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**Reflections upon the 'post':**

**towards a cultural history and a performance-oriented perspective**

Andy Lavender

The prefix 'post' by definition comes before something, in order to signal its afterwards. Discussions of (for example) postmodernism, posthumanism, the post-industrial, and indeed the post-digital have remarked that the 'after' or 'beyond' suggested in these framings is not necessarily categorical, nor even clearly demarcated by way of a date. In this case, the 'post' often contains significant features of what came before, and the presence of a name (the modern, the humanist) marks a continuity however much it is also always renounced. As Hal Foster suggested in 1983, addressing a trajectory from modernism to postmodernism, 'modernism is now largely absorbed. Originally oppositional, ... today, however, it is the official culture' (Foster 1985: ix). This raises a fundamental question concerning the 'post' as a cultural descriptor. To what extent does it mark a radical break, and to what extent is its precedent figured in the very shapes and expressions of the thing that it now describes? This tension is at the heart of cultural process, and thinking about the

'post' can help us understand principles of change within culture, society and politics, and therefore also within performance.

This issue plays out rather differently depending on the 'post' in question. Wiktionary (n.d.) contains 200 pages of 'English words prefixed with post-', from 'postabdomen' to 'postzygotic'.<sup>1</sup> These typically refer to an 'after' by way of time ('postcareer', 'postnatal') or less frequently position ('postaxial', 'postuterine'). They have also come to be used to indicate a stage of beyondness, as in 'post-rock' or indeed 'post-truth' (more of which later). Older terms than this latter pair include 'post-diluvial' (after the Flood) or 'post-Reformation', designating historical periods; or 'postscript', 'post-mortem', and 'postgraduate' – a mix of categorising and descriptive words that have become part of everyday language.

Our concern here is with the 'post' that describes significant socio-cultural developments, and a plethora of such terms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The cultural history of the 'post' indicates a swirl during this extending timeframe. The term suggests an anxiety (or else, an urgency) to do with historical shift, nomenclatural definition and segmentation, and the tracing of cultural process. These concerns arise during the broader era of post-Enlightenment social democracy, but they appear to have become more acute as socio-economic change accelerates. The very articulation of a 'post' comes about in a context of (post)empirical categorisation, in a cultural scene that experiences flux, is aware of changing socio-political and personal frameworks, and (temporally, at least) is alert to the idea of living in a new present that moves on from an identified past. And yet 'post' names the thing that it departs from since there is as yet no other new term. The 'post' has an

umbilical relation to the past. It can't help looking backwards. It signals a nervous combination of newness and incipient nostalgia, which relates to a larger fretfulness concerning history, inheritance and innovation, as features of knowledge formations within shifting socio-economic and technological fields. The 'post' is inherently liminal and transitional, even where it appears also to suggest a definitive new state of being. As a marker of cultural change, then, it always performs political work of some kind.

This much is clear if we consider the shape and provenance of postmodernism. As implied above, it came to incorporate aspects of radical modernism (a delight in speed and flow, a comfort with abstraction, a taste for the overthrow of old orders) whilst itself promulgating new modes of socio-economic and cultural expression. The case is reconsidered by Jeffrey T. Nealon in his book *Post-Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Pausing to observe (understandably) that "'Post-postmodernism" is an ugly word' (2012: ix), Nealon associates the phenomenon with the sinuous development of 'the "new economies" (post-Fordism, globalization, the centrality of market economics, the new surveillance techniques of the war on terrorism, etc.) and their complex relations to cultural production in the present moment, where capitalism seems nowhere near the point of its exhaustion' (2012: 15). His insistence that we see large-scale cultural structures as also defined by economic structures – since the procedures and formations of both are mutually intertwined – is a core feature of the book's engagement with its own eminent predecessor, Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). We are beyond – post – the classic structures of postmodernism that Jameson identified as profoundly bound up in socio-economic systems, yet these in some respects 'were intensified and have persisted' (Nealon 2012: 12). What's being described here, at least in

part, is the pervasive grip of neoliberalism, as a system of financial flow, labour organisation, corporate hegemony, and cultural manoeuvring that shapes (or warps) activity throughout those societies where it holds sway.

What does this mean for performance? One way of thinking about this is to consider the notion of the 'postdramatic', promoted by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (first published in German in 1999), which set out something of a latter-day schematic for performance in the wake of postmodernism. (This doesn't immediately take us to a discussion of neoliberalism, but bear with me.) Lehmann's book proposed a name for a lengthening period of theatrical production, and widely influenced theatre and performance studies in the twenty-first century. It extended the analysis of postmodernism backwards, to trace aesthetic continuities and ruptures; and forwards, to seek the outlines of a phase of work that in Lehmann's account has moved beyond a central concern with dramatic representation. The correlates, instead, are sensual and somatic arrangements of movement, rhythm, flow; the spatial work of scenographies; and performance that has a kind of visceral appeal.

Lehmann recalibrates this arguably drastic positioning in *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (published in German in 2014), in which he argues for an expanded sense of the dramatic (which never went away, after all). Tragedy as an idiom provides the mainspring to this enquiry. Lehmann presents a case for the persistence of tragedy as a mode, not least as appropriate to the distressing geo-political contexts of the twenty-first century. He proposes that 'the task is to investigate the kind of experience that makes [tragedy] possible, the modes of perception it encourages, and the sensory thinking that it enacts' (2016: 4). As this

terminology suggests, the book marks several shifts in relation to conceptions of tragedy, theatre and indeed the postdramatic. One of its agendas is to claim the importance of the mediality of theatre. In this (as in other respects) *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* sustains the project of *Postdramatic Theatre*, to develop a critical procedure grounded in a 'reading' of theatre as a live and situated phenomenon, geared to spectatorship and the effects that pertain to co-presence. The sensorial basis of experience comes with a challenge to sense-making – but it is in this fusion of the two (sense and sensibility, we might say) that Lehmann's book is post-postdramatic, and post-postmodern. In turning back to the classical tragedies of Athens, with their agonistic narratives played out in the city's *theatron*, we gain fresh perspectives on our own performance idioms in the multimedia environments of digital culture.

We have here, then, what Nealon, in a different context, describes as a reiterative process of 'intensification and mutation' (2012: ix). For Lehmann, the postdramatic gets differently sustained by a recursion of the dramatic (which itself attains a new dynamism through strategies of the postdramatic). The 'post', in this analysis, does not describe a tidy linear timeline. Rather, it concerns continuous negotiations of past and present, convention and innovation, as part of the nervous energy of cultural production. And it's this particular kind of energy that is of our own historical moment, as the structures of neoliberalism stand out with greater definition over time. The kind of sensory and somatic theatres that Lehmann addressed in *Postdramatic Theatre* have joined up again with the conflicted and committed performances that he unpacks in *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*.

How suitable, then, to the nature of the time in which I write this essay. To reflect on this, we need look no further than the election of Donald Trump as US President on 9 November 2016, an instance of historical turn that came about due to the felt commitments of specific groups of voters, and one that has been contested by a no less compelling set of felt commitments on the part of others. Trump was both the upshot and chief exponent of a drastic refiguring of 'truth' in the public sphere, borne out in the contestations around 'fake news', the discrediting of various kinds of 'establishment', and a demotic scorn for 'experts'. Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year 2016 was in fact a compound of two words: 'post-truth'. The organisation's website notes that '*post-truth* [is] an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.<sup>2</sup> Matthew D'Ancona observes that

in December 2016, an IPSOS poll for BuzzFeed of more than 3,000 Americans found that 75 per cent of those who saw fake news headlines judged them to be accurate.

... All that matters is that the stories *feel* true; that they resonate. ... The point is not to determine the truth by a process of rational evaluation, assessment and conclusion. You choose your own reality, as if from a buffet. (2017: 53-56)

In postmodernism, reality dissolved into relativism. In post-postmodernism, realities are asserted diversely. This brings us to a post-postdramatic scenario. Our *experience* of and *feeling* about the world has effect in political process (we know this through the plebiscitary shocks of 2016); and is at the heart of much contemporary performance, whether it engages through modes such as verbatim and testimony, mobilises audiences as players and participants, or offers a sense of being immersed in a specific narrative and milieu. The

establishment of a single perspective or a set of *verifiable coordinates* matters much less in this kind of culture – whether in the contours of a performance that both dramatizes and extends such epistemic unfixity (I think of Ivo van Hove’s *Kings of War* [2015], for instance, that surfs across Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III* to open out different interpretative frames); or the massive civic processes that result in, say, the outcome of the Brexit referendum in the UK, or the election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

If we’ve learned anything about the ‘post’, however, it is that, the ‘pre’ isn’t easily done away with. It’s not that Truth is toast, rather that it has come sharply into focus as something worthy of our attention. The fact of conceiving ‘post-Truth’ marks a challenging turn to post-postmodernism, where it is thinkable (but when wasn’t it?) that elections can be won on the back of misrepresentations. This indeed presents a defining trope of post-postmodernism – the conjunction of performance and politics in a single combination of public appearance. But there will be another ‘post’: a time and place where all this is behind us. Meanwhile the ‘post’ returns us (precisely) to history, process and epistemology. Put aside its fascination with exhaustion and entropy, and it offers a call to action – where we must always seek to discover what the ‘post’ effaces, what fuels it, and what it is leading us towards.

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## **Abstract**

This piece addresses a plethora of 'post's that describe significant socio-cultural developments. It explores the negotiations of past and present, convention and innovation, in such formations. It examines relations between (post)postmodernism and (post)postdramatic performance, to explore how socio-economic structures and cultural expression interrelate amid changing and challenging times.

## **Bio**

Andy Lavender is Professor of Theatre & Performance and a Head of School at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (Routledge 2016), and co-editor of a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 'Encountering the Digital in Performance' (27:3, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Wiktionary, n.d., *Category:English words prefixed with post-*, viewed 4 November 2017, from [https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=Category:English words prefixed with post-&from=A](https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=Category:English%20words%20prefixed%20with%20post-&from=A).

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, n.d., *Word of the Year*, viewed 4 November 2017, from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.