PERSPECTIVES ON POSTMODERNISM AND THE HISTORICAL FICTION

Olivia Chirobocea

Lecturer, PhD, "Ovidius" University, Constanța

Abstract: This article provides insight into postmodernism as a whole and postmodernist literary theory in particular, with a special focus on historical fiction written according to the views of this eclectic trend. The emergence of new scientific and philosophical ideas caused the major shift of mentalities and led to the emergence of new perspectives and major changes. The old traditions and metanarratives were no longer able to keep up with the rapid changes in the social life, with the technological progress, the emancipation of minorities, the fall of high culture and rise of popular culture and the global village. Postmodernism encompasses all these new perspectives and mentalities, and it is reflected in architecture, art and our everyday life. In literature, historiographic metafiction is the new form of historical novel and its origins and principles are analyzed by major postmodernist theorists, as presented in this paper.

Keywords: postmodernism, postmodernist literature, historiographic metafiction, metanarrative, novel

Introduction

In order to understand postmodernist literature, it is necessary to acquire some insight into the cultural trend that has been dominating the Western society and the world in general starting with the mid 20th century. The word 'postmodernism' encompasses a multitude of meanings, it has created controversies among theorists, it has been either glorified or demonized, but it certainly represents the world in which we live as it has influenced every aspect of our life and it is this very heterogeneity and plurality that best describes it. Theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Linda Hutcheon, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard have attempted to make sense of postmodernity and postmodernism. This endeavour is made difficult by the fact that the trend is ongoing, which makes it hard to define while it is subject to constant change. However, the opinions of these theorists are referential to whomever wants to tackle this complicated project of searching for answers to the simple question 'what is postmodernism?'

Reflections on postmodernism

The way to begin the search for the meaning of postmodernism, as most of these theorists have done, is to start with the name, the word 'postmodernism' itself. Ihab Hassan browses history looking for mentions of this term and finds it used for the first time in 1934 by Federico de Onís in his *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana* (Hassan, 274). And, since the word points to a period that comes after modernism, Hassan proceeds to do what the others will do as well. He will compare modernism to postmodernism. In the study "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", Hassan also proposes a scheme of antonymic terms meant to delineate clearly between modernism and postmodernism, in spite of his previous statement that "modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future"

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

(Hassan, 277). Thus, while modernism is about purpose, hierarchy, centering, genre/boundary, hypotaxis, metaphor, selection, reading, signified, narrative/Grande Histoire, origin, determinacy, and transcendence, postmodernism is, on the contrary, about play, anarchy, dispersal, text/intertext, parataxis, metonymy, combination, misreading, signifier, anti-narrative/Petite Histoire, difference-differance, indeterminancy, and immanence (Hassan, 280-281).

The cultural trend that dominated the first half of the 20th century, namely modernism, represented a break with tradition and its many avant-garde movements account for this. The changes that began in the 1960s and 1970s are both a reaction to what modernism stands for but also a natural continuation of some of the changes that had already begun. The world wars, two of the most traumatic events in recent history that succeeded in the course of twenty years, had already shaken the Western mentalities, which became marked, as Lyotard puts it in 1979, by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 72). The ferocity of the two wars, both originating in Europe, shook the traditional belief which regarded the Old World as the source and cradle of Western civilization and culture. Europe had always represented the centre and everything else related to this centre. As Guy Scarpetta shows, the intense feelings of nationalism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, racial and sexual prejudices found their most sinister manifestation in the fascist and Nazi movements and converged towards the breakout of the Second World War (Scarpetta, 25-94). All these negative events and social movements gave rise to an increased feeling of discontent within the intellectual elites that fled (or were forced to leave) to the New World. The centre thus shifted and America became the new patron of the arts, a place where artists could manifest themselves openly and without constraints. The USA emerged from this devastating historical episode, the Second World War, with a flourishing economy and thus became the initiator of postmodernism at different levels of society. America has spread concepts such as consumerist society, pop culture and hyper-technology that have become part of everyday life in most parts of the world.

The theories that began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s focused on scepticism. The first half of the 20th century was dominated by the structuralist view which, with an almost mathematical precision, gave clear solutions to literary dilemmas. Based on the works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralist analysis generally applied the theory that any system has an internal grammar that governs its operations. Structuralism, in its precision, allows little room for chance, creativity or the unexpected as, in its analysis "there are no loose ends and everything falls neatly into place" (Sim, 5).

The poststructuralist theories of the late 1960s oppose such authoritarian views and have come to be considered the cornerstone of postmodernist theories in general. While structuralism believed in method, system and reason, was more scientific and based on logical deductions, and saw the world constructed through language, which is an orderly system, poststructuralism, on the contrary, was based on philosophical sources and thus was prone to scepticism and interpretation. Scepticism is the key word here as it pervades all the mid 20th century theories that will have an important influence on the postmodernist ones. Stuart Sim explains it as "an essentially negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth, or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth" (3). The term used to describe such a style in philosophy is 'antifoundational' and the philosopher that sets the example is Friedrich Nietzsche who calls for revaluation and interpretation (3).

Scepticism is manifested in the works of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-François Lyotard. Derrida, for example, attacks directly the structuralist theories and, through his innovative concepts such as deconstruction and *differance*, he shows that language as well as any other system in general are not stable but quite relative. Linguistic meaning is unstable as words relate to each other

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

and to the systems they are part of, not to some external reality. This theory of deconstruction (and poststructuralist theories in general) has been strongly linked with postmodernism. Since the central argument for deconstruction depends on relativism, postmodernism found an important support in such theories as they fold so well on postmodernist scepticism and resistance to previously enforced norms. The task of the postmodernist deconstructor is, therefore, to show how the relationship between language and the world is no longer as fixed as previously assumed (Butler, 18).

Foucault also challenges the authoritarianism of the norm against the different by analyzing the history of marginalized groups. His study *The History of Sexuality* focuses on homosexuality and how it functioned in Greek and Roman culture, which were apparently more tolerant than the Post-Renaissance culture that "has been committed to the marginalization, even demonization, of difference, by its setting of norms of behaviour" (Butler, 6). Gilles Deleuze questioned authority in his psychoanalytical studies, while feminism, through the voices of theorists such as Luce Irigaray, challenged the authority of patriarchy and used the theories of differance to argue that gender identity is not fixed.

Jean-François Lyotard, however, remains the most influential postmodern philosopher. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard argues that knowledge is the world's most important commodity but it is transmitted through narrative, a concept that he criticizes, since grand narratives claim to be able to explain everything and resist change. He considers this attitude authoritarian and argues that knowledge should be made accessible to the public, action that should prevent the centralized political control of knowledge (Lyotard, 73).

Scepticism, anti-authoritarian attitudes, the rise of the margins and the dissolution of one unique centre seem to rise as features of the new order of things otherwise called postmodernism. All these attitudes come together to build a philosophy proper that should define it. However, as Stuart Sim concludes:

> Overall, postmodern philosophy is to be defined as an updated version of scepticism, more concerned with destabilizing other theories and their pretensions to truth than setting up a positive theory of its own; (..) Postmodern philosophy, therefore, can be seen as a deployment of philosophy to undermine the authoritarian imperatives in our culture, both at the theoretical and the political level (13).

Still, postmodernism, in spite of its resistance to definitions and its rebellion against authority, has become a grand narrative itself. Moreover, as Sim indicates, grand narratives are not dead as Lyotard claims and the rise of religious fundamentalism accounts for this (14).

The word 'postmodernism' became part of contemporary culture in the 1960s when it was used to refer to Barth's novels and the dance of Merce Cunningham and it gained notoriety in 1975 with Charles Jencks' book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, as Anthony Easthope indicates (Easthope, 17). Architecture and literature are the most discussed postmodern genres, as Linda Hutcheon notes in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (38).

Postmodernist literature

Postmodernist literature begins officially in the 1960s, and it is marked by the revolutionary spirit of the age and by the historical context, namely the Cold War. In his essay "Postmodernism and Literature (or: Word Salad Days, 1960-90)", Barry Lewis exemplifies the influence of the historical context on literature through Philip Roth's essay 'Writing American Fiction' (1961) which argues that "the daily news was more absurd than anything fiction could render. This gave hundreds of novelists the go-ahead to experiment with fantasy and self-consciousness" (Lewis, 121). The field of literary theory of this period is also marked by controversies and daring statements proposed by such theorists and writers as Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Ihab Hassan, John Barth, Roland Sukenick, and Raymond Federman.

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

Susan Sontag declares herself "Against Interpretation" in 1963. She analyses the word interpretation and what it meant throughout time and the conclusion is that nowadays interpretation is much too aggressive and destroys instead of illuminate, as she compares this process with the stifling sensation given by the fumes of heavy industry:

> The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one. (…) In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings." It is to turn the world into *this* world. ("This world"! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have (Sontag, 8).

In 1967 John Barth writes "The Literature of Exhaustion", in 1968 Roland Barthes writes "The Death of the Author," while in 1969 Roland Sukenick writes "The Death of the Novel" and the next decade begins with Ihab Hassan's "The Dismemberment of Orpheus: towards a postmodern literature" (1971). This nihilism is evidence for the awareness of a change in mentality and fiction writing in an era that emerged 'exhausted' from the constraints of modernism.

Roland Barthes argues that the features of the Author proper are irrelevant to the actual work and ascribing an Author to a text means only to limit that text, procedure that always pleased critics as their task apparently was always that of finding the Author beneath the text, which is their final victory (Barthes, 231). Barthes, however, proposes that we should cast aside the arrogance of viewing the writer as the only person in literature and admit that it is actually the reader the one that is able to reveal the total existence of writing because "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (…) the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (232). This reader-focused reading theory is a cornerstone in contemporary literary criticism and has opened the path for new possibilities and similar theories from theorists such as Umberto Eco, for example.

Both John Barth and Roland Sukenick apparently claim that the novel is dead. However, their statements are not to be taken lightly. John Barth states: "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities – by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (Barth, 64). Sukenick refers to what he calls 'post-realistic novel' (what will later be known as postmodernist novel) and concludes that:

> The contemporary writer – the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part – is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he dies; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive, and so there is no destiny, only chance. (…) In view of these annihilations, it should be no surprise that literature, also, does not exist – how could it? (Sukenick, 41)

The error of these two writers and theorists (a cross-over so characteristic of postmodernism) possibly lies in the titles of their essays which were taken for granted, but neither really refers to the actual demise of the novel as a literary genre. In the early 1980s John Barth corrects his misreaders in an essay called "The Literature of Replenishment. Postmodernist Fiction" and explains that in his previous essay he didn't mean the exhaustion of language or of literature, "but of the aesthetic of high-modernism" (Barth, 206). As mentioned earlier, it was only natural for the theorists of the time to compare postmodernism with the previous period of time which is present in the term itself, modernism. John Barth does that in this essay as he comments the opinions of critics and theorists such as Gerald Graff and Robert Alter. Also, Ihab Hassan

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

compares the two periods in many studies as do Douwe W. Fokkema, Matei Călinescu, or Linda Hutcheon.

So then, what is postmodernist fiction and how is it different from the modernist one? In his well-known study "The Dismemberment of Orpheus: towards a postmodern literature" (1971), Ihab Hassan relates the myth of the dismembered Orpheus with the literature written after 1914, which was consciously disarticulated but even so, like Orpheus, continues to sing. This literature preserves its creative force left intact in the process of destruction, as Steven Connor explains Hassan's thesis (Connor, 116). Barth states that most theorists, with slight variations, resolved to say that "postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world" (Barth, 200), while he himself hopes that "the ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction" (203). Some important conclusions that can be drawn from these definitions are that postmodernist literature is self-reflexive, it is metafiction, and, in accordance with the features of postmodernism in general, it is resistant to interpretation and to the authority of norm.

The literary works of postmodernist novelists have been given different names overtime and postmodernism's very resistance to definition accounts for these many names and the critics' difficulty in finding common traits. So, postmodernist literature is 'exhausted', it is self-reflexive, it is metafiction, it is fabulation, anti-novel, surfiction, it is experimental and innovative, according to such names as John Barth, Raymond Federman, Josephine Hendin, Linda Hutcheon, Robert Scholes, and many other theorists. In his short introduction to postmodernism, Christopher Butler summarizes some of the important characteristics of the postmodernist fiction:

> The postmodernist novel doesn't try to create a sustained realist illusion: it displays itself as open to all those illusory tricks of stereotype and narrative manipulation, and of multiple interpretation in all its contradiction and inconsistency, which are central to postmodernist thought. Its internal theorizing, its willingness to display to the reader its own formal workings, is also typically postmodern (Butler, 73).

It is its resistance to norms and the scepticism born out of poststructuralist theories that makes postmodernist fiction disregard the claims of mimesis or realism and play with fiction and fact. Linda Hutcheon's studies analyze in depth the problems of representation in postmodernist art in general and the intentional confusions between fact and fiction that seem to define postmodernist literature in particular.

One of the major characteristics of postmodern fiction is its proclivity towards irony and self-reflexivity, which makes many postmodernist novels works of metafiction. The term 'metafiction' originates in an essay by the American critic and novelist William Gass in 1970 and it refers to a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction. In his short presentation of Patricia Waugh's extensive study on metafiction, Diogene Mihăilă distinguishes between the various species of metafiction: the introverted novel where "the fictional content of the story is continually reflected by its formal existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of textuality" (Mihăilă, 183), the antinovel, whose most common manifestation is parody, irrealism "represented by paranoia that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies theory to discover new forms of fantastic extravaganzas and magic realism" (184), the self-begetting novel described as "an account, usually in the first person, of the development of a character up to a point which he is able to take up and compose the novel we have just finished reading" (184), fabulation, whose intention is to encourage the reader to use their knowledge of traditional literary conventions by alluding to them, and finally, surfiction, defined by the very person who coined the term, Raymond Federman, as follows:

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

> (…) for me, the only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction; the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it; the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man's imagination and not in man's distorted vision of reality – that reveals man's irrationality rather than man's rationality. This I call SURFICTION. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality. Just as Surrealists called that level of man's experience that functions in the subconscious SURREALITY, I call that level of man's activity that reveals life as a fiction SURFICTION (Federman, 380).

The world of fiction started being self-conscious in the 1950s and 1960s, as Steven Connor indicates:

> Since the French 'new novel' of the 1950s and 1960s, a veritable epidemic of reflexivity has swept the fiction-writing world, from the work of American writers like William Gass (who declares that 'there are no descriptions in literature, there are only constructions'), to the ostentatious puzzle-making of Borges, the Scheherezade-like improvisations of John Barth, the fables of Italo Calvino and the nightmarish fairytales of Robert Coover. (129).

The novel thus assumes the role of participant in the production of fiction. Brian McHale explains this inclination towards self-reflexivity as a shift from the epistemological interest of the modernist literature to the ontological interest of the postmodernist literature and a change of the fundamental questions from 'how can a world be known?' to 'what is a world?' (169).

Taken as a whole, postmodernist literature is, as mentioned earlier, a colourful mosaic with representatives all over the world, the most fertile spaces being South America (Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes), North America (John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Ronald Sukenick, Kurt Vonnegut) and the Anglo-Saxon space (Iris Murdoch, John Fowles, Tom Stoppard). However, other famous names for postmodernist literature are Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco (Italy) and Alain Robbe-Grillet (France) among others. All these writes have in common a variety of narrative forms and innovative literary devices that group them through their very heterogeneity under the cloak of postmodernism.

Matei Călinescu lists the most familiar devices that a reader might encounter when dealing with a postmodernist text:

> [...] the more obvious postmodernist devices include: a new existential or "ontological" use of narrative perspectivism, different from the mainly psychological one found in modernism [...]; duplication and multiplication of beginnings, endings, and narrated actions [...]; the parodic thematization of the author [...]; the no less parodic but more puzzling thematization of the reader [...]; the treatment on an equal footing of fact and fiction, reality and myth, truth and lying, original and imitation, as a means to emphasize undecidability; self-referentiality and "metafiction" as means to dramatize inescapable circularity [...]; extreme versions of the "unreliable narrator," sometimes used, paradoxically, for purposes of a rigorous construction [...]. Stylistically, aside from the special, often parodic uses of the great traditional rhetorical devices, one might note a marked preference for such unconventional figures as deliberate anachronism, tautology, and palinode or retraction, which often play an extensive and even structural role (303-304).

Barry Lewis gives a more detailed account of each of the important postmodernist literary devices. He remarks at the end of his study that all these devices are but symptoms of insanity, namely, of the schizophrenia that has apparently plagued postmodern society: "Temporal disorder, involuntary impersonation of other voices (or pastiche), fragmentation, looseness of association, paranoia and the creation of vicious circles are symptoms of the language disorders of schizophrenia as well as features of postmodernist fiction" (Lewis, 133).

The first device Lewis mentions, temporal disorder, goes along with Hutcheon's 'historiographic metafiction' which intentionally distorts history, action that can be accomplished by means of apocryphal history, anachronism, or the blending of history and fantasy (124). Well-known examples of novels in which these particular devices are used are Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the* Days, John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Graham Swift's *Waterland,* among others.

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

Pastiche can be understood either as imitation or as hodgepodge, the latter being the meaning that matters here. This device provides a way of reviving the corpse of the so-called dead novel by stitching together the amputated limbs (Lewis, 125), description that is only reminiscent of Frankenstein's monster. Pastiche is translated into the actual literary works as a blending of different literary forms. The most famous example is Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, a novel that can be classified as medieval thriller, detective story, philosophical novel, or semiotic novel, with many religious and historical allusions.

Fragmentation is a very important trait of postmodernism in general. It is also a feature of the contemporary Western society which is unified by its very fragmentariness, plurality, and multiculturalism. As postmodernist literature rejects the traditional narrative norms, the solution is to propose other ways of structuring narrative. Postmodernists disrupt narrative by using multiple endings which offer several outcomes for a plot or simply break the text into short fragments separated by different symbols or just by space. The disruption of narrative can be accomplished even by extreme methods which affect the very fabric and appearance of the book itself as an object. Some pages may remain blank, others may have different colours. Drawings, symbols, or visual jokes may intervene between the lines of the text, and many other devices can be used in order to disrupt and break the norm.

Paranoia is a feeling experienced by many characters in postmodernist novels and it can be directly linked with the historical context and the society of the 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s to a certain extent. The climate of fear and suspicion created by the Cold War in that period may account for the wide use of paranoia in postmodernist fiction. As Lewis explains:

> Postmodernist writing reflects paranoid anxieties in many ways, including: the distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to any one particular place or identity, the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others. These different responses are immanent in three distinct areas or reference associated with the word 'plot' (130).

Starting from 'plot' Lewis distinguishes the three possible meanings: that of a small piece of ground with a special purpose, that of secret plan or conspiracy, and the third one is that of a plan of a literary work (130). Novels that exemplify the first meaning are Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. The three protagonists, Randle McMurphy, Billy Pilgrim, and Yossarian, respectively, are confined to their 'plots' by external forces (the mental hospital, the prisoner-of-war camp, and the air-force base, respectively) which leads to a panic of identity. However, in spite of their longing to be free, their impulses toward freedom are corrupted by their fear of escape and of the openness.

The second meaning of 'plot', that of conspiracy finds its best illustration in Thomas Pynchon's novels where the whole of the society is seen as a plot against the individual and the historical events are perceived as "side-shows orchestrated by unseen ringmasters for hidden motives" (Lewis, 131). This is called paranoid history. The protagonists of novels such as *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, or *Vineland* feel trapped in schemes that threaten the rights of the individual. The third meaning of 'plot', that of plan of literary work leads to paranoia because a plot in literature has shape and shape is control and there are writers who want to prove themselves above such constraints of form such as Umberto Eco in his novel *Foucault's Pendulum* and John Barth in *Letters*.

The last postmodernist literary device proposed by Barry Lewis is vicious circles and it refers to the instance when text and world are permeable and we cannot separate one from the other. These moments occur under the form of "short circuits (when the author steps into the text) and double binds (when real-life historical figures appear in fictions) (131). These confusions between fact and fiction are symptoms of schizophrenia, the condition that seems to affect postmodernist literature and society in general.

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

Postmodernist historical fiction

Linda Hutcheon, a celebrated name in postmodernist poetics, declares that the most defining form of postmodernist literature is what she calls 'historiographic metafiction', that is, as Connor explains: "works of fiction which reflect knowingly upon their own status as fiction, foregrounding the figure of the author and the act of writing, and even violently interrupting the conventions of the novel, but without relapsing into mere technical self-absorption" (Connor, 132). The novels that fall into the category of 'historiographic metafiction' (Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, to name just a few) choose characters and events of the past and then proceed to subject them to distortions, and fictionalizations. These works of 'historiographic metafiction' are meant to show that past itself is fiction since we can only know the past through forms of representation or of narrative. Since the fundamental theories of postmodernism postulate that everything must be questioned, regarded skeptically and interpreted, this is what 'historiographic metafiction' does; it shows that the past is literature as well. We transform historical events into facts by interpreting the archive documents which are representations of the past, themselves victims of the subjectivity of the person that recorded them.

The original and official version of history is subverted and alternatives are suggested in order to make this point. Thomas Pynchon proposes a different purpose and outcome for the Second World War in *Gravity's Rainbow*, one of his characteristically paranoid versions where the society plots against the individual and history is made of events orchestrated by unknown forces. John Barth, in a similar vein, proposes yet a more parodic and comical version of the early American colonial history and new approaches to well known legends such as the Pocahontas famous story. Consistent with Foucault's theories about discontinuity, Kurt Vonnegut shapes his famous 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* accordingly, to illustrate it. History is shown here from the perspective of extraterrestrial beings that have no worries because, to them there are no such concepts as past, present or future. Anyone can relive certain moments of their lives whenever they want just by travelling through time.

Foucault's theory of discontinuity is consistent with postmodern theories of fragmentation and incredulity towards the metanarratives. Linda Hutcheon briefly explains this theory and its echoes in postmodernism theories in general in her extensive study, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*:

> We are no longer to deal, therefore, with either "tradition" or "the individual talent, " as Eliot would have us do. The study of anonymous forces of dissipation replaces that of individual "signed" events and accomplishments made coherent by retrospective narrative; contradictions displace totalities; discontinuities, gaps, and ruptures are favored in opposition to continuity, development, evolution; the particular and the local take on the value once held by the universal and the transcendent. For Foucault it is irregularities that define discourse and its many possible interdiscursive networks in culture. For postmodern history, theory, and art, this has meant a new consideration of context, of textuality, of the power of totalization and of models of continuous history (97).

Foucault's theory helped the Marxist and feminist theories that used context to justify absences from history, the minorities such as the low classes and the women, who did not have the power to write their own version of history.

In her chapter about the historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon claims that fiction and history have always been absorbent genres and now more than ever scholars are trying to separate the two, but theories refer mostly to the similarities rather than the differences between the two. This is what Hutcheon also stresses:

> They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

> intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. But these are also the implied teachings of historiographic metafiction. Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time (105).

Conclusion

Everything is relative in postmodernism, including the two terms, history and fiction, and the postmodern theories presented throughout this paper only emphasize this idea. Postmodernist writers, through their works, coined by Linda Hutcheon as historiographic metafiction, strive to prove that we live in a world in which no essence can be truly known unless through its representation. Postmodernism demystifies and postmodernist literature tries to shake the image of history as an objective science that offers people the historical fact without the shadow of a doubt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barth, John, *The Friday Book. Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984.

Barthes, Roland, „The Death of the Author", *Literature in the Modern World. Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Walder, Dennis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press in association with the Open University, 1990), pg. 228-232.

Butler, Christopher, *Postmodernism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Călinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1987.

Connor, Steven, *Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary.* Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1997.

Diogene Mihăilă, "Patricia Waugh: What is Metafiction", *Critical Approaches to British, American and Postcolonial Literatures, Gender and Film Studies*, coord. Constantinescu, Ligia (Iaşi: Cronica, 2005): 182-185.

Easthope, Anthony, "Postmodernism and Cultural Theory", *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Sim, Stuart (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), pg. 15-27.

Federman, Raymond, "Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of a Manifesto", *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*, ed. Kostelanetz, Richard (New York: Prometheus Books, 1982), pg. 378-384.

Hassan, Ihab, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Natoli, Joseph and Hutcheon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), pg. 273-286.

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Lewis, Barry, "Postmodernism and Literature (or: Word Salad Days, 1960-90), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Sim, Stuart (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), pg. 121-133.

Lyotard, Jean-François, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge", *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Natoli, Joseph and Hutcheon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), pg. 71-90.

McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Scarpetta, Guy, *Elogiul cosmopolitismului*. Traducere de Petruţa Spînu, Iaşi: Polirom, 1997.

Sim, Stuart, "Postmodernism and Philosophy", *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Sim, Stuart (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), pg. 3-14.

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)

Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966.
Sukenick, Roland *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, University of Alabama Press, 2003.

BDD-A25645 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:59 UTC)