

**THE POST-POSTMODERN TURN: CHALLENGING THE  
APPLICATION OF KUHN'S MODEL**  
EL GIRO POSTPOSTMODERNO: UN CUESTIONAMIENTO DE LA  
APLICACIÓN DEL MODELO DE KUHN

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**Abstract**

The point of departure for this article is the much-debated death of postmodernism, heralded by influential experts on the subject such as Linda Hutcheon or Ihab Hassan at the beginning of the new millennium. Although the academic community as a whole has not agreed with this fact, there was an intense debate during the first years of the twenty-first century that was evidence of a change of attitude towards this cultural phase. With this in mind, the aim of this study is to provide a theoretical framework for the change in order to understand its nature. Analysing the theories developed by Thomas S. Kuhn on paradigm shifts in the field of science and applying them to the context of critical theory at the beginning of the millennium serves to challenge the very idea of postmodernism as a paradigm in the terms developed in Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

**Keywords:** Thomas S. Kuhn, paradigm shift, postmodernism, Jürgen Habermas, unfinished project of modernity, post-postmodernism

**Resumen**

El punto de partida de este artículo es la discutida muerte del postmodernismo, anunciado por influyentes expertos en la materia, como Linda Hutcheon o Ihab Hassan al principio del nuevo milenio. Aunque la comunidad académica en su conjunto aún no se ha puesto de acuerdo en esto, durante los primeros años del siglo veintiuno hubo un intenso debate durante que puso de manifiesto un cambio de actitud hacia esta fase cultural. Partiendo de lo anterior, el objetivo de este estudio es proporcionar un marco teórico para dicho cambio con el propósito de comprender su naturaleza. A través del análisis de las teorías desarrolladas por

Thomas S. Kuhn sobre cambios de paradigma en el campo de la ciencia y su aplicación al contexto de la teoría crítica desarrollada al respecto al comienzo del milenio se pondrá en tela de juicio la misma idea del postmodernismo como paradigma en los términos desarrollados por Kuhn en *La estructura de las revoluciones científicas*.

**Palabras clave:** Thomas S. Kuhn, cambio de paradigma, postmodernismo, Jürgen Habermas, proyecto inacabado de la modernidad, post-postmodernism

## 1. Introduction

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history. He described the triumph of economic and political liberalism over all its antagonists during the history of the twentieth century. The old absolutist regimes, Bolshevism, fascism or the terror triggered by an impending nuclear apocalypse—caused by an “updated Marxism” (Fukuyama 3)—could not snatch the victory from the system of the Western liberal democracies. The framework of apparent stability provided by the historical situation seemed to resemble the final stage of the desired Hegelian emancipation of the individual. However, contrary to Fukuyama’s thesis, the dream of this final stage of history concluded, symbolically, with the attacks of September 11, 2001. The end of history appeared, once again, to be far away and the situation created by economic and political liberalism led the individual to a state of crisis. The lack of a totalizing framework to guide technological advances and limit the free market created the perfect breeding ground for the development of a society in which the individual felt alienated. The era of irony, excess and metafiction seemed not only to have no place in the new order, but also to be part of the cause of the crisis. Even though at the turn of the millennium the death of postmodernism was not generally agreed upon, the twenty-first century brought about an intense debate on the subject that evidenced that something was happening. Postmodern gurus like Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon functioned as harbingers of the news of the passing of the age of irony. In his article “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust” (2003), Ihab Hassan offers an answer to the question “[W]hat was postmodernism” (199). In “Postmodern Afterthoughts” (2002), Linda Hutcheon declared: “[f]or decades now, diagnosticians have been pronouncing on its health, if not its demise, with some of the major players in the debate weighing in on the negative side: for people like Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris, postmodernism is certainly finished, even passé; indeed, for them it’s a failure, an illusion. Perhaps we should just say: it’s over” (5).

In light of this, the objective of this study is to contribute to the research on the nature of the turn produced after the disputed death of postmodernism. Kuhn’s

theories—and the use of the terms ‘paradigm’ and ‘paradigm shift’ with or without relation to them—have been widely applied, as we will see, to describe postmodernism and the cultural shift of the turn of the century. With this in mind, it seems necessary to clarify the matter of whether we can speak of a Kuhnian revolution or not. It is essential to establish the roots of the change and the implications that these may have in culture and society. For that reason, we find it useful to analyse the nature of Thomas S. Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts and its repercussion in the world of cultural theory. Even though the theoretical framework developed in 1962 by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*<sup>1</sup> has been widely used outside the sphere of natural sciences to explain intended paradigm shifts in the fields of the humanities, I will introduce nuances to that application that I consider innovative and relevant to outline the taxonomy of the change after the heralded passing of postmodernism. I will contend that, even though some cultural theorists have used the term in a Kuhnian sense to refer to this “social condition” (Jenks, *Critical* 16), postmodernism does not fit Kuhn's scheme and, for that reason, it cannot be considered a paradigm<sup>2</sup> but an impasse, a liminal or interstitial bracket in the unfinished project of modernity, as advocated by Jürgen Habermas. We could argue that the cultural period of modernism—which happens at the end of modernity in the Habermasian sense—gives way to postmodernism. However, we should not, of course, confuse postmodernism and postmodernity, for, even though many cultural theorists may deem postmodernism to be dead and, even if there was a desire to return to an enlightened project, we could argue that the turn being discussed in this article is contained within “that broader phenomenon” (Habermas 6) called postmodernity.

The period discussed in this study will be framed by two events: the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center—which is extensively seen as the point of departure of the shift—and the intensification of neoliberalism brought about by the Bank Bailout of 2008. We will identify the end of this phase with the fading of the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement. It is true that after these events the debate about the end of postmodernism did not disappear from the arena of cultural theory, but the proposals for the definition of the subsequent cultural phase were not as plentiful from that moment on, as the neoliberal turn brought to a halt the hopes for a return to the project of modernity. The state of the question during the second decade of the Twenty-first century and the role of the recent events associated with the coronavirus pandemic would deserve a closer analysis at least similar in extension to this one.

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, *Structure*.

<sup>2</sup> From now on in this article, the term “paradigm” will be used to refer to the notion as defined by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and not in a general sense.

When cultural theorists started the debate about the passing of postmodernism there was no commonly used and accepted nomenclature to designate the new cultural phase. Post-postmodernism seemed to be the most neutral option. Among the authors who made use of this term was Alan Kirby, who considered it a “vile term consecrated by Wikipedia” (40). Jeffrey T. Nealon used it to title his well-known book *Post-Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Just in Time Capitalism* (2012) and he recommended its use, even though he referred to it as “an ugly word” (ix). However, despite its detractors, many of the theorists who spoke about this period made use of it. Linda Hutcheon used it hoping it was not definitive: “[p]ost-postmodernism needs its own label. Over to YOU” (11; capital letters in the original). It was also used by other theorists, such as Raoul Eshelman in “Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism” (2001) or the scholar and artist Nicoline Timmer in her comprehensive book *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010). I will stick here with the words of Tom Turner—the first to put the term in the title of a book, *City as Landscape: A Post-Postmodern View of Design and Planning*—, who said the following about it: “As post-postmodernism is a preposterous term, we must hope for something better [...] Let us embrace post-postmodernism—and pray for a better name” (Turner 10).

## 2. Kuhn’s Model

As Kuhn explains in *Structure*, the evolution of science is not linear or cumulative. Rather, it develops through the construction of discrete paradigms that follow one another by consensus in a scientific community. A scientific paradigm prevails because it offers solutions to part of the empirical dilemmas of interpretation of reality that the previous one faced unsuccessfully. A paradigm will only prevail if it is recognized by all the members of the scientific community. Once the paradigm has been established, the scientific community will not consider the falsity of its premises. This leads to a period of “normal science”. Kuhn defines normal science as “the activity in which most scientists inevitably spend almost all their time” and it “is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like” (Kuhn 5). When problems arise that the paradigm cannot solve, a situation of crisis occurs. This leads to a phase of “extraordinary” investigation (6) in which scientists formulate hypotheses that would not have been accepted by the scientific community in the previous paradigm. They make proposals that will compete with each other. When one of the hypotheses is successful, this is followed by a revolution that leads to a subsequent paradigm shift (6): “[p]aradigms gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors in solving a few problems that the group of practitioners has come to

recognize as acute [...] The success of a paradigm [...] is at the start largely a promise of success discoverable in selected and still incomplete examples” (23-24). Apparently, the previous description could fit the structure of the crisis of the end of postmodernism as a cultural phase and the arrival of a new paradigm. However, I will argue that the suitability of the theory for its application in the field of the humanities is questionable.

One of the first to make use of the notion was Artist Mel Ramsden, a member of the British conceptual art group Art & Language. In his essay “On Practice” (1975) he wrote the following:

Hence change comes to take place because the system creates, through its own internal contradictions, the conditions for its breakdown. Such characterization of revolutionary change is, interestingly enough, also fairly consistent with T. S. Kuhn's ‘paradigm shifts’: a system breaks down when ‘anomalies’ in one model force new paradigms to come into existence. (83)

Ramsden criticizes the rising role of bureaucracy within his artistic group, as well as the commodification of the medium. Mediation in the artist's work process was being implemented as a model at that time, since the creator had to submit his/her work to a professionalized, specialized, autonomous way of operating, adjusted to the functioning of the market (83). This situation left no room for a direct relationship between reality and creator. According to Ramsden, something did not fit with the previous ways of making art; hence, a revolution was needed. A paradigm shift should take place, as the artistic creation system no longer had a social or economic correlate. Ramsden uses Marxist terminology to express this mismatch, but he also uses Kuhn's concepts. Erroneously, the artist draws attention to the parallelism between the concept of Marxist “contradiction” and Kuhn's “paradigm shift.” He is not taking into account the different nature of both theories. Contradiction refers to a system of fighting counterparts that share their essence within a whole. Through their opposition, these counterparts make the whole advance, but, at the same time, they bring the system into a state of lack of harmony. Finally, after the system breaks down, the opposites merge into a third quality that restores balance: “[t]hus in both dialectical social analysis (Marxism) and an extremely fashionable segment of Contemporary Philosophy of Science, ‘revolution’ is considered sufficiently characterized as a dialectical movement out from a set of entrenched forms” (Ramsden 83). Ramsden speaks about conceptual art in terms that fit Kuhn's theory—even though he denies that conceptual art was the revolution that was necessary at the time for an intended paradigm shift—: “it seemed (again to pursue this further) whereas the AWC had been disarmed by an essentially inadequate reform program, Conceptual Art might indeed be such a

‘revolution.’ It wasn’t.” Kuhn’s theory, however, does not contemplate that kind of dialectics. It was not so much a contradiction as a diversification in Marxist terms, since that was the way the institutions did things at the time: “[t]hat is, today institutions have become autonomous. They constitute a bureaucratic tyranny which brooks no opposition [...] To put all this another way: it may be that the range of maneuvers now available to us under Modern Art are simply *out of phase* with the institutional conditions inherent under late capitalism” (Ramsden 83; emphasis in the original). Postmodernism was not really the result of a revolution brought about by an anomaly (crisis) in the existing model, but rather an intensification and a diversification of the previous model through the development of the culture of late capitalism, as Ramsden himself hints. Following Habermas’s ideas—and in light of the cultural manifestations that take place around the turn of the millennium—, postmodernism, as an heir to modernism, has meant a parenthesis in the development of the unfinished project of modernity and, at the time, it was also seen as the liminal stage to its recovery.

It was not long after the publication of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*<sup>3</sup> that Kuhn’s terminology began to be widely used in other areas, including cultural theory or art/literary criticism. Kuhn’s ideas seemed to be able to explain the changes that were taking place when they were published. Nowadays they have a renewed significance for the same reasons. This can be seen in several highly relevant texts that link Kuhn’s theories to the great debates of the intellectual world. Fredric Jameson, a leading figure on postmodern theory, indicates the following in the prologue that he writes for the first English translation of *Condition* in 1984: “Jean-François Lyotard’s discussion of the consequences of the new views of scientific research and its paradigms, opened up by theorists like Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, is also a thinly veiled polemic against Jürgen Habermas’s concept of a “legitimation crisis” and a vision of a “noise-free,” transparent, fully communicational society” (vii). The concept of paradigm shift became so widespread that it was almost impossible to escape its influence. Kuhn’s work had an impact on the works of many of the most prominent names in postmodern theory. The hypotheses put forward in his book helped develop the relativism on which Lyotard built the foundation for *Condition* (1979). The terms paradigm and paradigm shift became commonplace. Lyotard himself uses the word paradigm repeatedly in *Condition* and bases many of his arguments on what is stated in *Structure*, as can be seen in the notes section of his book—notes 24, 94, 102, 146 and 213—. In note 213, it is unambiguously stated that a specific use is made of the word paradigm “in Kuhn’s sense” (101). This

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, *Condition*.

note refers to the following text in the body of the book: "Research carried out under the aegis of a paradigm tends to stabilize it; they are like the exploitation of a technological, economic, artistic 'idea'" (110).

The paradigm shift scheme has been adopted in many other areas of knowledge. In *Politics and Paradigms: Changing Theories of Change in Social Science* (1986), Andrew C. Janos applies it to the social and political sciences arguing that, even having critics who doubt the universal applicability of the theory, the sequencing of events conforms to the study of those fields. In *Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (1986), Francis C. McGrath attempts to construct an intellectual paradigm that accounts for the characteristics of modernist literature based on the works of Walter Pater (3). Peter J. Schakel writes in *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis: Journeying to Narnia and Other Worlds* (2002):

Thomas S. Kuhn in *Structure* (1962) published his argument that scientific revolutions take place when anomalies call into question explicit and fundamental generalizations of the existing paradigm and a crisis occurs; as a result, a "paradigm shift" takes place, as a new, "neater," "more suitable," or "simpler" paradigm emerges to take the place of the previous one. Lewis hints at this same process in a remarkable paragraph in *The Discarded Image*. (18)

Schakel connects the concept of paradigm with a change of point of view—similar to Kuhn's own—through the way in which C. S. Lewis sees certain changes in models "stating that you have models of the universe which are abandoned by later ages in favor of what they consider more adequate models" (18).

Despite all the examples above, that is, even though it has been widely used and it has helped see things more clearly in some cases, in the humanities and other areas of knowledge—and even at the social level—, paradigms do not have a theoretical apparatus, unlike what happens in the natural sciences. For that reason, it would not be accurate to speak about Kuhnian paradigms in those cases. James A. Marcum holds the following argument in *Thomas Kuhn's Revolution* (2005): "[t]he revolution's influence transcends the boundaries of the history and the philosophy of science communities to include other professional communities as well" (ix). In the section that Marcum dedicates to Kuhn's influence on fine arts, he mentions a lecture, "The New Reality in Art and Science" (1969), which the art historian E. M. Hafner gave in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1967, linking Kuhn's theories to his area of study. In his article "Comment" (1969), Kuhn replied to Hafner: "[u]nder these circumstances, I must concur in its major conclusion: 'The more carefully we try to distinguish artist from scientist, the more difficult our task becomes.' Certainly that statement describes my own

experience” (403). In that respect, Marcum states: “Kuhn recognized that there is a general developmental pattern common to art and science—periods of practice governed by tradition that are punctuated by periods of rapid change. However, he believed that there are significant differences between them in terms of the finer details of their development” (157). The fundamental difference says Kuhn, is the role of innovation, which in art is continuous and in science is necessary only in times of crisis. As McGrath explains in the following passage:

That I focus on the more theoretical notion of paradigm in no way implies that Modernist writers were consciously implementing a theoretical program. More typically a cultural movement spreads through the influence of paradigms of the more concrete and specific sort, for example, through the influence of seminal texts like *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*. The primary impact of concrete paradigms on actual practice, however, does not diminish the value of articulating the theoretical component. (4)

In an article by Caroline A. Jones entitled “The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn” (2000)—also present in Marcum’s book—she warns about the use of Kuhn’s theories applied to that field of the humanities. What Jones presents in this article serves to introduce a fundamental idea: that it would not be accurate to speak of a paradigm shift in the strict sense. Jones introduces a very relevant concept for this study, the “post-paradigmatic” era. Since the transition to postmodernism did not take place through a revolution, there could not be a paradigm shift. The fact that Jones describes the postmodern era as post-paradigmatic is related to the postmodern fragmentation of knowledge. In an age of fragmented reason, in which each atomized field of knowledge interprets—authoritatively and uniformly—the same instances of language in a different way, the pervasive relativism makes it practically impossible to develop a unifying theory that prevails over the others—due to the immensurability of the different Wittgensteinian language games, as we will see later on.

If it is true that the alternatives proposed to overcome the crisis tend to explain the new phase in pre-postmodern ways (in a pre-Kuhnian sense), then it is appropriate to describe postmodernism as post-paradigmatic, since it only followed the last era that fit Kuhn’s definition of paradigm, even though the very notion of paradigm shift arises from a fundamental need for what postmodernism entails. One should not use the term paradigm shift if the solution that is intended to be given to the crisis starts from recovering the schemes of a previous paradigm. Jones points out that “the paradigm is itself a tool of Modernism and a Modernist tool” (527). The moment was post-paradigmatic simply because postmodernism



is not a paradigm. It has been a kind of interregnum in which a problem has been raised concerning the adequacy of modernity, but in which there have been no alternatives fighting for prevalence to provide a solution to a crisis. At the turn of the millennium the problem was clear and the proposed alternatives did try to provide solutions. The alternatives proposed by different cultural theorists and scholars related to the fields of art, literature and sociology—belonging to a sort of period of extraordinary investigation—included Raoul Eshelman's 'performatism,' Gilles Lipovetsky's 'hypermodern times,' Vermeulen and van den Akker's 'metamodernism,' Kirby's 'digimodernism,' Jeffrey T. Nealon's 'post-postmodernism,' Jencks's 'critical modernism,' Christian Moraru's 'cosmodernism,' Robert Samuels's 'automodernity,' Jose Lopez and Garry Potter's 'critical realism,' Nicolas Bourriaud's 'altermodernity' or Paul Crowther's 'supermodernism.' Almost all of these alternatives aspired, in one way or another, to change the prefix "post" for a more appropriate one to affix to "modernism." As Jencks points out, "[i]t comes down to a battle of what could be called 'Prefix-Modernisms'" (215).

### 3. Analysis of the Cultural Turn

"Let us assume that crises are a necessary precondition for the emergence of novel theories and ask next how scientists respond to their existence" (77), says Kuhn in *Structure* and, on that same page, he affirms that the prevailing paradigm will only be declared invalid "if an alternative candidate is available to take its place." Jencks, in *Critical Modernism*, offers one of the reasons for its prevalence: "[o]f course, post-modernism only grew in stature because it offered some positive, critical alternatives, and thus one could consider sociological and cultural explanations that placed its birth in the era of the 1960. The pluralist counter-culture, feminism, the sudden dominance of the post-industrial workforce in America were all put forward as reasons" (20). Jencks proposes arguments for a more positive paradigm that could help resolve the conflicts raised by the previous one. That reasoning comes from the end of faith in metanarratives. Influenced by Kuhn, Lyotard offers a theoretical framework that seems to provide a solution. Lyotard's proposal, which prevailed, sparked what Jencks describes in the following passage:

The grand narratives that underlie social cohesion—socialism, progress, belief in religious doctrines, or, for intellectuals, belief in Enlightenment reason, even the credibility of science—were faiths to which it was no longer possible to adhere. Following Critical Theorists Lyotard wrote that grand narratives were used ideologically by powerful institutions to

legitimize their authority; for instance, the march of socialism was employed by communist countries to quash dissent. (23)

Indeed, Lyotard begins his book by saying that the starting point of the postmodern era was the moment Europe had finished rebuilding: “[o]ur working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the completion of reconstruction” (3). The war had left humanity in a state of shock and, in order to start building, the rejection of everything that could mean making the same mistakes committed in the immediate past fuelled the discredit of the metanarratives that led to totalitarianism. To build this vision of the new paradigm, Lyotard relied on Ludwig Wittgenstein and his idea of “language games”—as developed in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). For Wittgenstein, language does not respond to univocal rules, but can be structured through a method, that is, it does not respond to a linguistic “form,” but to a fragmentary linguistic “logic.” Like in a chess game, each type of statement responds to certain rules:

Wittgenstein [...] focuses his attention on the effects of different modes of discourse; he calls the various types of utterances he identifies along the way [...] *language games*. What he means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put—in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them. (Lyotard 10; emphasis in the original)

This way of seeing language is contrary to what Wittgenstein himself exposed in his previous work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), where he studied language based on the notion of it having a totalizing underlying logical structure. In point 43 of *Philosophical Investigations*, he says that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (20). Thus, understanding a language implies also understanding the use that words are given in each community or, in other words, understanding the rules of each of the language games. In order for these rules to be valid, the community that uses them must agree on their application, but, then, that certain set of rules—which conforms itself with its implementation—is only valid in that discrete community. Thus, if the meanings of words are linked to their use, the truth they communicate will only be true inside a certain community and it will be the result of an agreement.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein develops a system that inevitably leads to solipsism. He ends causal relationships between language and nature. In the phenomenon of language, the relationships are arbitrary and representative. The meaning of language units allows individuals to communicate thanks to the fact that the words in the sentences represent objects in reality. As the units of language are mimetic figures of reality and as one cannot even be sure that this relationship is authentic, one cannot be certain of anything. A schism is produced between reality and the individual. For a sentence to make sense and be true, it must represent authentic objects within nature; any linguistic manifestation that does not represent authentic issues that can be found in reality are not true and therefore meaningless. For this reason, Wittgenstein discards the study of matters such as metaphysics.

On the other hand, in *Philosophical Investigations*, he ends the solipsism created by the absence of causality in the relationship between language and reality by establishing the validity of language within certain areas through discrete systems—or language games—. The units take meaning by consensus among the members using such systems. This makes language meaningful if, and only if, other people agree on what constitutes truth. This strips the individual of the solipsism of the previous scheme—although a community kind of solipsism could be argued—, but endows him/her with total relativism because of the incommensurability of the truths of each community. Lyotard takes advantage of this relativism to explain the framework in which the “cultural phase” (Wheale 15) after the Holocaust takes place. All the positive postmodern movements that Jencks mentions—“the pluralist counter-culture, feminism, the sudden dominance of the post-industrial workforce” (20)—start from the same base: if everything is relative, if truth is dependent on what a community agrees, there are no universal values and, therefore, everything is questionable. The values of the Enlightenment and the project of modernity are suspended, and all the grand narratives that built totalizing values lose the legitimacy of their authority.

However, despite the many advances made thanks to this new logic, the atomization of knowledge and the fragmentation of reality—brought about by the implementation of the idea of language—were not free of dangers. According to what Sébastien Charles writes in Lipovetsky's book *Hypermodern Times* (2005), everything that denied the autonomy of the individual, disappears in the postmodern era after the decline of the great narratives. This is what he calls “great socializing structures” (24): “[t]he great socializing structures have lost their authority, the great ideologies are no longer productive, historical projects no longer inspire people, the social field is no longer anything other than an extension

of the private sphere: the age of emptiness has dawned, but ‘without tragedy or apocalypse’” (Lipovetsky 9).

“The era of emptiness,” a precise definition of the moment, Charles points out, is the product of the phenomenon of mass consumption and the values it fosters (9). Charles perfectly explains the effects of late capitalism, “the second phase of consumption” (10), and its intensification:

The second phase of consumption, beginning around 1950, was the moment at which production and mass consumption were no longer reserved uniquely to a privileged class, at which individualism was emancipated from traditional norms, and a society emerged which was more and more turned towards the present and the novelties it brought in its train society more and more imbued with a logic of seduction, taking the form of a hedonization of life accessible to every different level of society. (Lipovetsky 10)

The disbelief towards metanarratives nurtures an individualism that seeks to satisfy one’s own desires and personal fulfilment. The great ideologies give way to a void that causes an alienating anxiety. This feeling leads to being fully imbued in the consumer society—through the “ideology of hedonistic individualism” (10)—to give meaning to a life that tends to nihilism. In the face of the cultural evidence that shows a desire to recover a holistic thought to end this era of emptiness, postmodernism seems to have been a parenthesis in the project of modernity. Cultural alternatives want to recover the project from where it was abandoned, although without forgetting the advances that had been made in the spheres of pluralism, feminism, ecology, racial integration, etc.

The concept of a “postmodern paradigm”—in Kuhn’s terms—is both a tautology and an oxymoron, as the very characteristics that constitute the postmodern era give rise to the concept of the paradigm as developed in *Structure*. However, it is an abnormal, isolated paradigm, and it is probably the only instance of a discrete paradigm that has ever existed—atomization of knowledge, end of history, end of coincidences, end of science as a project with a final objective, etc—. At the same time, it is an abnormal paradigm in the sense that it has not served so much to explain reality as to create a fragmented conception of it. It has tried to rationalise itself through breakdown; a framework of rules without rules. However, by breaking down to the most irreducible, relativism ends up being exactly what it tries to undo. Bourriaud explains it thus: “[t]he grand modernist narrative was succeeded by that of globalisation, which does not designate a cultural period properly speaking, but a geopolitical standardisation and the synchronisation of the historical clock” (20). Alan Kirby speaks about this paradox

in *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (2009). He points out that “[t]he most popular and destructive Western grand narrative is not religion but consumerism” (238). The result of the destruction of the project of modernity through the delegitimation of grand narratives is just another metanarrative. In the same line, Francisco Vázquez García indicates that

[d]espite Lyotard's perseverance to dodge the metanarrative, it is difficult to deny that these maxims are themselves a metanarrative, since they seek to arbitrate the relationships between the various narratives that coexist in our societies. This metanarrative is supported not on a universal notion of human nature, but on an experience of how intolerable are metanarratives, which suppress the right to differ. Now then, does this experience of the intolerable not have a universal value? Is it not for this reason that it allows the prohibition of any particular narrative from claiming to be the only truth? Does this arbitration not imply a break with the incommensurability thesis?<sup>4</sup> (89; translation my own)

The new metanarrative that replaces the previous ones ends up producing a loop that ends in an existential void. It does not allow any holistic certainty other than that of the absence of any certainties.

The first years of the new millennium were laden with the consequences of all the previously mentioned. Lipovetsky summarises the idea by saying that “these days, we feel that the times are hardening again, laden as they are with dark clouds. We experienced a brief moment during which social constraints and impositions were reduced: now they are reappearing in the foreground, albeit in new shapes” (30). The result of the emancipation from metanarratives gave way to globalized liberalism (Lipovetsky 31). Although—as Jencks affirms in *Critical Modernism*—Lyotard establishes “Auschwitz” (122) as the refutation of modernity, Jencks alludes to the crimes that continue to occur during the last years of the twentieth century: “[i]n the 1990s, scientists who studied biodiversity claimed we were entering the sixth period of mass extinction, a trend subsequently confirmed” (122-123). Hassan, for example, also speaks of the genocides of the

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<sup>4</sup> Original text in Spanish: “A pesar de la perseverancia de Lyotard para esquivar el metarrelato, es difícil negar que estas máximas constituyen por sí mismas un metarrelato, puesto que pretenden arbitrar las relaciones entre los diversos relatos que coexisten en nuestras sociedades. Se trata de un metarrelato apoyado, no en una noción universal de la naturaleza humana, pero sí en una experiencia de lo intolerable que resultan los metarrelatos que suprimen el derecho a diferir. Ahora bien, esta experiencia de lo intolerable, ¿no posee un valor universal?; ¿no es por ello que permite prohibir a todo relato particular pretenderse como verdad única?; ¿no implica este arbitraje una ruptura con la tesis de la incommensurabilidad?”

postmodern era: “Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo, Ulster, Rwanda, Chechnya, Kurdistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Afghanistan, Tibet” (203). Theorists like Lipovetsky warn of how this era causes more anxiety than optimism: “the gulf between North and South is widening, social inequalities are increasing, all minds are obsessed by insecurity, and the globalized market is reducing the power of democracies to govern themselves” (68-69). Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker also suggest it in their seminal article “Notes on Metamodernism” (2010):

For one, financial crises, geopolitical instabilities, and climatological uncertainties have necessitated a reform of the economic system [...] For another, the disintegration of the political center on both a geopolitical level [...] and a national level [...] has required a restructuration of the political discourse. Similarly, the need for a decentralized production of alternative energy; a solution to the waste of time, space, and energy caused by (sub)urban sprawls; and a sustainable urban future have demanded a transformation of our material landscape.

Using Kuhn’s terminology, the framework posed by the postmodern has failed to solve the problems posed by reality.

#### **4. The Unfinished Project of Modernity**

In *Condition* (64), Lyotard explains how Wilhelm von Humboldt chose the model presented by Schleiermacher over that of Fichte for the creation of the University of Berlin between 1807 and 1810. Humboldt’s model had a great influence on the constitution of the new European universities. Schleiermacher’s project, more liberal than Fichte’s, was based on the dictum “science for its own sake,” (Lyotard 32). As Lyotard indicates—quoting Humboldt himself—, “Humboldt does indeed declare that science obeys its own rules, that the scientific institution ‘lives and continually renews itself on its own, with no constraint or determined goal whatsoever.’” However, he adds that the University should orient its constituent element, science, to “the spiritual and moral training of the nation” (32). According to Schleiermacher, the function of the University would be to “‘lay open the whole body of learning and expound both the principles and the foundations of all knowledge.’ For ‘there is no creative scientific capacity without the speculative spirit’” (Lyotard 66). Following this speculative spirit, philosophy had to unify knowledge in a metanarrative that would give meaning to the state and society. This type of speculative knowledge makes sense in relation to society, not in itself; it is directed to an end. After the invalidation of grand narratives,

according to Habermas—and Lyotard—, knowledge starts being manipulated and exploited. The result is that the spirit with which the University of Berlin was born is blurred during postmodernism. This also makes the relationship between knowledge and the people less and less clear. Individuals lose the connection with the spheres of knowledge and, in turn, the spheres of knowledge lose the connection that existed among themselves. There is a fragmentation of knowledge mercantile in nature. Private companies, for example, finance public scientific research. This causes an increase in the values of profitability and efficiency in a global economy that is directed to the benefit of the markets, not of the human beings.

In his speech “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” delivered in 1980, Habermas—repeatedly mentioned in *Condition* and against whose proposals some of Lyotard's arguments are developed—defines the project of modernity as follows:

The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. (9)

Habermas, who maintains that the project is incomplete, offers us the opposite view to that defended by Lyotard. His alternative option would be to build increasingly exoteric knowledge that could be easily applied to daily life. This project, which in itself constitutes a totalizing vision, was intended to improve society through science. Habermas proposes to recover the project and to take heed of past mistakes in order not to repeat them. To this end, he suggests a development of “institutions [...] which set limits to the internal dynamics and to the imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative complements” (13). While Habermas believes in consensus through dialogue, Lyotard thinks that the postmodern knowledge provided by the diversity of language games increases tolerance towards the incommensurable—by reinforcing sensitivity to difference.

When Habermas gave his speech, he did not augur success to the recovery of the project, since rampant capitalism was in its zenith and only the knowledge that brought economic benefits was developed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many of the proposals in the sphere of cultural theory and the humanities

in general—which acted symbiotically with the different authors and the world of culture—that appealed for a recovery of the unfinished project of modernity were based on the recovery of metanarratives. Metanarratives may have lost their influence, but, in the era of alienation and existentialist anxiety, there was a nostalgia for the stability that they provided.

All the aforementioned, however, did not mean that postmodernism was buried, liquidated and that it was relegated to oblivion. According to Jencks, a fundamental part of any cultural movement is criticism of the previous stage; the next step is the creative turn. As Kuhn explains in *Structure*, new paradigms, since they are born from the old ones, incorporate part of the essence they leave behind, their system and their vocabulary. However, they do not use it in the traditional way; they establish new relationships with the old components (149).

## 5. Conclusion

The atomization of knowledge, the textual deconstruction, the relativistic vision of society and its values, were symptoms and integral parts of the many causes of the feeling of alienation that led society to a state of crisis. This crisis was proof of the obsolescence of the cultural phase from which it arose. The solutions with which it intended to respond to the disagreement between its theoretical assumptions and the understanding of reality, and the identity of the individual were not only unsuccessful, they were also causes of further problems that the pre-postmodern model did not present. However, the consequences were dire due to an intensification of enthusiasm that was essential for the fanaticism that caused the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century.

By applying the scheme developed by Kuhn, I have tried to demonstrate that, even though the elements for a revolution like those proposed in *Structure* were given, the death of postmodernism did not lead to a paradigm shift adjusted to the Kuhnian notion. Since there was no revolution—but rather a distortion from the previous paradigm—, postmodernism was a post-paradigm episteme. The desire to resume the Habermasian project of modernity—with nuances—made postmodernism an interstitial stage. However, the reconstruction—after the deconstruction—of many of the great themes implied a dangerous recovery of forgotten values—which, in turn, are the basis for the return to realism—. Thus, the epoch of transition was conditioned by two impulses: there was an urge to keep holding onto the positive consequences that postmodern relativism brought about, but, at the same time, there was a need for transcendence, for a univocal structure, for an essentialist identity. Post-postmodernism has not yet been fully defined, but



the current state of crisis requires a new lens through which to—in Kuhn's terms—understand nature/reality and the place that each individual occupies within it.

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