

After postmodernism: literary theory, culture and the new Higher School Certificate English syllabus

AXEL KRUSE

Postmodernism appeared as a unit of study in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate for the first time in 2001. The inclusion of postmodernism is part of a new English syllabus described as “a major reconceptualisation and expansion of the study and teaching of English” in New South Wales.¹ The new English syllabus involves crucial issues about literary theory, culture and education. The definition of texts has been extended to include film, media and multimedia texts, and the definition of English studies has been changed to combine traditional literary studies with new theoretical views of meaning and texts:

The syllabus allows for an engagement with new theoretical developments in the study of English, while maintaining the literary orientation that has been the traditional character of HSC English in New South Wales. The syllabus recognises the significance of meaning as process as well as a result of responding to and composing texts.²

The syllabus document defines “the new theoretical developments” and “meaning as process” in terms of how texts are produced in historical and cultural contexts and in relation to systems of values. There is a considerable focus on “contexts” defined as “the range of personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts in which a text is responded to and composed”.³ The general view is that English studies involves understanding a wide range of texts and understanding matters such as meaning, genre, and style in relation to

historical and cultural contexts and values. There is a new emphasis on texts, culture and values, and a concern to provide access to study of contemporary culture and a wide range of contemporary texts (including popular fiction, non-fictional prose, film and television) as well as the traditional literary canon. In addition, the new HSC English syllabus provides a mix of traditional literature, mass culture, media and multimedia studies across the full range of units of study, and with the aim that all students should have access to the full range of units, and that all students should develop a wide range of reading, writing and communication skills.

The new Higher School Certificate English syllabus involves significant advantages for students and teachers, and I strongly support the general terms of the view of English studies, and the general approach to units of study and texts. At the same time there is a need for a more extensive account of the changes and their background (within the syllabus document itself and elsewhere) in order to encourage greater understanding; and there are reasons to reconsider and extend the view of contemporary culture.

The new HSC English syllabus is a reconceptualisation of English studies in New South Wales schools in agreement with the broad view of English studies, literature and culture which has developed within the conditions of postmodern culture since the second world war. In these circumstances, in the same way as there have been conservative calls to return to the canon in the universities, there has been some attempt to talk up opposition to the new HSC English syllabus as the end of literature, art and civilisation. Barry Spurr has suggested in *The Sydney Morning Herald* that the aim is to replace Shakespeare with Steve Vizard, and that the changes in the syllabus will be the end of English literature and the English language.⁴ The English language, literature and civilisation will not end as a result of the new English syllabus. Shakespeare will survive. The general direction is towards a long needed reconceptualisation of English in the schools according to the view that English studies should involve both traditional

literature and more than the reading of traditional literature. Two crucial assumptions are that the choice of texts should reflect the conditions of contemporary culture, and that English studies should not be a practice carried out in isolation from the rest of the world and history.

The aim from within the universities should be to support the changes in HSC English by making sure that the syllabus addresses issues such as literary history, literary theory and contemporary culture as clearly and effectively as possible. In particular, it seems to me that the changes in the HSC need to be seen in relation to the institutional history of recent literary theory, and in relation to recent directions in culture which signal the end of postmodernism. The inclusion of a new elective unit about postmodernism underlines these issues, for the reason that the changes in the HSC English syllabus can be understood as a response to postmodernism, and as an attempt to assimilate postmodernism across the full range of the syllabus and the units of study. At the same time, postmodernism might not be the best solution to the aim to include contemporary culture in HSC English studies.

The concern with postmodern culture and literary theory in the new HSC English syllabus comes at a time when postmodernism is passing, or has passed. There is a widespread sense that we have reached a point after postmodernism. According to this sense of things the present marks the beginning of a new period. Postmodernism begins to seem an historical period in the recent past. It even has the dullness and lack of charm characteristic of the fashions of the recent past (a reaction especially significant when being fashionable, cool and retro was so much part of the postmodern condition). In this context, the New South Wales education system has only begun to catch up with postmodernism (and postmodern involvement with mass culture and contemporary culture) after postmodernism, at a point when postmodernism seems no longer immediately relevant to the present; and the situation is problematic if the aim of the new HSC English syllabus is to

recreate English studies in order to reflect contemporary culture.

The time lag with regard to postmodernism is accompanied by related complications with the new theoretical view of texts in the Higher School Certificate English syllabus. The provision for “new theoretical developments” reflects a concern with literary theory and interdisciplinary cultural studies in the universities since the nineteen sixties. The rise of theory has been one of the defining features of postmodern culture in the universities, and it has been essential for development of the study of literature as more than an exercise in taste, social status and uncertain notions about wisdom and illumination.⁵ The fact that it has taken over three decades for these concerns to be registered in the Higher School Certificate is evidence of the slowness of the secondary school examination system to respond to cultural and social change. The changes in the HSC might be described as a late triumph of twentieth-century literary theory and the postmodern breakdown of the barriers between high culture and mass culture. The new HSC English focus on texts, culture and values echoes the basic concerns of poststructuralist literary theory as they were defined in the nineteen sixties in classic essays such as Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?”⁶ While the new English syllabus maintains interest in the author and rhetoric (as genre and style) it follows the classic post-Marxist and post-Nietzschean concern of poststructuralism with culture, history, and the evaluation of values, one of the main models for the widespread breaking down of the barriers between university literary studies and cultural studies. At the same time, the rise of theory in the universities has involved competition and large differences between different schools of theory; and the institutional history of theory has involved both conservative determination to defend literature and the canon against cultural change and a more complicated condition of “resistance to theory” and institutional inertia.

The historical conditions of widespread institutional inertia in response to twentieth-century theory are crucial for

understanding developments such as the new HSC English syllabus (and not separate from the conditions of contemporary mass culture). Theory has been a major presence at the level of academic research, conferences, publications, and the organisation of departments and units of study, and it has been associated with a high profile for debate about the literary canon, cultural studies, identity politics, and the introduction of new areas of study. But theory has been less present in the day to day practice of undergraduate teaching. There has also been considerable institutional inertia about the introduction of the study of postmodernism and mass culture. The study of postmodernism and the introduction of media courses has been a slow process in universities in New South Wales. In general, the “new theoretical developments” and the concern with postmodern culture which inform the changes in HSC English studies have had only recent and limited currency in university undergraduate education in New South Wales. As a result, many teachers and students in New South Wales are not well placed to deal with the new directions of the new English curriculum. The situation is made more complicated by the current turn beyond postmodernism.

The Postmodernism elective is an extreme case of the issues about theory and contemporary culture which surround the new HSC English syllabus. The recommended texts are *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Possession*, David Williamson's play *Dead White Males*, and the film *Orlando* directed by Sally Potter. The texts might provide the basis for rewarding study. They support a view of postmodern culture in terms of mixed cultural conditions which include hybrid culture, multiculturalism (in the broadest sense), and extremes of cultural pastiche. But the novels are complicated and difficult examples of postmodern literariness, and it seems likely that some experienced teachers will not be prepared to choose them, on the grounds that students might find them too difficult to study for the examination. It seems likely that in its present form the Postmodernism elective will remain unavailable for the majority of HSC students. Furthermore, the full selection of

recommended texts involves a drift back to literature and away from mainstream fiction and media studies. Sally Potter's film fits the aim to include media studies but it is an art movie based on the combination of stylish high modernism, elaborate literary games, and eroticised intellectual debate in Virginia Woolf's novel. *Orlando* the film is an exercise in eroticised gender games and mannered cinematic pastiche which combines mainstream movie conventions with high art conventions. Within the HSC English syllabus it fails to encourage direct focus on the issue that postmodernism involves both a preoccupation with culture and a shift towards mass media and commodity culture. The list of recommended texts would have gained from the inclusion of film, television and computer texts which provide direct focus on the postmodern preoccupation with mass media and commodity culture. Consider the complications of mainstream postmodernism which have been obscured: the proliferation of subcultures/dominant cultures such as popular music and youth culture; the rise of television genres such as the commercial, the news, youth soaps and sitcoms, and talk shows; computer culture developments such as the replacement of traditional learning archives with global computer data; the development of mainstream postmodern culture as self-referential, hyper games with style such as pastiche and retro; and the development of postmodern culture as a self-aware, de-politicised condition in which media simulacra, commodities and fashion replace traditional versions of history, social codes, and reality.

The definition of postmodernism provided in the HSC syllabus for the Postmodernism elective continues the implicit focus on high culture and provides only a brief selection of issues as a guide for study:

Postmodernism has arisen within the questioning of certainties about time and space. It involves the playful challenge of fundamental principles and assumptions about the nature of texts. By highlighting the conventions and clichés of the forms and functions of texts, accepted notions

of originality and authorship and the nature of representation are challenged.⁷

The longer you study it the more the definition looks like a compromise designed to fit the texts and the wide range of belief within the school system. Playful challenges about the nature of texts and self-referential textuality are significant features of postmodern culture but far from the whole story, even with the kind of ultimate postmodern literariness Byatt explores in *Possession*. The claim is accurate enough as a description of the knowing games with style, genre and textual modes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession*; but both novels involve a combination of games and claims to seriousness about the nature of texts and values. Barthes' "The Death of the Author" is one of the reference points for both Fowles and Byatt, and the comment about challenges to traditional notions of originality, authorship and representation involves a distant echo of it. But the issues about culture and language which are part of Barthes' elaboration of the idea of the death of the author are not acknowledged. The comment about time and space adds to the vagueness. Teachers and students would need a high degree of understanding in order to decode the definition and read it back into the history of twentieth-century culture. The definition omits the crucial historical claim that the postmodern period after the second world war involved a failure of belief beyond the challenges to traditional belief of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, that after the second world war there was a sense of being after the end of traditional belief, at a point where traditional belief and value systems could only be understood with incredulity (according to Lyotard's definition), or as spectral presences (as in Derrida's account of Marxism).⁸

The English syllabus definition of postmodernism drifts away from the issue that postmodernism has included a widespread preoccupation with theory. At the point where the description of the elective might offer a general comment about cultural history and the new syllabus it slides away from confrontation with the historical issues which shape the current

“reconceptualisation and expansion” of HSC English as a combination traditional literary study and a study of texts, culture, history, and the evaluation of values. At the point where teachers and students would benefit from a close view of postmodernism the syllabus drifts away from the essential issue that the definition and understanding of postmodernism has been closely associated with the development of literary theory and cultural studies in the universities (so much so that there has been widespread doubt that the postmodern period has never been more than an academic invention). Here and throughout its presentation the HSC English syllabus would be more helpful if it provided direct comment on the history of literary theory and postmodern culture which shapes it. The failure to provide an account of the intellectual background to the Postmodernism elective is especially problematic as the novels involve a high level of engagement with the history of culture and literary theory and literary criticism. Fowles draws connections between the nineteenth-century class struggle and existentialism. Byatt writes about Romantic individualism, the history of literary criticism and literary theory, and the fact that one of her postmodern literary critics has learned:

to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his “self” as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-work of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this.⁹

David Williamson’s play is a theatrical animated cartoon or low standup comedy routine about poststructuralism and the debate about the canon. Each of the three texts is a reminder that postmodern literature and theory involve contention about the past, and a process of transformation, revision, and renewal of the codes and conventions which have been said to be irretrievable or no longer dominant.

The strongest announcements of the end of postmodernism have come from within the universities, where the end of

postmodernism has been a topic of discussion since the late nineteen eighties. One irony is that these announcements of the end of postmodernism have come from within the field of theory, and that the end of postmodernism is defined as a speculative theoretical project (a situation which tends to add to the impression that postmodernism has been an invention of the age of academic theory). This theorising of the end of postmodernism has appeared at the climax of a debate between claims for the aesthetic conditions of literary texts versus the reading of literature in terms of cultural studies and politics. The debate has been characterised by a highly developed awareness of the history of literary theory and criticism (and a series of polemical overviews of the history of English studies in the universities since the nineteen sixties).

The end of postmodernism includes major recent publications in defence of the idea of literature such as *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, in which the aim is to oppose a “resistance to aesthetics” associated with “cultural criticism” and “an imaginary projection of work and world into irreconcilable opposites”.¹⁰ In contrast, the theoretical view of the end of postmodernism includes a large number of commentaries based in the revolutionary theory of the second half of the twentieth century, and with the emphasis that the end of postmodernism involves a new stage of global power and global culture. For example, E. San Juan Jr. develops a view based in concern for third world survival within the conditions of American global power which include a global commodity and media culture and strategic military intervention.¹¹ The theoretical debate about the end of postmodernism involves a wide range of literary and cultural theory.¹² Ihab Hassan’s views have attracted interest in Sydney in the last few years, in part because they represent a liberal, pragmatic scenario. Hassan carries considerable authority as an eminent critic who was among the earliest commentators on postmodernism in America. In *The Postmodern Turn* (1987) and *Rumors of Change* (1995), he argues that while we have “barely begun to understand what postmodernism implies. Intuitively, though, we now sense its lacks, the insufficiency of its “indeterminances” to our

changing needs”.¹³ In *Rumors of Change* he argues against the dominance of theory and the extremes of American academic neo-conservative formalism and post-Marxist politicising of literary studies; instead he argues for pragmatic pluralism in the tradition of William James. In a recent essay published in 2000 by the Artspace Visual Art Centre in Sydney he says that postmodernism has died “though its specter still haunts Europe, America, Australia, Japan...you name it.”¹⁴ He looks back at postmodernism as a culture of potential nihilism and irresponsible play produced by affluent, consumer, media-driven societies; and he describes a shift beyond postmodernism into a global culture of crisis which he labels as postmodernity. As a guide to survival beyond postmodernism he adds a personal testament in which pragmatic pluralism and politics are finally less important than a spiritual project for future culture.

My response to the end of postmodernism is similar in some ways to what Ihab Hassan proposes, but more extreme. It seems to me that English studies needs to encourage interest in the nature of texts as language, *and* in the literary conditions of texts, *and* the social and cultural contexts of texts, *and* the significance of texts in relation to politics, values and belief. The success of that kind of project depends on an interdisciplinary approach which does not separate English studies from other theory and cultural research (and which includes, for example, the understanding of culture available in recent studies such as *The Weight of the World* by Pierre Bourdieu and his associates).

But the immediate issue here is to present the new HSC English syllabus in perspective as a point in a wider process of cultural change which involves an established interest in relations between literature, culture and values, and uneven transmission of understanding within educational institutions and across the educational system. Seeing the new English syllabus in this way stresses the need for improved access to literary theory and the history of English studies, within conditions where the development of English studies remains

complicated, uneven, and a matter of contention. The new English syllabus is a prime example of a need for wider communication about theory and the idea of the field of English studies within the universities and the schools. As the syllabus is put into practice one requirement is to provide teachers, students, parents and the rest of the community with more information about the history of literary theory, literary criticism and cultural studies which is the background to the new developments. There is a basic need throughout the syllabus for more direct engagement with the broad tradition of twentieth-century intellectualism influenced by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; with the development of twentieth-century theory and literary criticism which includes poststructuralism, deconstruction, cultural materialism, and new historicism; and with the development of definitions of postmodernism in the nineteen seventies and eighties. Strange as it might seem, that kind of approach in the HSC syllabus and in practice in the schools (and in the universities) is desirable if English studies is to be a field of study rather than an exercise in vague connoisseurship. Theory does not need to be the end of pleasure, and it certainly does not need to be the end of pleasure in novels, movies and television. At the same time, the history of inertia about the teaching of twentieth-century theory has been compounded by the passing of time and the sense of a new stage of history. Teaching poststructuralism, deconstruction, post-Marxist cultural materialism and so on in the HSC in the future would be part of the intellectual and cultural history designed to provide support for theorising texts, culture and values in new conditions.

In general, it would be an advantage if the HSC English syllabus could respond more promptly to new developments in culture. The “new” view of texts, culture and values has been a long time coming to schools in New South Wales, and the formulations and texts are less relevant to contemporary culture than they might have been.

One of the tests of the new HSC syllabus will be to see whether it will allow students to explore the idea of the end of

postmodernism in relation to contemporary texts and the study of contemporary culture. The theoretical announcements of the end of postmodernism need to be balanced by a lot more interest in defining the features of contemporary culture (and reasonable doubt that the end of postmodernism might not be more than a refinement in the academic invention of the postmodern condition). The global perspective seems relevant given the new combination of media culture, global corporatism, and the direction of the new American administration to military intervention and a conservative version of American imperialism. In any case it seems clear that the games with genre, pastiche, and retro nostalgia of the nineteen seventies, eighties and early nineties have become old fashioned, comfortably mainstream, and down-market. *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* seem as much part of the distant past as *Rebel without a Cause*. From that point of view recent movies such as *The Matrix* (with its mix of hyper special effects, references to Baudrillard, and games with apocalyptic and utopian neo-cyberpunk) seem very much like late attenuations of postmodernism.

But what are the signs of the new in recent literature, film and television? Recent films suggest a return to straight media fictions and more or less direct American cultural triumphalism. *Gladiator* is a return beyond postmodern games to a straight, hyper version of Hollywood Roman epic. *The Emperor's New Groove* reads like a return to a classic kind of Walt Disney epic with a heavy load of commodity triumphalism and a more or less explicit message about the need to reclaim the moral high ground for the empire. Films such as *American Beauty* suggest a direction to hyper versions of urban realism, and realism in excess about ordinary losses and gains. Perhaps there is a return to political fiction and new versions of political texts (in global circumstances where computer technology encourages the postmodern claim for personal politics beyond the grand narratives of the past; but with the difference that the spread of war, American militarism, and economic problems encourage a return to the grand narratives of freedom, progress and shared values). Novels such as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* involve a

mix of traditional literariness and political documentary. Television documentaries and news commentaries might be related signs of a return of politics after the postmodern cultural games of the nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties. In a different way *The Simpsons* is evidence of interest in politics, culture and values in contemporary texts, although with the complication that it is widely accepted as a model for reality. *The Simpsons* suggests the rise of mass culture in which the late twentieth-century focus on texts, culture, history, and values is followed by a broad assimilation of that historical direction, not always with the benefit of well informed understanding or much comment. One of the directions of contemporary media culture might well be towards interest in politics and values in a condition of pleasurable fetishism and commodification without understanding and power. In that case, there is even more reason for students to be given as much support as possible as they explore the new focus on texts, culture and values in Higher School Certificate English.

Endnotes

- ¹ *An Introduction to English Stage 6 in the new HSC* (Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales, 1999), p. 2.
- ² *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales, 1999), p. 7.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Barry Spurr, "English going the way of Latin and Greek", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April, 2001, p. 12.
- ⁵ For discussion see: Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).
- ⁶ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).
- ⁷ *English Stage 6 Prescriptions: Higher School Certificate 2001 and 2002* (Sydney: Board of Studies New South Wales, 2000), p. 2. Electives and Texts for English Extension Course 1: Module B: Texts and Ways of Thinking: Elective 2: Postmodernism.

- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- ⁹ A.S.Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 424.
- ¹⁰ Michael P. Clark (ed.), *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), Introduction, p. 10.
- ¹¹ E. San Juan, Jr., *Hegemony and Strategies of Transgression* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 194, 197, 247, 253-7.
- ¹² Further contributions to the nineteen nineties theoretical debate include: Herbert W. Simons and Michael Billig (eds) *After Postmodernism: Reconstructing Ideology Critique* (London: Sage Publications, 1994); Barbara Adam and Stuart Allan (eds), *Theorizing Culture: An interdisciplinary critique after postmodernism* (London: UCL Press, 1995); Tom Cohen, *Ideology and Inscription : "Cultural Studies" after Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- ¹³ Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism? Theory, Sense and Pragmatism" in *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades* (Tuscalossa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), p. 136.
- ¹⁴ Ihab Hassan, *From Postmodernism to Postmodernity; The Local Global Context* (Woolloomooloo: Artspace, 2000), no page numbers.