**‘Trailing Postmodernism: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Zadie Smith’s *NW*, and the Metamodern’**

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Trailing postmodernism

In many ways both David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012) are typical postmodern novels in their use of fragmented form, multiple narratives, and complex models of identity and characterisation. However, in this essay, I argue that alongside the postmodernist aspects of the novels manifest in their formal techniques, philosophically they are also interested in the possibility of exceeding or moving beyond postmodern scepticism and identifying the potential for reconstructive (rather than postmodern deconstructive) narratives. This is not to say that they constitute a rejection of the postmodern, nor that they represent either the new sincerity that has been identified by some critics and commentators as emerging in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century fiction[[1]](#endnote-1), the new puritanism that caught the imagination in the first decade of the new millennium, or, as we shall see, the problematic concept of the metamodern.[[2]](#endnote-2) The relationship with the postmodern in Mitchell’s and Smith’s novels is more complicated than a straightforward rejection as they are part reliant on postmodernism’s emancipatory rejection of some older grand narratives and part frustrated by its radical scepticism towards any alternative vision of the future. I also intend to pursue this examination with respect to distinctions between postmodernism as a set of narrative techniques and aesthetic practices and postmodernity as a series of socio-economic conditions and philosophical outlooks. In this context, I frame the discussion of the fiction with respect to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s famous distinction between modernism and postmodernism as set out in *The Postmodern Condition*.[[3]](#endnote-3) I offer a reading of the novels that place them in the interstices between Lyotard’s dichotomy, and in that sense gestures towards a post-postmodernism that acknowledges a relativistic conception of the world, but maintains the value of the individual’s search for concrete meaning and locus for collective identities (including an identity politics). I also, argue, however, that the two novels represent differing conclusions with respect to this aim.

Both the novels discussed in this essay exist in a space and time that can be seen to be ‘trailing’ the postmodern in more than one sense of the word. Firstly, we can think of ‘trailing’ in the manner of the detective who puts a subject under surveillance – being ‘on its trail’. In this sense, I am interested in the texts that continue to examine, explore and interrogate postmodernism. Secondly, we can think of ‘trailing’ in the sense of coming after, following in the wake of postmodernism, while still being affected by it in the present. Novelists and critics working in the contemporary period can therefore be seen to be in a position of external temporality to the postmodern and able to place it in an identifiable past from which it might be narrativized, historicized, parodied or perhaps even looked back upon with a wistful nostalgia.[[4]](#endnote-4) It should be noted, however, that I would like to maintain a tentative approach in this essay to the very concept of post-postmodernism as we are dealing with aesthetic formations that are incipient; indeed, both novels offer interesting treatments of time that examine the relationships between the past, present and future (including mediated constructions of each of these timeframes). As well as looking closely at Lyotard’s work, the essay will also engage with recent literary and critical theory associated with the post-postmodern (and especially the concept of metamodernism) by a number of writers, including David James and Urmila Seshagiri, and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.

In the last few years there has been a renewed interest in the concept of postmodernism and a number of recent books that have attempted to readdress its importance, treating it as a literary-historical period associated with the late twentieth-century moment.[[5]](#endnote-5) According to this chronological model, novelists in the early twenty-first century can be seen to be working in the shadow of postmodernism, responding in a variety of ways to its centrality to cultural theory and aesthetic production. As Potter and Lopez have argued, although it can be seen to have had its heyday by the beginning of the new millennium, for new writers emerging in the 2000s, ‘it is impossible to avoid considering postmodernism’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Adam Kelly has also noted, with respect to American fiction in particular, that a generation of writers emerged after 2000 who had grown up with postmodernism and were keen to move beyond its influence.[[7]](#endnote-7) Kelly argues that writers like Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Frantzen, Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace and Colson Whitehead were eager to establish a distance from the postmodern in order to achieve a temporal distinction in their work.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In this sense, it is perfectly valid to try to map out the parameters of a post-postmodernism that includes creative artists and writers who distance themselves in some form from the postmodern, while still holding that critical mode as a point of contrast in their work. It is certainly the case that several thinkers and cultural commentators have posited a form of post-postmodernism, a term that in its awkwardness reveals something of the complexities of its historical and aesthetic intersections. Several terms and concepts have emerged over the last twenty years or so that reveal a desire for an aesthetic and cultural practice that creates a distance to postmodernism, while accepting a recognition of its impact. These include Nicolas Bourriard’s altermodernism; Billy Childish and Charles Thompson’s remodernism; Alan Kirby’s digimodernism; Jose Lopez and Garry Potter’s critical realism; Gilles Lipovetsky’s hypermodernism; Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne’s new puritans; David Foster Wallace’s new sincerity; and Lars von Trier’s Dogme 95; amongst others.[[9]](#endnote-9)

One term that has particularly caught the literary-critical imagination is metamodernism. In this essay, I argue that the articulations of metamodernism (in particular those proposed by as proposed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, and David James and Urmila Seshagiri[[10]](#endnote-10)) have valence with respect to thematic, philosophical and attitudinal responses to the contemporary condition. However, the identification of an aesthetic distinction between metamodernism (and/or neo-modernism) and postmodernism throws up interesting complexities when applied to Mitchell and Smith, two writers who are often cited in this context. Indeed, I will argue that in terms of concrete examples of aesthetic and literary practice, it is very difficult to see (as yet) a paradigmatic and epochal set of styles that extends beyond postmodernism, despite this term now being clearly identified as having had its clearest impact in the late twentieth century. As Martin Paul Eve has rightly argued, metamodernism ‘as a form of post-postmodernism’ is ‘insufficiently delineated from its antecedent’ and therefore ‘cannot be used as a temporal specifier’.[[11]](#endnote-11) In this context, it might be more accurate to see metamodernism as a category within the postmodern, rather than offering a clear break with it.

Before discussing the various models of the metamodern in detail, it is useful to return to one of the key thinkers of postmodernism in order to frame the idea of the relationship of postmodernism to modernity (and modernism) with respect to interrogating the idea of a chronological development.[[12]](#endnote-12) In his ground-breaking work, ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’ Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that a distinction can be made between modernism and postmodernism, not necessarily in terms of historical and chronological positioning, but in terms of their respective positions and approaches to the attempt to represent the Kantian notion of the sublime as revealed in aspects of living in modernity. For Lyotard, modernism represents: ‘an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognisable consistency, continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Modernism thus attempts to represent aspects of contemporary living that cannot find concrete or representational forms. It does this through a variety of aesthetic practices that are destined to fail, but in the very attempt to produce a coherent and contained work of art it offers a reassuring connection between the author, work and reader. Thus, striving to intimate the nature of the sublime is in itself a worthwhile endeavour, even if the concrete object remains out of reach. Indeed, for the modernist, the work of art itself becomes the sublime object that compensates for, for the incoherence and instability of the unpresentable.

For Lyotard, the postmodern constitutes the same attempt, but carries very different qualities and implications about the object to be rendered in aesthetic form: ‘The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Postmodernism, thus constituted, shares modernism’s attempt to capture the unpresentable, but questions the very possibility of aesthetic form standing in as a substitute for the unpresentable. The scepticism towards metanarratives is thus played out at the level of aesthetic form, which, in contrast to the modernist, constitutes for the postmodernist the unsettling disruption of satisfying formal qualities:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The postmodern work is thus posited in two ways: firstly, as unsettling for the reader or audience in its rejection of the soothing effects (and affects) of approaching unpresentable subjects in recognisable and safe forms; and secondly, as a practice that eludes crystallization into a series of recognizable techniques or attitudes towards the object of representation and/or construction.

It is illuminating, then, to play out Lyotard’s approach in the context of engaging with the various theories of a post-postmodernism that have emerged over the last 10 or 20 years. To take the issue of postmodernism as an unsettling aesthetic practice first, it is clear that by the 1990s audiences had become so used to its practices of disorientation, metafiction, challenging of expected generic conventions, and the representation of prurient and transgressive subject matter that it had lost its power to shock.[[16]](#endnote-16) Indeed, postmodernism could be seen to be following the trajectory Fredric Jameson identifies for modernism earlier in the twentieth century when he argues: ‘Those formerly subversive and embattled styles [of modernism …] felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandparents are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy - dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new’.[[17]](#endnote-17) For Jameson, it is clear that postmodernism was always meant to be understood as a periodized concept, appearing as an anterior reaction to high modernism. However, Lyotard’s approach complicates the idea of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism as a purely chronological one: ‘A work can become modern only if it is at first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Postmodernism, in this configuration, can be seen as a category of response to modernity – alongside, not superseding, modernism – whereby the postmodern suggests a more radical, experimental and incipient aesthetic response to the current moment.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The question of whether postmodernism can be neatly placed in a chronological trajectory can be interrogated in the various attempts to identify a post-postmodernism.[[20]](#endnote-20) It is at this point that we can examine two twenty-first-century interventions in the debates around post-postmodernism, and in particular around the term metamodernism, one developed in an essay of 2010 by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker and the second in an article by David James and Urmila Seshagiri. The term metamodernism is especially interesting in the context of this essay as both Mitchell and Smith have been discussed with respect to this concept. However, as I argue below, I remain sceptical of the distinctiveness of the term once it moves from the sphere of theoretical speculation to the analysis of concrete examples. Metamodernism is one of a variety of attempts to identify a perceptible shift in aesthetic practice and ethical outlook developing in the twenty-first century and it can be seen to be in dialogue with both modernism and postmodernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker, in particular, have produced an open-ended and tentative identification of some of the ways in which this new discourse might be approached. They describe metamodernism as alternating between the modern and the postmodern; for them it ‘oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern’.[[21]](#endnote-21) The way Vermeulen and van den Akker conceive of the discourse then is perpetually in movement, oscillating between several nodes.[[22]](#endnote-22) This is a seductive model, although it should be said that perhaps the plurality associated with the concept is closer to the radical diversity of the postmodern than the unity they attribute to modernism. Nevertheless, the metamodern seems to identify an ontological and attitudinal relationship to modernity that exceeds postmodern scepticism and irony. As they argue, if postmodernism is associated with deconstruction then metamodernism tends towards reconstruction. However, the metamodern is not strictly speaking an escape from postmodernism’s influence and they also argue that the discourse relies on a certain pragmatic strategy that accepts some of the cynicism towards idealism in the postmodern but strategically chooses to continue to search for the possibilities of an alternative and progressive future. The ethical impasse of postmodernism is thus evaded, if only momentarily: ‘Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find’.[[23]](#endnote-23)

David James and Urmila Seshagiri have also adopted the term metamodernism, but with a slightly different set of characteristics to Vermeulen and van den Akker. James and Seshagiri agree that ‘postmodern disenchantment no longer dominates critical discourse’ but the emphasis they identify is a *return* to modernism rather than an oscillation *between* modernism and postmodernism.[[24]](#endnote-24) James and Seshagiri argue: ‘Metamodernism’s value […] lies in the ambition that unifies its otherwise varied artistic and historical positions: to reassess and remobilize narratives of modernism’.[[25]](#endnote-25) They also lay emphasis on the formal and historical aspects of this newly configured body of literature; for them, it offers: ‘a critical practice balanced between an attention to the textures of narrative form and an alertness to the contingencies of historical reception’.[[26]](#endnote-26) They make a valid case and identify several texts that can be included in the category including Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* (2011),J.M. Coetzee’s *Youth* (2002), Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2006),Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Will Self’s *Umbrella* (2012,) and, significantly for this essay, Zadie Smith’s *NW*. This identification certainly works at the level of form, as all of these novels can be seen to be using techniques often associated with modernist literary practice (for example, the examination of subjective time; liberal use of interior monologue, free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness; and disruption of linear narrative) to differing extents and in differing ways. James and Seshagiri continue: ‘Metamodernist narratives thus distinguish themselves from an earlier postmodernism through self-conscious, consistent visions of dissent and defamiliarization as novelistic inventions specific to the early twentieth century’.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is with this last distinction, however, that there are a few problems. Firstly, this argument relies on a linear progression of dominant literary modes, which, as noted above, a postmodernism formed along Lyotardian lines rejects. Secondly, the self-consciousness of the form seems at times indistinguishable from dominant practices in postmodernism. It is perhaps in the focus on the ‘consistent visions of dissent’ that there might be a space opened up between post- and meta- versions of modernism. However, I am not convinced that the novels cited exemplify consistent attitudes in the way claimed here. I would argue that the relationship these texts have with their formal progenitor is often one of historical interrogation (and in some cases parody) as much as an identification of the continuing appropriateness of those techniques to convey contemporary as well as early twentieth-century contexts.[[28]](#endnote-28) Taken on formal terms, then, these texts are not doing much that is significantly different from postmodernism. Indeed, postmodernism is precisely ‘post’ because it offers the same approach they claim for metamodernism as it, ‘incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier cultural moment’.[[29]](#endnote-29)

So in what sense can the meta- be distinctive from the post-, other than in its claim to a vitality that has been exhausted in the waning of postmodernism? The argument turns again on the attitudinal response between post- and meta- with respect to intertextual modernist influences. These are, of course, multiple and singular to each text’s iteration of the reference to the modernist source(s); McCarthy’s use of modernist techniques is very different from Smith’s as they both are to McEwan’s, Selasi’s and Self’s. For metamodernism to have credibility then, we need to return to Vermeulen and van den Akker’s identification of a philosophical outlook that reinvests postmodern fragmentation and scepticism of attitudes to the past with a modernist belief in a positive teleology. I would argue, however, that this position was already adequately described in Linda Hutcheon’s concept of postmodernism’s ‘complicity and critique’, a category of aesthetic practice in which there is the taking up and often celebration of a particular style, mode or genre, whilst the postmodern re-visiting of that style alerts the reader to dubious and problematic ideological assumptions in the originating model.[[30]](#endnote-30)

So what are we left with? Metamodernism certainly seems to represent a *desire* to reject some of postmodernism’s debilitating paradoxes and philosophical cul-de-sacs; but is it sufficiently formulated in the models offered by Vermeulen and van den Akker and James and Seshagiri to merit a category of aesthetic practice that distinctively and meaningfully exceeds the postmodern? In the following sections of the essay I show that by employing close readings of Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and Smith’s *NW* it is possible to tease out and highlight some of the intriguing inconsistencies raised by the idea of metamodernism as well as identifying the some of the contexts by which it can be a useful term.[[31]](#endnote-31)

David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004)

*Cloud Atlas* is Mitchell’s fourth novel and continues his love of fiction that combines disparate narratives into one aesthetic space. The geographical and temporal diversity in this novel is, indeed, vast encompassing narratives from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well as speculative narratives that take us into a post-apocalyptic future. It also exhibits multiple intertextual references to other texts and identifiable literary genres. It is in this intersection between historical periods and aesthetic styles that the novel reveals its engagement with postmodernism and, I will argue, offers a good example of some of the characteristics (and limitations) of the categories of post-postmodernism and metamodernism.

There has already been a certain amount of critical discussion on Mitchell’s relationship to postmodernism. Richard Bradford, for example, describes him as a ‘new postmodernist’ who exhibits a ‘mutually supportive symbiotic relationship’ between poststructuralist theory and postmodern aesthetics.[[32]](#endnote-32) In addition, Bradford places Mitchell as one of a group of British authors emerging in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries (including Nicola Barker, Jonathan Coe, Toby Litt, Will Self and Ali Smith) who ‘execute a calculated and premeditated shift away from an implied mind-set, outside the novel, that involves the plausible, the rational and the predictable’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Similarly, Will McMoran reads *Cloud Atlas* as unproblematically postmodern and identifies similarities between Mitchell’s novel and Italo Calvino’s *If On a Winters’ Night a Traveller*.[[34]](#endnote-34) However, several critics have suggested that Mitchell’s work gestures beyond the postmodern. Peter Childs and James Green, for example, argue that his ‘novels do not merely rehearse the stylistic inflections of a domesticated postmodernism […] but rather articulate a complex response to the current material conditions of the world’.[[35]](#endnote-35) Furthermore, they place Mitchell in a cultural moment in which postmodernism is ‘increasingly unsatisfactory to describe the flows of mediated identity, the global reach of capital, the possibilities of new political paradigms, and the modulating networks of the world market’.[[36]](#endnote-36) With reference to metamodernism in particular, Patrick O’Donnell has noted the similarities between Mitchell’s work and Vermeulen and van den Akker’s formulations; as O’Donnell writes: ‘With its mixture of genres, voices, and styles, fluctuating between recognizably traditional narrative modes and those more visibly reflexive and contemporary, Mitchell’s fictions resists easy classification, yet it bears some of the traces of the “metamodern”’.[[37]](#endnote-37) The diversity of the critical responses, then, suggests that *Cloud Atlas* represents an interesting example of the difficulty of clearly defining the distinctions between postmodernism and any of its forms of extensions beyond it. In what follows, I will analyse some of the literary techniques used in the novel in order to establish how best to describe its modal character.

One of the ways in which *Cloud* Atlas’s relationship with the postmodern can be identified is in its deployment of a wide range of intertextual references and several critics have picked up on this feature of the novel.[[38]](#endnote-38) Courtney Hopf, for example, in a chapter on the way discursive models of identity are presented in *Cloud Atlas*, emphasises the way in which the novel utilizes intertextuality in its presentation of objects, ideas and feelings across the differing sections, suggesting that its dominant modes is metalepsis. She argues that ‘by foregrounding narrative levels at such an extreme, the novel encourages the reader to see herself as just another level, and to imagine the self as a discursive construction as well’.[[39]](#endnote-39) This reading chimes with the postmodern emphasis on the mediated and discursive aspects of identity and a deconstruction of the subject. However, what Hopf identifies in Mitchell’s approach might better be described as ‘intratextuality’ in that the references bounce around *within* the novel forming resonances and patterns that are passed between the sections. In many ways, it dramatizes the concept of intertextuality itself. There are also, however, several intertextual references to outside sources and specific references to a number of writers and texts sprinkled across the book including Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, as well as Martin Amis, Borges, Flaubert, Plato, Solzhenitsyn, Tolstoy and Lawrence Durrell. In this way, meta-textuality is emphasized in terms of both an internal structuring and an external set of reference points. Intertextuality, of course, is inevitably an anterior technique: it looks backwards to place the present work in relation to a tradition or a set of established aesthetic codes. This can be deployed in (at least) two ways; firstly, to emphasize the continuation of the present text in a body of work; and secondly, to mark a break or rupture with a recognized and established tradition. *Cloud Atlas* does both: it registers its allegiance to postmodern technique, while marking its point of departure from postmodernism’s philosophical, ethical and political implication.

*Cloud Atlas* presents us with distinctively different prose styles in each of its six sections. Many of these can be seen as parodies of identifiable literary styles of the past, addressed with a knowing and ludic distance between the articulation of the world coterminous with the writing and a contemporary sensibility. Indeed, the novel is self-reflexively aware of literary style as a framed series of historically-contextualized engagements with writing from and about the past.[[40]](#endnote-40) The presentation of multiple stylistic forms is deployed in each of its six main narratives, four of which can be regarded as historical, while two are placed in the future. In its self-reflexive focus on historical contexts it reveals something of Linda Hutcheon’s established definition of postmodern literature as dealing in historiographic metafictions.[[41]](#endnote-41) There is, indeed, a distinctive aspect of this in Mitchell’s work, in that the various narratives are not meant to be seen as authentic representations of styles that are located in their historical moments, rather each of the fictions presented complicates the relationship between style and temporality. For example, the first and last sections of the novel represent the journal of Adam Ewing, an American scientist, as he visits various Pacific islands. The narrative is presented specifically in term of its dates (corroborated in one of the other sections of the novel) as taking place between Thursday 7th November 1849 and Monday 13th January 1850.[[42]](#endnote-42) However, the historical placing of this stylized form of writing inevitably evades such a strict temporality. Indeed, Ewing’s narrative is meant to be seen as old-fashioned to its moment, borrowing stylistic traits more from eighteenth-century travel narratives than its actual mid-nineteenth century placing; his rather over-literary style is reminiscent not of the coterminous Dickens, Gaskell or Thackeray but the exploration narratives of Defoe.[[43]](#endnote-43) This is, of course, a way for Mitchell to comment on Ewing as a character, as he is attracted to the heroic exploration tales represented by Defoe. The other main intertextual reference in this section is to Herman Melville, which, it could be argued is more synchronous to its coterminous moment. Indeed, the evaluation of Ewing’s style by Robert Frobisher (who discovers Ewing’s published book in the 1930s) in the second section of the novel identifies Melville’s ‘Cpt Delano in *Benito Cereno*’ as the indicative style. Melville’s style, however, can itself be placed historically in the past, because it takes as its model earlier travel narratives and uses phrases and idioms that are recognizably anachronistic for a mid-nineteenth century readership.[[44]](#endnote-44) So rather than pinning down the historical context of the narratives, the novel raises vertiginous questions about the very possibility of fixing a literary style to a specific time or period, even as it experiments with offering historically-grounded narratives based on distinctive forms of writing.

One way to negotiate these temporal slippages is to identify the earlier sections of *Cloud Atlas* as representing a form of writing we can refer to as neo-historical fiction, a form that combines a reappraisal of the ideological positions and stylistic techniques of narratives from the past with a contemporary sensibility in order to offer an implicit (and sometimes explicit) critical commentary on those past positions. As Elodie Rousselot describes neo-historical fiction, ‘on the one hand it strives for a high degree of historical accuracy, while on the other it is conscious of the limitations of that project. The mode of verisimilitude employed by the neo-historical novel therefore confirms its simultaneous attempt *and* refusal to render the past accurately’.[[45]](#endnote-45) In the neo-historical sections of *Cloud Atlas*, this approach is framed by authors who not only reveal styles that are located in their contemporary moment, but rearticulate the styles of their own pasts. Stylistically, therefore, this section can again be identified as a form of historiographic metafiction.[[46]](#endnote-46) The disruption of temporality *within* the individual sections themselves as well *between* the texts furthers the novel’s disruption of a linear temporality, and thus complicates the possibility of a firm location in which to ground an ethical and/or political position.

This leads us, then, to a consideration of the ethical implications of the novel’s use of what appear to be typical postmodern narrative techniques. With respect to *Cloud Atlas*’s disruption of linear narrative we might ask whether, taking the novel as a whole, it is possible to locate a position from which to make ethical judgements about the various characters’ actions. Two models are suggested: one in which the ethical tenor of the novel transcends each of the temporal and cultural locations in the multiple narratives; and one in which distinct and culturally-contextualized ethical positions are assumed that disallows the possibility of grounding any fixed position from which to judge the behaviours of the characters. This opposition, of course, goes to the heart of whether this novel can be approached as postmodern in terms of its ethical outlook. Again, Ewing’s narrative is crucial here with particular respect to its commentary on shifting historical attitudes towards (post)colonialism and the slave trade.

Ewing’s section of the novel is set in the South Pacific and his journal includes an account of the history of the Moriori tribe, the indigenous population of the Chatham Islands, who are described to Ewing by Mr D’Arnoq, a preacher-cum-amateur-anthropologist, as enjoying a pacifist utopia before the arrival of the British colonialists. As D’Arnoq explains:

Two thousand savages […] enshrine *Thou Shalt Not Kill* in word *& in deed* & frame an oral ‘Magna Carta’ to create a harmony unknown elsewhere for the sixty centuries since Adam tasted the fruit of the tree of Knowledge. War was an alien concept to the Moriori as the telescope is to the Pygmy. *Peace*, not a hiatus betwixt wars but millennia of imperishable peace, rules these far flung islands. Who can deny Old Rēkohu lay closer to More’s Utopia than our States of Progress governed by war hungry princelings in Versailles & Vienna, Washington & Westminster?[[47]](#endnote-47)

This ideal pre-colonial state suffers a series of exploitative encounters with outside forces including Europeans, the New Zealand Maoris, and independent whalers who are representative of individualized, neo-colonial exploitation. The quoted passage is revealing in its interpretation of the pre-colonial sate of Rēkohu, the original indigenous name for the colonized Chatham Islands. In part, it celebrates the advanced thinking of the indigenous culture, but it does so in terms that confirm the positional power of dominant Western culture. D’Arnoq’s relationship to the mechanisms of colonization remain ambiguous, combining a sense of loss for the values of the Moriori culture with an acceptance of the inevitability of the colonial invasion. The teleological structure of D’Arnoq’s discourse seems irresistible and makes it difficult to decipher whether he advocates a return to the utopian moment, or offers an ironic distance towards a culturally naïve set of beliefs that are crushed when it encounters the harsh realities of colonial acquisition, where slavery is an accepted (if contested) practice. Caroline Edwards offers an interesting way of approaching this binary in terms of what she identifies as a trend in recent British fiction (and particularly in Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten* [1999]) away from ‘totalitarian’ models of utopia to ‘minor utopian visions’ and, following Jay Winter, ‘moments of possibility’.[[48]](#endnote-48) *Cloud Atlas*, then, resists the temptation to project towards large scale idealized and teleological prefigurative systems in favour of what Edwards calls ‘microtopias’.[[49]](#endnote-49) These ‘microtopias’ suggest Lyotard’s *petits recits* that replace the grand narratives of modernity with localized discourses that retain a faith in their achievability and thus evade the postmodern, deconstructive scepticism. However, this approach can only really be addressed from the dominant position of our own period from which slavery and violent colonialism are clearly morally abhorrent practices. In fact, Ewing is presented as a character with a discourse that can step outside of the dominant ideologies of his moment in his final decision to associate with the Moriori slave against his own Western culture. This could be an example of Ewing representing an emergent set of cultural beliefs that are, in Raymond Williams’s terms, oppositional to dominant and prevailing cultural discourses.[[50]](#endnote-50)

The possibility of a small scale, localized, utopian society can be seen most directly in the central post-apocalyptic narrative in Mitchell’s novel, ‘Sloosha’s Crossin’ and Ev’rythin’ After’. The primitive, communal and tribal social structure in this section offers escape from the hyperreal dystopian world presented in the narrative that enfolds this section (structurally) and precedes it (temporally), ‘The Orison of Sonmi-451’. This enfolding section conceives of a late capitalism, or perhaps more accurately a ‘last capitalism’ before the revolution enacted by the fabricants, a species of cyborg AIs in this alternative reality, who are described as ‘the ultimate organic machinery’.[[51]](#endnote-51) The contrast between these two futuristic societies balances the totalized and localized versions of a utopian vision, with the latter offering a more sustainable version, an outlook that is ultimately supported by the novel. As Edwards argues with respect to Mitchell’s novel, ‘The utopian moments of solidarity articulated in […] *Cloud Atlas* do not offer alternative societies *in totem* but, rather, offer fugacious expressions of non-alienated life’.[[52]](#endnote-52)

This returns us to the ethical effects produced by the use of specific narrative techniques. Hopf identifies the potential ethical implications of Mitchell’s particular approach to deploying narrative levels: ‘The process of reading through *Cloud Atlas* […] is a process of continual *­re-*framing and *re-*contextualizing that encourages the reader to adapt to new subject positions with increasing ease’ (emphases in the original).[[53]](#endnote-53) This suggests that through the deployment of postmodern narrative techniques of fragmentation and disruption a new approach emerges that exceeds postmodern scepticism and irony towards the possibility of a legitimate quest for human connectivity across diverse times, locations and cultures. Similarly, Peter Boxall argues that: ‘The ethical possibilities of this novel, as well as its formal and aesthetic ones, emerge from […the] sense that the future of the novel, however much it belongs to its present and its past, is also absolutely unknown, an empty vacuum in which anything remains possible’.[[54]](#endnote-54) Thus the indeterminacy generated by Mitchell’s refusal to ground the novel’s ethical outlook in any of its sections produces a set of (optimistic) possibilities rather than the debilitating scepticism produced by postmodernism’s radical irony. This can also be identified in the novel’s distinctive structure; as Kristian Shaw argues, the move from fragmentation to reconnection pivots around the central Sloosha section: ‘While the first half of *Cloud Atlas* imitates the postmodern narrative structure of Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979) […] the second half utilises cultural connectivity and active agency to work against the fragmentation associated with postmodern fiction’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

This text is complicated, then, by its extension into the future. Following his experiences in the South Seas, Ewing eventually joins the nineteenth-century abolitionists, the context of which is projected into the future in the narrative of Sonmi-451, a being that as a cloned worker is being designed to carry out menial work in a futuristic projection of a fast food restaurant. The treatment of the cloned workers in this hyperreal, hyper-capitalist state set in a future South Korea parallels the treatment of slaves in the nineteenth century and offers a transmigration of contexts of both exploitation and resistance across time. In this aspect of the text there is no room for postmodern ethical scepticism and fluidity – the narrative is clearly on the side of the abolitionists in their stand against the exploitative relationships the narratives convey. In this context, the novel chimes with Rosi Braidotti’s concept of the post-human, a figure that can reject postmodern recalcitrance to locate fixed ideologies. As she notes:

After the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and even the much contested post-feminist conditions, we seem to have entered the post-human predicament. Far from being the variation in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and somehow arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet. [[56]](#endnote-56)

In the case of *Cloud Atlas*, then, the connections of solidarity are made between the marginalized and exploited across human history and projected into the future in order to suggest that as long as there are exploitative systems, there will be collective (and successful) resistance to them. Mitchell’s text thus projects beyond the end of history to suggest that the dialectic identified by Hegel and passed through Marx will continue not only in the human, but in the post-human condition. In this context, Mitchell’s approach can be described as philosophically and politically post-postmodernist, but it arrives at this position in a formal approach that is heavily reliant on the postmodern aesthetic of fragmentation, intertextual complexity and metafictive playfulness. These are all techniques that can also be identified in Zadie Smith’s *NW*.

Zadie Smith, *NW* (2012)

Zadie Smith is a novelist who has championed an experimental approach to literary fiction. In her essay ‘Two Directions for the Novel’ she surveys the landscape of the contemporary novel in terms of formal technique and general attitudes to experimental fiction. Echoing David Lodge’s famous essay of 1969, ‘The Novelist at the Crossroads’, Smith’s essay identifies two trends in contemporary fiction by exemplifying and analysing two recent novels, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008), and Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005).[[57]](#endnote-57) The former she identifies as symptomatic of what she calls ‘a breed of lyrical realism’ that has become a dominant mode to the extent that ‘most other exits [are] blocked’.[[58]](#endnote-58) Smith makes it clear that she favours the path offered by experimental works such as McCarthy’s *Remainder*, whose self-conscious awareness of the mechanics of fiction making are brought to the fore. As she notes, McCarthy’s novel ‘meticulously […] works through the things we expect of a novel, gleefully taking them apart, brick by brick’.[[59]](#endnote-59) This, of course, sounds very much like the emphasis in the postmodern novel on metafiction, an interrogation of the very forms in which the fictive discourse operates.[[60]](#endnote-60) Smith perhaps wisely avoids the portmanteau postmodernist tag, but it is clear that a continued striving for new and experimental directions in which to take the novel should, for her, be part of the serious novelist’s duty. Of course, ‘experimental’ and ‘postmodern’ are not synonymous, especially, as we have already established, during a period when postmodernism was seen as an accepted and even dominant literary practice. Nevertheless, Smith’s target here is a form of realism that stands in opposition to many of the techniques adopted in postmodern fiction. It is in this context that we can consider *NW*, the first of her novels published after the ‘Two Directions for the Novel’ essay.[[61]](#endnote-61) *NW* has been identified as both a metamodernist and a neo-modernist work, however, the deployment of techniques associated with modernist literary practice is only one aspect of this formally complex novel. As I will argue in this section, by examining Smith’s experiments with a range of narrative modes we gain an insight into the difficulties of placing the novel within strict categories of literary form.

Smith’s *NW* is cited by James and Seshagiri as an example of metamodernism, and in particular as exemplifying a recent trend for ‘narratives of modernism’, which they define as ‘experimental fiction shaped by an aesthetics of discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority, and chronological play’.[[62]](#endnote-62) The distinction between modernism and postmodernism, however, remains unclear in this definition, as each of those descriptors might easily be applied to either aesthetic form. It is clear, however, that they stress *NW* as an example of a text that deploys techniques that consciously resonate with literary modernism of the form developed in an Anglo-Western European context in the early part of the twentieth century.

Smith does use techniques in the novel associated with literary modernism, most noticeably in the sections that focalize through Leah Hanwell. The short opening of the novel, in particular, establishes a typically modernist style with its focus on the perceptions of a single consciousness in a language that uses repetitions, sensory perceptions, and spots of time and establishes an impressionistic sense of location, time and mood:

The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lamp posts. In Willesden people go barefoot, the streets turn European, there is a mania for eating outside. She keeps to the shade. Redheaded. On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line – write it out on the back of a magazine. In a hammock, in the garden of a basement flat. Fenced in, on all sides.

Four gardens along, in the estate, a grim girl on the third floor screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody. Juliet balcony, projecting for miles. It ain't like that. Nah it ain't like that. Don't you start. Fag in hand. Fleshy, lobster-red.

I am the sole

I am the sole author.[[63]](#endnote-63)

This is recognizably modernist writing, reminiscent of Woolf in terms of its use of interior monologue and rhythms; and Joyce and Eliot with respect to its references to popular culture and snippets of overheard language. What becomes complex here, however, is the relationship the text, as a whole, has to this technique. Certain questions are suggested if this is to be described as a ‘narrative of modernism’ as James and Seshagiri claim: firstly, is this style maintained throughout the novel; and secondly, is the modernist style presented as the most effective way to convey the full complexity of life in the early twenty-first century moment it renders, or is there a level of (ironic) distance towards this style being registered with respect to the rest of the novel?

In response to the former question it has to be noted that the use of (neo-)modernist techniques in the first section of *NW* is only one aspect of a formally complex novel. The opening of the next section ‘guest’, for example, focalized through another character, Felix, introduces a distinctly different mode:

The man was naked, the woman dressed. It didn’t look right, but the woman had somewhere to go. He lay clowning in bed, holding her wrist. She tried to put a shoe on. Under their window they heard truck doors opening, boxes of produce heaved on tarmac.[[64]](#endnote-64)

This passage is more akin to conventional realism in its description of a recognizable social setting with characters conveyed by the relaying of information about them by a third-person narrative that remains above the action. Take, for example, the last line of the quoted passage ‘Under their window they heard truck doors opening, boxes of produce heaved on tarmac.’ A typical modernist approach might have taken us into the mind of the hearing consciousness, but here objective distance is maintained through external description. This style continues throughout the section and although we are provided with access to Felix’s thoughts this remains at the level of external description rather than the free-indirect discourse and internal monologue that are a prominent feature of Leah’s chapter. Felix is placed squarely within a clearly described social environment and in many ways, his section harks back to a tradition of working-class realism, especially in the so-called ‘angry young man’ fiction of the 1950s. Smith’s narrative of social class is thus presented in a form which is familiar to readers of a tradition of postwar realist fiction. [[65]](#endnote-65) As with novels such as John Braine’s *Room at the Top* (1958), Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), and John Wain’s *Hurry on Down* (1953) the narrative is episodic in ‘guest’ and involves Felix’s encounters with a series of people revealing a rich and diverse social world. The novel moves geographically from the estates of north-west London to affluent central areas of the city and includes a visit to his Felix’s father’s council-estate flat, a meeting with a young upper-middle-class white man trying to sell his father’s sports car, and a visit to Felix’s drug addict ex-girlfriend’s apartment in Westminster. As in that earlier tradition, Smith uses these encounters to examine socio-cultural contexts of contemporary urban life, with respect to discourses of class, gender and ethnicity. The adoption of a realist style, then, seems to be appropriate to Smith’s subject matter in this section of the novel.

The third section, ‘host’, changes again in terms of style. This section focalizes primarily on the character Keisha Blake (who changes her first name in her teenage years to Natalie) and significant experiences in her life are given in numbered sections, which, it is suggested, build to represent the development of her identity and sense of self. The timeframe of ‘host’ is also very different from the other sections and spans the period from Keisha’s earliest memories to the contemporary moment (as established in the first two sections ‘visitation’ and ‘guest’). ‘Host’ could indeed be described as a *Bildungsroman*, embedded within the broader framework of the novel. Formally, however, it differs from the traditional *Bildungsroman* (based on nineteenth-century models) as it adopts a more fractured structure of development.[[66]](#endnote-66)Although the ordering is logical and linear, the sections vary in length, tone and significance, and there is a gap between sections 36 and 38, echoing the significance given to the number 37 in the first chapter. The form deployed in this chapter lies somewhere between conventional definitions of modernism and postmodernism (or structuralism and poststructuralism), in that it suggests an ordered life, but begins to break open the contexts upon which that order is based. In addition, it is a form that hovers around the gaps between the significant moments that are recorded as significant in Keisha’s life. Stuart Hall defines a postmodern model of identity as ‘having no fixed, essential or permanent identity […] formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us’.[[67]](#endnote-67) This definition captures the way in which Keisha’s transition into adulthood is conveyed in the third chapter of Smith’s novel. The change of her name is thus crucial in this development: at one point we are told that ‘Natalie Blake was busy with self-invention’, and her relationships are based on a set of constructed and mediated images and emotions. The relationship she develops with Frank de Angelis is particularly indicative of this postmodern model of identity: ‘the silent and invisible bond between them strengthened, for who else but Frank de Angelis – *or someone exactly like Frank De Angelis* – could she ask to accompany her on the strange life journey she was preparing to undertake?’[[68]](#endnote-68) At this moment of describing what appears to be an authentic love relationship, the possibility of a simulacrum of the love object undermines the sincerity, implying that Natalie is in love with the cultural construction Frank represents. In terms of literary form, this chapter formally corresponds to a character whose identity remains fractured despite the attempt to regiment it into neat compartments. The pointillism of the style builds not to a coherent image but one that remains blurred and intangible; postmodern form and content can be said to be working in harmony here.

It would appear, then, that Smith deploys a series of differing formal techniques to express the character who forms the main point of focalization in each of the chapters. In this sense, to read *NW* as a neo-modernist text is misleading. It certainly uses techniques associated with modernism at times, most clearly in the chapter that centres on Leah’s experience. However, this deployment of modernist style is framed within the larger text as it juxtaposes modernistic techniques with a range of other forms of writing. Its attitude to modernism, therefore, is partly ironic, partly celebratory, recognizing it as one of a series of formal options available to the novelist of the twenty-first century, and one that is most appropriate in presenting a certain kind of character and set of situations. This is character as form: each individual being presented in a formal style that is most appropriate to the sensibilities and emotional make-up of that character.

The formal complexity of Smith’s novel, then, matches that of Mitchell’s but what of the ethical implications associated with this use of a fragmented and pluralistic literary style? To approach this question we might look at a description that comes towards the end of the novel when Keisha looks back towards central London from the Hornsey Lane Bridge in north London, a location infamous for suicides:

The view was cross-hatched. St. Paul’s in one box. The Gherkin in another. Half a tree. Half a car. Cupolas, spires. Squares, rectangles, half-moons, stars. It was impossible to get any sense of the whole. […] The tower blocks were the only thing she could see that made any sense, separated from each other, yet communicating. […] A man and a woman walked over and stood next to Natalie at the railing. Beautiful view, said the woman. She had a French accent. She didn’t sound at all convinced by what she’d said. After a minute the couple walked back down the hill.[[69]](#endnote-69)

This passage neatly represents a hovering hesitation between a postmodern rejection of a totalizing unity and the tentative possibility of a sense of meaning to be gained from the urban landscape Keisha observes. Communication is accepted between the residential buildings, but these are separated bodies. An attempt to recognize the view as potentially beautiful and capable of being placed in a (grand) narrative of essential aesthetic value, is recognized, but then rejected, and ultimately suggested to be unconvincing. It is interesting here to return to Lyotard’s conception of postmodernism as a category ‘within’ modernism rather than chronologically coming ‘after’. The idea of a set of aesthetic practices and world views following on from one another is replaced by an indeterminate oscillation between two methods of interpretation: the modernist and the postmodernist and, in this sense, it has affinities with Vermeulen and van den Akker’s model of the metamodern. However, I would argue that Smith’s outlook remains closer to the postmodern in its rejection of the attainability of a fixed identity as the most appropriate to reflect the complexities of contemporary living, and maybe this is the limit placed on writers in the current period of transition. Smith’s work is not a rejection of postmodernism, not a post-postmodernism, but a *trailing* postmodernism, representing a fiction that despite commendably striving for an experimental edge is unable, yet, to find a mode that that is significantly different from the formal characteristics associated with the postmodern. This is not a criticism of Smith, but rather of the attempt in literary and cultural criticism to identify a body of writing that represents a clear break from a lingering postmodernism, at least in terms of form.

Conclusions

Whereas much postmodernist literature was invested in promoting a process of fragmentation in order to interrogate, challenge or deconstruct a variety of grand or metanarratives, post-postmodernism, of the kind with which Mitchell and to a lesser degree Smith can be associated, starts at a point of fragmentation and explores possible ways of (re-)forming connections. If postmodernism was a movement of deconstruction, post-postmodernism is about the possibility of reconstruction. In terms of literary form, however, the various strategies that are involved in that process necessitate an engagement with fragmentation at some level revealing texts that are often indistinguishable, at a formal level, from those now classic postmodernist texts with their non-linear narratives, self-reflexive metafictional moves, de-centred characters and heightened intertextualities. At a formal level, then, the distance between Mitchell and Smith’s self-reflexive, intertextual, fragmented and plural narratives and those of Amis, Auster, DeLillo, Carter and Pynchon, is not yet enough to warrant a new literary category. Metamodernism, if it is to be a valuable concept, is only useful at the level of its attitude towards the fragmentary and plural nature of contemporary local, national and global conditions. It could, in that sense, represent a workable tag to identify those texts that display fragmented narratives in order to explore (and tentatively celebrate) the possibility of reducing that fragmentation and deconstruction and the implied disassociation and factional disruptions that are a feature of contemporary societies. Metamodernism, then, attempts to re-humanize a posthuman or indeed anti-human set of conditions that pertain in much poststructuralist and postmodernist work. The two texts discussed in this article can, broadly speaking, be seen to represent different conclusions towards this impulse. Where *Cloud Atlas*, in its closing image of an ocean as a ‘multitude of drops’[[70]](#endnote-70) gestures towards a model of the world in which a balance between individuation and collectivity can be sustained and championed, *NW* is less optimistic about the efficacy of a harmonious relationship between disparate and often contesting positions; its residing model of societal connection being local networks of friends while at the macro level, the world remains ‘cross hatched’. Where *Cloud Atlas* suggests human collectivity can operate at a universal level, *NW* can only have faith in localized and subcultural groups, whilst the macro retains its fragmentation and plurality.

At this juncture, then, perhaps the only available position is of a critical looking back towards the dominant modes of the twentieth century, opening up a momentary space for a kind of neo-postmodernism. It could be suggested that there is indeed a new nostalgia for the postmodern, a wistful longing for a period that combined a ludic playfulness allowable under the ubiquity of (late) capitalism with a confidence in the value of challenging established and outmoded grand narratives (of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity), and maybe this confident position of radical scepticism was only possible when in reality there was an underlying acceptance of the continuation of market economics. This nostalgia is a symptom of this moment of flux. In this sense, a more distinctive and convincingly defined post-postmodernism (although certainly not called that) will reveal itself as a response to the very real threats that are emerging in the early twenty-first century to the dominance of a neo-liberal, globalized economy. Simon During has intimated something of this in his description of a new wave of literature associated with the precariat. As he suggests: ‘Precarity cannot easily engage with those forms of literature that are defined around the difference or opposition between modernism and postmodernism […] the contemporary literature of the precarity […] can be described […] as expressing intuitions and experiences of new, more or less disaggregated flows and moods, as belonging to literature of inconclusive illuminations’.[[71]](#endnote-71) In particular, then, the development of new forms of precarity might necessitate a move away from the desire to identify new modes of writing that feel obliged to define themselves against the established literary modes of the twentieth century.

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1. See Wallace; Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Blincoe and Thorne. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.It should be noted that I am using the English translation of Lyotard’s original 1979 *La Contidion postmoderne: rapport sur le saviour*, and recognize the inherent potential problems with translation in this context. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The use of the term ‘contemporary’ needs to be clarified here in its specific use as a category of literary history. I use the sense of the contemporary here broadly as synonymous with the twenty-first-century, but also with the literary and cultural critic’s position of attempting to be able to stand outside of the moment in order to analyse current trends and significances. This latter approach corresponds to Agamben’s definition: ‘Contemporaneousness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it’. Agamben, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, recent books and edited collections that in part historicize postmodernism as a late-twentieth-century concept: *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone; and *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern British Fiction* ed. Bran Nicol. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Potter and López, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kelly, ‘Beginning with Postmodernism’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. To push this narrative of critical paradigms forward, if the 1990s can be seen as postmodernism’s high point and incorporation into dominant and popular aesthetic practice, and the first decade of the twentieth century as a period when there have been a series of reactions, challenges and searches for its superseding mode, then the perhaps the 2010s might be seen as the decade when a renewed interrogation, interest in, and even nostalgia for postmodernism can be seen to be emerging. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Bourriaud; Childish and Thompson; Kirby; Lopez and Potter; Lipovetsky; Blincoe and Thorne; Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Vermeulen and van den Akker; James and Seshagiri. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Eve, 8. Eve offers a series of critiques of metamodernism as formulated by Vermeulen and van den Akker most notably in what he argues is their misreading of Kant. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Several commentators and critics have challenged Lyotard’s position with respect to his distinction between narrative and scientific discourse, but few have discussed this particular aspect of his discussions of postmodernism. For critiques of Lyotard’s relativism see Eagleton; Habermas; Norris. For a critique of Lyotard from the position of the philosophy of science see Nola and Gürol. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Lyotard, ‘Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?’, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. (italics in the original). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In a previous work, I discussed the 1990s as the decade which sees the emergence of a ‘popular postmodernism’ that could no longer claim to represent any kind of avant-garde aesthetic radicalism: Bentley, ‘Introduction: Mapping the Millennium’. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Lyotard, ‘Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?’, 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Critical analysis of aesthetic practice, of course, is in the business of trying to identify, define, and categorise particular techniques that can then be associated with portmanteau modal terms such as realism, modernism, postmodernism. According to Lyotard, however, postmodernism is distinctive in that embedded in its practice is the very rejection of attempts to categorise and define, or in other words, to fix it as a set of stable practices – self-reflexivity is not only a description of its technique, but one of the key concepts by which it self-scrutinizes. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. I have already discussed the relationship of postmodernism to various theoretical configurations of the post-postmodern in a previous work. See Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, ‘Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s. In that essay, I identify three ‘ends’ of postmodernism, only one of which can be understood as pertaining to a linear chronology; the others referring to the limits of its philosophical approach, and the concept of the ‘ends and means’ of postmodernism in terms of its ideological and political aims. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Vermeulen and van den Akker, 5-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The artist Luke Turner has also suggested the oscillatory nature of metamodernism: ‘Movement shall henceforth be enabled by way of an oscillation between positions’., *Metamodernism // Manifesto*, <http://www.metamodernism.org/>, (2011), Accessed 26th May 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Vermeulen and van den Akker, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. James and Seshagiri, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. I’ll discuss in greater detail the appropriateness of James and Seshagiri’s categorization of metamodernism with respect to *NW* in greater detail in the third part of this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. James and Seshagiri, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), 11. The classic example of complicitous critique is Angela Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* which celebrates the narrative power of traditional fairy stories whilst alerting the reader to the patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes conveyed in traditional iterations of the genre. It should be noted, however, that Hutcheon also suggests that there is movement beyond the postmodern in work produced in the later parts of the twentieth century, see the epilogue to the second edition *the Politics of Postmodernism* where she notes, ‘Let’s just say it’s [postmodernism] over’, Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002), 165-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. It should be noted that although the two main texts I discuss in the essay are by British writers, each is responding to a set of global and cosmopolitan contexts that reach beyond national boundaries. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Bradford, 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. McMorran. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Childs and Green, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. O’Donnell, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See, for example, Hopf; O’Donnell. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Hopf, 111. The point Hopf makes about *Cloud Atlas* chimes with Patricia Waugh’s observation about the effects of metafiction as a narrative strategy on the reader generally: ‘Metafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems’, Waugh, 9*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. In many ways, this could be identified as a modernist interest in the parodic relationship between literary articulations of a heroic past and a debased and bathetic present. I have in mind here Joyce’s *Ulysses* as perhaps the clearest example of this distancing between a heroic intertextual template (Homer’s myth) and the quotidian experiences of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Daedelus as they wander around a post-lapsarian Dublin. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. The use on anachronisms in literature to reveal a character’s particular relationship to the past is a fascinating and emerging area of literary criticism. For a ground-breaking discussion of this area (in the context of Early Modern literature) see Munro. Munro, in particular, identifies the way I which the use of archaisms in literary texts can undermine temporality, a point that is especially resonant with Mitchell’s use in *Cloud Atlas*. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. In terms of anachronism, it should be said that it would be unlikely that Ewing writing in 1949 would be aware of Melville’s work, given his most well-known narratives are not produced until the 1850s. Indeed, the reference to ‘Benito Cereno’ that comes later is of a text not published until 1955, five or six years after the Ewing’s recorded travels. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Rousselot, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Edwards, ‘Utopia, Transmigration and Time in *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*’, 185 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Edwards, ‘Microtopias: The Post-Apocalyptic Communities of Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse*’. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. See Williams’s model of the negotiation between dominant, residual and emergent discourses identifiable at any one moment in time of a culture: Williams. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 341-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Edwards, ‘Utopia, Transmigration and Time’, 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Hopf, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Boxall, 212. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Shaw, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Braidotti, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Lodge; McCarthy; O’Neill. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Smith, ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, 71. This essay was originally published in 2008 in the *New York Review of Books*. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. See, for example, Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*; McHale; Waugh. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Indeed, in interview, Smith has explained that the novel took her seven years to write, which suggests that work on the novel and the essay overlapped. ‘Zadie Smith Interview: On Bad Girls, Good Guys and the Complicated Midlife’. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. James and Seshagiri, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Smith, *NW*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Although, as I’ve argued elsewhere, the description of these novels as realist is reductive. See Bentley, ‘Form and Ideology in the Fifties Novel’. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. See Moretti. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Hall, 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Smith, *NW*, 183-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid. 281-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 529. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. During, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)