

Contemporary or Post-Contemporary ?

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Abstract

In his book *Brouhaha. Les mondes du contemporain* (2016), Lionel Ruffel shows how the contemporary foregrounds engagement with the outside world and the interconnectedness of different histories and times - thereby opposing modernism's introspective approach and privileging of master narratives. Yet although the contemporary and related theories such as the post-contemporary do indeed reject certain aspects of modernism, in other respects they prolong or build on it. This paper will explore those facets of the contemporary that align themselves with the modernist approach, showing how the latter has influenced the contemporary perspective not only in terms of the present but also with respect to history and the past. Take for instance, the notion of linearity: just as the idea of rupture characterizing modern art – the break with the past in order to attain the new - can be regarded as a manifestation of non-linearity, so does contemporary art reject the linearity of past and present, by embracing multiple temporalities at once. Further parallels can be identified in their respective approaches to history: just as modernism is generally perceived as ahistorical, so does Ruffel define the contemporary as transhistorical - in that each historical moment has itself been contemporary. The terms ahistorical and transhistorical both suggest an external perspective, to the point where the distinction between them has tended to collapse. The paper will explore these and other facets of contemporary and post-contemporary art, showing how they intersect with modern art in regard to the question of time.

Keywords : future, linearity, modernism; present, succession, time

In his book *Brouhaha: Les mondes du contemporain* (2016), Lionel Ruffel shows how the contemporary foregrounds the simultaneity and interconnectedness of different histories and times – as against the modernist approach to history based on separation and succession. In this paper I will explore the differences - and resemblances - between the modernist perspective on the one hand and the contemporary or related theories such as the post-contemporary on the other, with regard to time. I will argue that despite the claims of Ruffel and others, the similarities sometimes outweigh the differences, not only in regard to the past but also to the future and the present.

I will start by looking at the ways in which the contemporary diverges from the modernist perspective, as outlined in Ruffel's new book. The contemporary that Ruffel champions is rooted in cultural studies, whose relation to modernism has always been one of rejection and animosity. Like cultural studies, the contemporary calls into question modernist linearity: it differs from the modern in that it is not new with respect to a previous state – and in that it is not a historical sequence that follows on from other historical sequences. Instead, like the premodern, it mixes genres, eras, and thoughts. This is not to say that the contemporary is a return to the premodern, but just that it too challenges the notion of the arrow of time. So the contemporary emphasizes co-temporality, proposing that there are multiple, conflicting - non -modern and modern - temporalities and that we are not stuck in the present but we live in these multiple temporalities at the same time. I'll just mention a couple of the examples Ruffel gives, so we can get a sense of how radically different from the modernist perspective the contemporary purports to be. First

the case of the Centro de Expresiones Contemporaneas in Rosario, Argentina, which in 2004 ran a regular column in its magazine posing the question “What is the Contemporary?”. Students, writers, professors, social workers, sent in their replies, each emphasizing terms like open, horizontal, democratic (Ruffel, 2016: 40), terms that contrasted with the perceived elitism and linearity of the modern.

Ruffel also discusses more “modern” approaches to the contemporary, such as that espoused by Giorgio Agamben in “What is the contemporary?”. Agamben states: “A true contemporary is out of joint with the times, and this alienation gives a perspective from which he sees the time in ways the time does not see itself.” In other words, for Agamben, it is this anachronistic quality, the quality of not coinciding perfectly with one's time, that makes a person contemporary. However this approach is antithetical to Ruffel's. For Agamben's model presupposes detachment, distance, abstraction as well as a distinction between those who are contemporary and those who are not, whereas Ruffel emphasizes equality and horizontality, as a means of being truly contemporary and engaging with one's time (Ruffel, 2016: 89).

So much for the contemporary and how it counters the modernist perspective. Now I will briefly describe the post-contemporary as outlined in another new book, Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik's *The Time Complex Post-Contemporary* (2016). Their thesis is that time no longer adheres to modernist linearity in the sense of the past being followed by the present, and then by the future. Instead, the future replaces the present as the main structuring element (2016: 9). So on this reading, the future happens before the present, as illustrated by such phenomena as preemptive strikes, preemptive policing, or even preemptive personalization (something you really do want but did not explicitly ask for). In other words, it is not about something you might think about buying in the future, but about something you will assuredly need in the future (2016:10), and preemptive shifts like this are happening more and more. The post-contemporary also jettisons modernity's promise of a bright future, ie the conviction that the future will be better and that we can change it. Instead we are confronting a technological non-human future, in which computers take decisions for us, being faster than we are - a future in which humanity is no longer at the centre of things but has to get used to the fact that it has been displaced. As Avanesian has pointed out, this is a new phenomenon that did not exist in the 19th and 20th centuries. In other words, in the twenty-first century, change happens in the laboratories of Silicon Valley and no longer through social and political structures devised by humans and certainly not in the street. So both Ruffel and Avanesian are contesting modernist linearity but in different ways: according to Ruffel, we live in conflicting temporalities whereas for Avanesian, the future has changed position and happens before the present.

Finally I just want to mention one last difference between contemporary and post-contemporary on the one hand and the modernist perspective on the other: it concerns all three approaches, and has to do with the idea of rupture. For modernism's emphasis on breaking with the past in order to attain the new is a manifestation of rupture or non-linearity, that might seem comparable to the non-linearity of the post-contemporary and the contemporary but in fact it is not. The post-contemporary is more a change of position with respect to the modernist perspective, which is a point I shall return to later in this paper. As for the contemporary, Juliane Rebentisch argues in her article "The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art" (2015), that the new that we see in contemporary artworks is only new in that it is distinct from other works, but it no longer produces a new beginning, as was the case of modern art. In other words, the contemporary is predicated on distinctiveness rather than true newness. This has unfortunate consequences, as she points out: "The contemporaneity of contemporary art, according to this rather gloomy diagnosis, is nothing but the nightmare of an eternal now, a shallow present without historical depth, which of course fits in perfectly well with the widespread economization of the life-world, with the consequence that there are only new things to be consumed, but not to be lived." So the non-linearity of the contemporary is not the same as the non-linearity of the modern, but rather falls short of it – and of course this is a criticism that one can apply to Ruffel's definition of the term contemporary as well.

This divergence from modernist principles is also reflected in the way young artists today are indiscriminately embracing the work of previous generations. As Rebentisch writes "Instead of aggressively rejecting previous generations, young artists today seem to embrace their influence; radical breaks and new beginnings have been replaced by referential acknowledgment. Contemporary art casts nets of references into the past, thus also only expanding, if one believes the critique, its peculiar timeless present ever farther back. According to this diagnosis, contemporary art absorbs all previous isms, all historical movements, to the degree that it itself can no longer be identified in terms of any historical development, that it itself is thus no longer any ism." Rebentisch characterizes this development as *posthistoire*, where art has reached the end of history and levels out historical breaks and differences, offering instead of the conviction and engagement of the modern only indiscrimination and indifference – another criticism that can be applied to Ruffel's thesis.

After looking at how these two new theories diverge from the modernist perspective, I shall now explore the ways in which they converge with it. For even though these theorizations of the contemporary and the post-contemporary claim to supersede or critique modernism, they in

fact run parallel to it in certain respects, though of course not all.

For a start, if we follow Rebentisch's argument a bit further, we realize that the contemporary may not be that far from the modernist perspective after all. Rather than accepting - as does the thesis of *posthistoire* - that contemporary art stands for an end of history, for a crisis of progress, Rebentisch suggests that it should be put in a different perspective (2015: 226), and seen as constituting an artistic critique of the modernist model of progress that should itself be evaluated as progress (2015: 230). In other words, by acknowledging this state of indifference, contemporary art is pursuing the modernist task of critique, by critiquing what progress has become. So on this reading, the contemporary becomes a kind of extension of modernism.

A further parallel between Ruffel's position and the modernist perspective can be identified in their respective approaches to history: just as modernism is often characterized as ahistorical, so does Ruffel define the contemporary as transhistorical – emphasizing that each historical moment was once contemporary (2016: 17). Now the term 'ahistorical' has been defined (Merriam-Webster) as not concerned with or related to history, historical development, or tradition, while the term transhistorical has been defined (Wikipedia) as outside the bounds of history, universal, permanent. Both terms suggest an external perspective and lack of awareness of context, to the point where the distinction between them has tended to collapse.

There are also parallels between post-contemporary and the modernist perspective: for a start, as Ruffel has pointed out, the use of the prefix post in post-contemporary is problematic in that it maintains the modernist representation of time as sequential and linear. So even though the post-contemporary can be one of the temporalities subsumed under Ruffel's category of the contemporary, it is nonetheless neo-modernist.

The prefix post also evokes the modernist perspective with respect to the past. As Suhail Malik writes: “Everything now seems to be 'post' something else, which indexes that our understanding of what is happening now has some relation to but is also disconnected to historically given conditions (...) What's happening now is in relationship to what has happened but is no longer. We are the future of something else” (2016:13-14). As we saw, modernism too wants to be disconnected from historically given conditions – this being a goal that the post-contemporary would appear to have achieved by putting the future before the present.

Finally, the post-contemporary has affinities with the modernist perspective in its emphasis on the future. As Malik points out, the contemporary “is still premised on the present as the primary tense” (2016: 34), whereas in the post-contemporary, there is the possibility of understanding time through the future. In fact, the logic of the contemporary with its fixation on the present is no longer adequate as he points out: “The 'pre-' indexes a kind of anticipatory deduction of the future that is acting in the present – so that the future is already working within the now, again indicating how the present isn't the primary category but is understood to be organized by the future.” Now, the modernist march of time also seeks to anticipate the future. As the theorist Miško Šuvaković has pointed out, one of the key moments of modernism was the anticipation of the future. As he writes, every fresh seizure “was signified with the demand that the feeling of confronting the new be repeated regarding the new that had become the old (...) This obsessive repeatability of attaining the newer than new would become the ontological core of modernism” (2014: 106). A little like in the case of the post-contemporary, the emphasis here is on what has yet to come and on how this continual preparation for a future state is determining and shaping the present .

I will conclude by pointing out that if these two recent books on the topic are anything to go by, the links between the contemporary and post-contemporary on the one hand, and the modernist perspective on the other hand, have yet to be completely severed.

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