

What Is Performatism?

Performatism is an epochal concept of post-postmodernism. I proposed it in 2000, first in a German-language article in the *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, then in an English translation in *Anthropoetics* (for more on this see the [Bibliography](#)). A book version, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, appeared in 2008.

Performatism describes an across-the-board cultural reaction to post-modernism that began sometime in the mid 1990s. Postmodernism as I understand it is a cultural epoch like romanticism or realism that dominated the arts roughly between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s. There is a lot of haggling over the details of what postmodernism is or was and when it started exactly, but there is a certain core agreement about its central aspects. These include

1. the conviction that the modernist emphasis on utopian, totalizing innovation (which ended in totalitarianism) is an ethical disaster to be avoided at all costs;
2. the use of continually receding irony (and ironic stylistic and narrative devices) to subvert those utopian or totalizing positions;
3. the notion that history has ended (that everything new is merely an ironic repetition or extension or intensification of something already existing);
4. the notion that the human subject is no longer a whole, autonomous being but is positioned and defined by all sorts of external influences that are in turn mediated by discourse and signs (as opposed to direct physical influences);
5. the notion that language, signs, media, discourse etc. form a virtual reality of their own that competes with and displaces physical reality. This rules out the sort of authentic experience that was crucial to modernism.

You probably can add quite a few other features to this list, but for the time being these will do.

This definition offers a clear opposition between modernism and postmodernism, which I like to define as a set of ironic strategies attempting to avoid the fatal traps into which modernism fell. In my view (which follows that of Fredric Jameson and others), postmodernism doesn't simply "extend" or "intensify" or "radically pluralize" modernism but ironically undercuts and subverts it. Concepts of postmodernism that emphasize plurality and ignore irony, like Jean-François Lyotard's or Wolfgang Iser's, are in practice extremely hard to apply to postmodern works of art or literature, because these tend to be, well, extremely ironic.

I might add that I'm often accused of simplifying postmodernism, which in the mind of some critics presents us with an endlessly rich plurality of possibilities which we haven't nearly begun to describe with any finality. My position is this: if postmodern is so endlessly plural and fertile, why has it become so utterly predictable? Why is it boring the daylights out of us? Why have most writers, filmmakers, architects, and creative artists stopped using it? The fact is, the features noted above are well known to the point of exhaustion and no longer can surprise or unsettle us. What was once a cleverly subversive, ironic mode of dealing with real social and political problems has become a heavily stylized, aesthetically predictable form of social critique that no longer has the power to really move us.

The same goes for poststructuralism, which has not produced any major theoretical innovations for the last 20 years or so. The main fear of most contemporary academics--that dispensing with poststructuralist theory will leave them and us "uncritical"--is in my view unfounded. The point is to develop a new critical attitude that is in tune with current cultural development. And that can only be achieved by acknowledging that our culture is no longer postmodern and by turning to theories that are no longer poststructuralist (there are already plenty of them--I specifically have in mind the work of people like Alain Badiou, Eric Gans, Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Rancière, or Peter Sloterdijk).

What, then, is performatism? One thing that it is *not* is a return to modernism or a fuzzy extension of postmodernism. I can make this clearer by going through the performatist reaction to postmodernism point by point:

1. The original postmodernist project of averting modernist totalitarianism and/or the totalizing devices that accompanied it is passé (unless maybe you live in North Korea). The main problem facing performatism isn't totalitarianism, but rather the aesthetic and ethical jadedness that has been produced by nearly four decades of ironic (postmodern) argumentation conducted in literary and artistic form. Performatism's basic goal is to choke off irony by forcing us to *believe* using literary or other aesthetic devices. In performatist terms, we can only act in a positive way if we believe in something, and performatist literature and art help us--or rather force--us to do so. Aesthetically mediated belief, and not endlessly receding ironic skepticism, is the basis of the new epoch.
2. Performatism works by cutting off postmodern irony. There are numerous ways of doing this and we have just begun to start describing them systematically. My main contribution to this project has been the idea of the "double frame." This means that performatist works offer us a unified object, person, or situation inside the work that we intuitively identify with, and then rigs the work as a whole so that we don't any

other choice but to accept this identification, even if the person or thing in question is rather dubious. One of my standard examples is the novel *Life of Pi*. Pi, the hero, is an obvious liar, but the form of the book is set up in such a way that you wind up wanting to believe his long, beautiful, untrue story instead of the short, ugly, true one he also tells. Performatist narratives tend to trick or coerce us into a position of believing in something unified. This sort of coercion works through form (*per formam*), which is where performatism gets its name; it's not a theory of the performing arts.

3. Performatism revives both history and the feeling of experiencing events. Performatist narratives contain a narrative or thematic device that produces a surprising effect resulting in a change in the fictional world. These "surprises," which cause us to believe in something fictional or artistic, can be thought of as performances that also change our attitude towards the real world. If this change in real attitudes takes place (and the evidence is that it has--performatist works now excite us in a way that postmodern ones no longer do), we can rightly claim that (cultural) history has started again.
4. Performatism revives the subject by closing it off formally from the world of signs and discourse that in postmodernism determine subjectivity (this is why there are so many autistic characters, fools, or naïfs in performatist narratives). The performatist subject is not "authentic" but is formally "out of it." This allows him or her to resist outside influence and act autonomously, against the logic of prevailing discourse. The crucial element of such narratives is not the separation of the protagonist *per se*, but rather whether he or she can transcend that separation (usually by passing on some sort of value to another person or reaching some higher state of consciousness or development). Hence performatist narratives often involve positive or productive dyadic relationships between human beings that are unthinkable in postmodernism. Performatist subjects tend to communicate with others through intuition or mimesis, i.e. by causing others to imitate them spontaneously (something not requiring communication through discourse). Because human subjects in performatism are active, they however also necessarily infringe on the physical space of others. The result is a paradoxical situation that I call the "ethics of perpetration": how do we reconcile positive action (which necessarily means stepping on other people's toes) with good?
5. Performatism has a paradoxical approach to reality that is unacceptable to or unthinkable in postmodernism: it creates artificial conditions in which we can experience all kinds of things that postmodernists think are metaphysical illusions, e.g. love, beauty, belief, reconciliation,

transcendence. Performatist works in a certain sense use a postmodern strategy (simulation) to artificially or aesthetically enable us to experience transcendence, love, belief etc. (Postmodernists think that this is simply a trick.) Performatism is most definitely *not* a return to modernist authenticity, which involves a direct experience of some aspect of our lifeworld. In performatist works we are always aware that our feeling of love, belief, transcendence is mediated through form and manipulated (but we accept it whether we want to or not).

The theory of performatism is meant to be an analytical tool and not a philosophy of life. If you're interested in how it can be used to read literature or interpret films, art, and architecture, take a look at one of the articles or books listed on this site in the [Performatism Bibliography](#) or in the Link section. The first chapter of my *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* also contains a more technical explanation of what I've outlined above (beware: semiotics!).

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