

Book Review

Email:
xaviermarcodepont@gmail.com

Re: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Criticism

after Modernism, Edited by Robert David Stacey

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Xavier Marcó del Pont

THE DEBATE SURROUNDING POSTMODERNISM HAS, for decades now, been ripe with dissonant voices. Is it a period? An aesthetic? Or, as Frank Davey insists in this collection, ‘an understanding of how meaning is constructed’ (10)? If we now speak of a plurality of modernisms, should we not offer postmodernism this same multiplicity of identities? Has postmodernism already ended? If so, what is to follow? And, perhaps the most crucial of these questions, did – or will – postmodernism ever in fact take place at all?

Joining this oftentimes heated discussion, *RE: Reading the Postmodern* emerges from the annual Canadian Literature Symposium at the University of Ottawa in 2008 and, as is generally the case with such affairs, its unity is of subject matter and theme, rather than of subjectivity and opinion. It is, however, the very heterogeneity of the views included in this volume that makes it an engaging read. This text aims to untwine Canadian postmodernism from the rest of its anglophone counterparts, avoiding its regrettably frequent subsumption under the toothless notion of a global postmodernism.

Following a thorough introduction by the editor Robert David Stacey regarding the very concept of postmodernism, the book is divided into four sections: ‘Retrospections’, ‘*En Garde!* Traditions, Counter-

Traditions, Anti-Traditions', 'Historicities', and 'Publics'. From its very outset, the collection includes papers in tones and forms that range from the experiential (Robert Kroetsch on the birth of *boundary 2*) to the exploratory (Linda Hutcheon on hindsight and recent art forms: videogames, the graphic novel, and 'historio-sonic meta-operas') and the experimental (Frank Davey's 'shuffle-text'). This latter paper is one of the most striking in the collection. As Professor Davey prepared to give the final talk of the symposium, he dropped his paper – on purpose, it would transpire – and hurriedly gathered the seemingly unstapled and unnumbered sheets of paper, before beginning to read the reconfigured lecture. This shuffled text is reproduced in the volume, and provides a unique and challenging reading experience, with the essay's resulting disjointed sections ranging from aphoristic remarks to thought-provoking questions regarding a truly Canadian postmodernism. It is this notion of a truly distinct Canadian postmodernism that concerns Christian Bök's 'Getting Ready to Have Been Postmodern', another of the stand-out papers in the volume. Bök concludes that the prefix *post-* in postmodernism 'can no longer imply an advancement beyond', as it has come to mean 'more of the same – only worse' (99), highlighting what he sees as creative stagnation within the canonical narratives of postmodernism and the complacency of its critics, a concern that is echoed throughout several essays in this compendium.

Other chapters are concerned with the different waves and generations of postmodern practitioners from a number of disciplines, from sound and visual poetry to millennial drama, and the use of photography in novelistic fiction. Whilst at certain points the cohesion of the collection seems to be threatened by its breadth of different approaches, in fact, it is this very diversity that allows the reader to see a form taking shape, offering a unique overview of a rich and distinct national postmodernism. In this reviewer's opinion, perhaps the greatest flaw of the collection is that, in its justified eagerness to interrogate Canadian postmodernism, it examines it for the most part in *isolation* from other postmodernisms more than it does in *opposition* to them. Perhaps the unique idiosyncrasies of Canadian postmodernism would have shone more brightly if contrasted against a few of its national, or even transnational, counterparts. *RE: Reading the Postmodern* is, nonetheless, a welcome addition to the body of criticism on Canadian postmodernism, one that will no doubt sit well next to Linda Hutcheon's seminal work, *The Canadian Postmodern* (1998). In her own words, '*Le postmodernisme est mort; vive le postmodernisme*' (51).

Royal Holloway, University of London