is to make sense of an event which is extremely devastating and entirely unnecessary. In the very beginning of the book the author's friend's wife compares the senselessness of the war and the immaturity of its participants to the Children's Crusade (a crusade in 13th century by tens of thousands of children, most of whom never reached their destination and were sold into slavery). The author then mentions a book about the crusade and cites a few paragraphs. He mentions many other books and historical documents, either about Dresden or about war in general, and cites passages from them. At one point he looks through the Bible, "for tales of great destruction," and cites the passage on destruction of Sodom and Gomorrahm. These intertexts not only help interpret the central event of the novel but also reveal its constructed nature by making overt the neighbouring discourses that go into the construction of any particular text.

We have done a standard generic analysis of this novel and shown how postmodernism functions here as a genre. Now let us take another novel which lacks all of these generic features and is still considered postmodern.

Postmodernism as Mode : DeLillo's *White Noise*

White Noise was first published in 1984. This novel lacks all the formal experimental techniques characteristic of previous generation of postmodern writers. It is a straightforward first person narrative of one year in the family life of a professor of Hitler studies in a small town college in America. The central plot event is a chemical spillage in a nearby area due to which all the residents of the town of Blacksmith have to evacuate their homes for nine days. It is not the formal features but the incidental details which make this novel postmodern. While in the previous example the constructed nature of the text was made evident by the use of formal techniques, here it is the constructed nature of the world that is being made evident through incidental details. The tone is set from the very first chapter of the novel where the narrator describes his house:

Babette and I and our children by previous marriages live at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines. There is an expressway beyond the backyard now, and at night as we settle into our brass bed the sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream.

The murmur of the expressway acts as a substitute for the apparently more real but absent murmur of the ravine. The world of White Noise is one of hyperreality. Two humourous incidents in particular stand out and drive this idea home. The first one is about a tourist destination called 'the most photographed barn in America' visited by the protagonist and his friend. They come across five signs announcing 'THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA' before they reach the site. At the site they find cars and tour buses and a special place designated for viewing and photographing filled with people carrying cameras; but no one sees the barn. The narrator's friend, a professor in culture studies, explains to the narrator:

No one sees the barn, [...] once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn. [...] We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura.

The viewers' response to the barn is conditioned by the signs surrounding it. A similar episode occurs when the narrator and his family have evacuated their homes and are staying in temporary camps. The rescuers come from a group called SIMUVAC which stands for simulated evacuation. When the narrator points out that the evacuation they are carrying out isn't simulated but real, he tells him that they'll be using the real event in order to rehearse the simulation. He further explains:

The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus which we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words we're forced to take our victims as we find them. We didn't get a jump on computer traffic. Suddenly it just spilled out, three-dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about.

Here it is not just that the real is mediated by its representation but is totally taken over by it. One of the narrator's daughter starts getting symptoms of the infection as they're described on the radio. But her symptoms keep on changing as the people on radio update their list of symptoms based on new findings. At one point the girl is told that she is running behind and ought to be throwing up instead of having sweaty palms.

This thesis of the real being replaced by its representations has commonly been put forward by theorists of postmodernism like Baudrillard. Other common ideas about postmodernism include the death of affect, intrusion of technology and media into the private lives of individuals, an overabundance of information, an ironic participation in popular culture and capitalist consumption etc. Novels like White Noise create what can be called a postmodern environment or mood. Postmodern here is an adjective describing contemporary reality, as understood not only in academic theories but also in the popular imagination. It is this environment that writers like DeLillo evoke in their novels. This is substantially different from a lot of major writers writing in the 50s and 60s who performed their postmodernism in the formal structure of their novels.

So far the distinction that we have been trying to create risks being reduced to a distinction between form and content. But this should not be the case. Just like generic features can also be thematic, mode can also function at the level of style. Let us take the example of another novel to prove this point.

Ellis' *American Psycho*

Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* was first published in 1991. It is written as a monologue of a Wall Street corporate executive Patrick Bateman, who also happens to be a serial killer. Unlike *White Noise* the novel does have some metafictional elements but they are barely noticeable. Bateman bases his and other people's self worth entirely on the products they use and the goods they consume. Consequently, whenever a character appears he

describes in great detail how they look and the clothes they are wearing. Here is one example:

Scott Montgomery walks over to our booth wearing a double-breasted navy blue blazer with mock-tortoiseshell buttons, a prewashed wrinkled-cotton striped dress shirt with red accent stitching, a red, white and blue fireworks-print silk tie by Hugo Boss and plum washed-wool trousers with a quadruple-pleated front and slashed pockets by Lazo. He's holding a glass of champagne and hands it to the girl he's with – definite model type, thin, okay tits, no ass, high heels – and she's wearing a wool-crepe skirt and a wool and cashmere velour jacket and draped over her arm is a wool and cashmere velour coat, all by Louis Dell'Olio. High-heeled shoes by Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. Sunglasses by Alain Mikli. Pressed-leather bag from Hermès.

This is not an exaggerated example, this style of describing characters continues throughout the novel. All this careful listing of different brands and attention to minute details produce an effect opposite to the realist technique of accumulation of details. These descriptions do not differentiate the characters but ends up making them appear similar. Infact the narrator continuously misidentifies people throughout the novel. There is no idea of depth here -- that of some unique inner personality type, only an abundance of meaningless surface level differences. This kind of style is described by one critic as brochure-speak (Young 101).

Another interesting stylistic element in Ellis is how he writes his sex scenes. All his sex scenes are written in a delebrative pornographic register with all the usual tropes associated with pornography. The only sense that is evoked in these scenes is the visual. The simulation of pornography has replaced the supposedly real of intimate and affective lives. Therefore unlike explicit statements, as in White Noise, here it is the style which evokes the postmodern.

Conclusion

The difference between the two generations of postmodern writers can best be understood as functioning of postmodernism at two different levels -- that of genre and mode. As a genre postmodernism has some very specific techniques and tropes. As a mode it has come to attain a more broad and diffuse meaning. This meaning is based on popular and philosophical perceptions of the everyday realities and experiences under postmodernity.

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