

# The Contemporary British Novel

Categories

vs

Hybridity

# Clear –isms in the contemporary scene?

- **Feminism:** Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*; Kennedy, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (also postmodernism);
- **Postmodern games:** Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (also working-class realism); Gray, *Poor Things* (also surrealism or form of magical realism)
- **Neo-realisms and magic realism:** McEwan, *Atonement* (also postmodernism); Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (also feminism and postmodernism)
- **National/transnational/post-national identity:** Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (also realism and postmodernism); Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Abh Ah Ah* (also realism)

# Feminism and gender

- A political movement; a literary theory; a literary-critical method
- First-wave feminism: *Suffragettes* till Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – 1 year after universal suffrage
- Second-wave 1960s-1980s: e.g. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).
- Alternative: Post-colonial feminism/black feminism vs Western feminism's ethnocentric views (Spivak, Walker, ...)

- Third-wave feminism (or Post-feminism?) 1990s until now: vs essentialist and generalist definitions of femininity; influence of post-structuralism and idea of *differance*
- French feminism (highly philosophical theories of the body): Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray (*écriture féminine*; *writing from the body*)
- “Feminisms”. Ex: Kennedy vs Galloway – general concern for the individual vs strong female voice emerging through narrative and visual experimentation

## Postmodern games

- Giuseppe Petronio: *“Il Postmoderno ... è ... uno spettro, e nessuno, forse, sa cosa sia”*
- Umberto Eco: *"La risposta postmoderna al moderno consiste nel ricordare che il passato, visto che non può essere distrutto, perché la sua distruzione porta al silenzio, deve essere rivisitato: con ironia, in modo non innocente.... "*

- Post-modern // post-modernist
- Post-Modernity: vs Renaissance and Enlightenment belief in man's rationality and ability to assume a central role in the historical process (most agree from the 1960s onwards)
- Post-Modernism: post the 1920s cultural and intellectual phenomenon introducing a new aesthetic, literary, political and social philosophy (reaction to this often seen as elitist)



- Frederic Jameson: postmodernity as a condition brought about by the “radical break” in cultural forms and systems in the 1950s and 1960s, with the wane of political, social and philosophical models of modernity (collapse of hegemonic ideologies and logocentrism)
- Jean-Francois Lyotard: postmodernity as culmination of modernity’s constant change; change as condition vs notion of steady progress conceived by positivist science, Marxism and structuralism

# Postmodern ?

- “Critique” of history as linear and progressive process
- Our world: multiculturalism, multiracialism, dialogue centre-periphery, re-appraisal of marginalities
- Our culture affected by multinational capitalism and commodification: everything can become image and art; hierarchies of value do not apply (pop art); surface and depth are no longer distinct
- Fragmented schizophrenic subjectivity without the angst of modernism
- A style marked by eclecticism, fragmentation, digression, collage, pastiche, parody and irony (*le plaisir du texte*), all involving the reader in endless games



- Umberto Eco: *Opera Aperta* (1962)

- Text as hypertext
- Text as living work assuming new meanings according to context
- Dialogue between tradition and innovation

- Roland Barthes: *Le plaisir du texte* (1973)

- *texte* = texture
- Interlacing of different ingredients
- Inter-text

- Mikhail Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982)
  - vs monologic novel
  - Poliphony / *heteroglossia*
- Linda Hutcheon : *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985)
  - “the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm .... the connection with the past”
  - “to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it”
  - “double discourse”: para (=against) tradition (debunking) and para (=beside) tradition (respect)
  - Vs Harold Bloom’s notion of the “anxiety of influence”

## ■ Ex: Ian Banks

- fusion/confusion of high and popular culture
- play of multiple and competing levels of ontology (human vs superhuman; author vs characters; art vs life; reality vs fiction)
- use of black comedy mocking the traditional values of Western culture
- language games with the reader who are both players and played upon

# Neo-realisms and magic realism

- Ian Watt (*The Rise of the Novel*, 1957): “realism” first used in theoretical discourse in France in 1835, yet anticipated by 18th century English novelists
- 20<sup>th</sup>-century realism: no shared view of reality among novelists but multiple reality eschewing precise definitions
- Magical realism: artistic genre in which magical elements or illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic setting; fusion between physical and psychological reality; link with Todorov’s *merveilleux*

# Magic realism (but not only) *topoi*

- Copiousness of sensory details
- Gender and sexuality as social constructs
- Distortion or overturning of time levels
- Encapsulating legend or folklore material
- Extensive use of symbolism and imagery
- Use of multiple perspectives
- Open ending leaving the reader wavering between a magical interpretation or realist interpretation of events (as in Todorov's *fantastique*)

# National/transnational/post-national identity

- “Postcolonial” first used in political theory to describe the state of nations freed from European control after the Second World War
- Postcolonialism as engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies
- Critical analysis of modes of discourse employed by authors coming from Britain's former colonies (*The empire writes back*)



- Central issue of self-definition and “national” identity: vs binary conceptualisations of self and other, dominant vs minority cultures (Said’s *Orientalism*), foreign vs indigenous
- Movement towards cross-culturalism and Homi Bhabha’s idea of inbetweenness, contact zone beyond fixed boundaries between colonisers and colonised; hybridity and cultural diversity; positive meaning of difference