

Foreword

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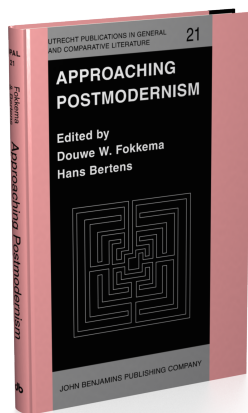
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**Approaching Postmodernism: Papers presented at a
Workshop on Postmodernism, 21–23 September 1984,
University of Utrecht**

Edited by Douwe W. Fokkema † and Hans Bertens

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FOREWORD

Much to the embarrassment of the literary historian, the term Postmodernism has become a household word even before there was time to establish its meaning. This may be felt to be true with respect to both the American and European situation, and it certainly applies to Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands where the term was virtually unknown until two or three years ago, whereas nowadays it is being mentioned frequently in discussions of the visual arts, architecture, music, and literature. It seems high time to investigate the use and usefulness of the term, and that is what this volume aims to do.

The problems involved in such an enterprise are immense, and any attempt to solve them requires clarity about one's epistemological position. One of the problems to be solved is that of the delimitation of the object of research and the very question whether such a delimitation is warranted. In his "Preliminary Remarks," Douwe Fokkema argues for a positive answer to this question, trying to steer clear of both the aporia created by modern (and fashionable) variants of linguistic determinism on the one hand, and simplified concepts of the empirical reality of literary communication on the other. As explained in a second contribution, he sees a link between the tenets of the Postmodernist world view and semantic and (text) syntactic preferences in Postmodernist texts. In his view the Postmodernists have created a particular language which one needs to learn in order to understand them. For "strategic" reasons Brian McHale, too, sets Postmodernism apart from other major tendencies in modern literature. He focuses on the distinction between Postmodernist and Modernist writing, suggesting to consider the dominance of epistemological questions characteristic of the latter and the dominance of ontological questions inherent to the first.

Whereas McHale and Fokkema present models of their understanding of Postmodernist writing, Hans Bertens offers a survey of the vicissitudes of the term and concept Postmodernism — mainly in North-American criticism — which finally have led to some (not much) consensus about its meaning. His contribution "The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and its Relation with Modernism" is primarily a *Forschungsbericht*, which brings us up to date and

from where we can proceed.

Other contributions are devoted rather to the analysis of primary sources. Richard Todd discusses the presence of Postmodernist devices in recent British literature, notably in the fiction of Anthony Burgess, Iris Murdoch, and Muriel Spark. Elrud Ibsch focuses on a German-language variant of Postmodernism, viz. the work of Thomas Bernhard, which she considers to be part of a philosophical tradition but at the same time different from earlier epistemological positions in Modernism, in particular those in Musil's fiction. Ulla Musarra investigates how the Postmodernist devices of duplication and multiplication affect the narratological structure of the novels of Italo Calvino. Herta Schmid discusses Postmodernist — or is it Neo-Avant-garde? — drama in the Soviet Union. At the same time, however, she raises the problem of periodization and suggests a structuralist solution inspired by Jan Mukařovský and others.

The analysis of individual texts which are held to be Postmodernist inevitably leads to questions of conceptualization and definition. Gerhard Hoffmann approaches Postmodernist fiction by way of conceptual distinctions between the tragic, the absurd, and the comic. Theo D'haen broadens the debate by including the visual arts. Taking his cue from a concept of postmodernity propounded by Jean-François Lyotard, he sees definite parallels between contemporary American fiction and art. Helmut Lethen is rather critical of research on Postmodernism done so far; in particular he questions the exclusion of the Avant-garde from the concept of Modernism and its consequences for the concept of Postmodernism. Matei Calinescu extends the debate on the opposition Modernism versus Postmodernism to the historiographical problem of periodization, and, in general, to the question of historical understanding. In the last instance Calinescu defends the period term as a mode of questioning. Susan Suleiman, however, persistently doubts the use of period distinctions, in particular the use of the term Postmodernism, which for various reasons has been unstable and ambiguous — one of the reasons being the difference between the Anglo-American and continental European literary traditions. Suleiman's contribution is a persuasive warning against oversimplification and a flattening-out of distinctions. The last essay of this volume can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a criticism of possible aberrations and, on the other, as an argument for epistemological clarity and erudite expertise.

The various papers collected in this volume were presented and discussed at a workshop on "Postmodernism," which was held between September 21

and 23, 1984, in the Institute of General and Comparative Literature, University of Utrecht. Unfortunately, Gerhard Hoffmann was prevented from attending the workshop, but the papers of all other contributors were elaborately discussed, not only by the authors themselves, but also by invited scholars whose interventions were much appreciated. They were: Sieghild Bogumil (Bochum), Christel van Boheemen-Saaf (Leyden), Joris Duytschaever (Antwerp), August Fry (Free University, Amsterdam), Jean Galard (Maison Descartes, Amsterdam), Willem van Reijen (Utrecht), Luz Rodriguez (Louvain), Johan Thielemans (Ghent), and A. Kibédi Varga (Free University, Amsterdam). The workshop was further attended by five young researchers, of whom in particular Lies Wesseling should be mentioned, as she wrote a valuable report on the discussions which cannot be printed here in full, but which underlies the following synopsis.

The discussion centered on the following topics: (1) Does the term Postmodernism apply to all literary genres alike, or is one particular genre more than the others a vehicle for Postmodernist conventions? A tentative conclusion was that fiction probably is a preferred genre of the Postmodernists, that drama may come next (Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, Tom Stoppard, Robert Wilson, Botho Strauss, and others), but that also poetry cannot be excluded from the corpus of texts where Postmodernist conventions are making themselves felt (not only Borges, but also Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, and Gerrit Krol). (2) Does the opposition Postmodernism versus Modernism include or exclude the Avant-garde? The discussion on this question was not decisive. It became clear, however, that first a distinction must be made between the (historical) Avant-garde as a period term and the typological use of the term. Moreover, the notion of the (historical) Avant-garde must be differentiated: DADA being quite different from Expressionism, Futurism, and Surrealism. One participant argued rather persuasively that the Avant-garde movements were progressive, espoused a linear view of time and moreover were committed to "métaréçits," which distinguishes them from Postmodernism. Whether the historical Avant-garde is included in our concept of Modernism or not, it seems legitimate to construe an opposition between Postmodernism on the one hand, and Modernism and the historical Avant-garde—with the possible exception of DADA—on the other. (3) Of course, the problem of the canon of Postmodernism was raised. No consensus was reached as to the question whether to include the *nouveau roman* in the corpus of Postmodernist texts. If, however, the concept of Postmodernism would allow for national and

individual differentiations, the chances of applying it on an international scale would certainly increase. Much depends on (4) the way in which the distinctive features of Postmodernism are defined. This question occupied the major part of the discussion, and it would be impossible to summarize the various proposals which were advanced and which can be found more accurately in the various papers. However, whether such notions as discontinuity and fragmentation were used, or nonhierarchy and nonselection, or the lack of legitimation, there was a tendency to conclude that one should not lose sight of the historical context in which Postmodernist texts are produced and read. Often they contain a polemic against particular earlier texts. The position of the *nouveau roman*, for instance, will become clearer if we know with more certainty against whom — apart from Balzac — its polemics were directed.

These are merely some of the major points of discussion. The workshop was a lively and productive one. We are indebted to the Royal Academy of Sciences in Amsterdam for a substantial grant which made the participation of scholars from abroad possible. The workshop was organized by the Research Center on Postmodernism, a small group of scholars of various universities in the Netherlands, which in 1983 was entrusted by the Co-ordinating Committee of the *Comparative History of Literature in European Languages* with the task of making preparations for a volume *Postmodernism*. Since the Co-ordinating Committee is a permanent committee of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), the workshop was in fact sponsored by the ICLA, just as also a second workshop on Postmodernism, to be held in Paris in August 1985, will take place under the auspices of the ICLA.

Five of the Dutch contributors, members of the Research Center on Postmodernism, have written their papers as part of the research program "Literary Conventions," which has participants from the University of Utrecht, the University of Leyden, the Free University of Amsterdam, and the University of Amsterdam, but whose administrative center is in Utrecht.

Last but not least, thanks are due to Margreet Davidse for her sustained efforts in typing various parts of the manuscript.

University of Utrecht
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