

## THE ROUTLEDGE INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POSTMODERNISM

**Linda Wagner-Martin** (author)

London: Routledge, 2018, pp.170, ISBN 978-1-138-74665-7

Reviewed by Sarah Brandi

Over the past decades, there has been an increasing interest in postmodernism. Many critics have attempted to explain what the term postmodern means and clarify the essence of this broad cultural movement, developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and encompassing several fields, such as architecture, philosophy, and the arts.

*The Routledge Introduction to American Postmodernism* aims to contribute to the growing literature on this issue. In particular, the author Linda Wagner-Martin, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature, intends to offer an account of how postmodernism has evolved in the context of American literature since its commencement up to the present. In the eight chapters that make up the book, Wagner- Martin analyses several genres of postmodern writing dealing with both renowned and less popular writers.

The book lacks a proper introduction, where the writer could have explained its aim and which aspects of American postmodernism it focuses on. Instead, the volume starts with the first chapter where the author attempts to detect the origins of postmodernism. Wagner-Martin illustrates the early uses of the term postmodern, emphasizing their aesthetic dimension. She also states that it is difficult to deal exclusively with American postmodernism, considering the global basis of the movement. Moreover, it is explained that there is a large debate on what genres, works and movements can be labelled as postmodern. Wagner-Martin reports several critical points of view according to which the key expression of literary postmodernism is American experimental fiction. In order to clarify how to place the movement within the United States' literary panorama, she also traces and examines the first definitions of postmodernism. In these definitions, this term is often related to other terms, such as self-reflexive fiction, neorealism, anti-realist fiction,

metafiction and post-contemporary fiction. In particular, these terms are characterized by an unexpected dimension of political awareness which – as noticed by several scholars, such as Gerhard Hoffmann and Joseph Dewey – is also rooted in the postmodern movement in America. In order to fully comprehend how postmodernism originated, the author examines the poetics of John Barth, William Gass and Donald Barthelme. Through the analyses of some of their works and statements, she clarifies the source of some of the most important forms and writing techniques of postmodernism. Other prominent postmodern masterpieces are analyzed in the second chapter of *The Routledge Introduction to American Postmodernism*. Through the examination of works by Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace, Wagner-Martin attempts to explain how postmodern writers deal with some issues, such as the concept of History. In particular, what emerges is that History is, for the postmodernists, a blurred and unstable notion. The analyses of the novels written by these authors also allows the identification of some essential characteristics of postmodern writing, such as the use of humour and its different meanings.

The volume deals not only with authors that are usually labelled as postmodernists, but also with those who are not generally included in this category. Particularly, chapter three discusses a catalogue of writers that begun their careers in the 1960s and 1970s. They are divided in two big categories: the Jewish and the Southern. Writers such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Norman Mailer are labelled as Jewish, whereas Joyce Carol Oates, Thadious M. Davis, Truman Capote, Cormac McCarthy and others are classified as Southern. The author pinpoints that in the past critics did not categorize these novelists as postmodernists. However, Wagner-Martin disagrees with this critical point of view, since a detailed examination of their works and poetics shows that they use some postmodern literary devices. Particularly, Mailer's fusion of genres and Oates' experimentations bring them close to postmodernism. For this reason, several Jewish and Southern writers can be considered members of the heterogeneous group of postmodernists.

In chapters 4 and 5 Wagner-Martin describes the method used by David Coowart in his book *The Tribe of Pyn* to classify postmodern writers. In his book Coowart groups

postmodernists according to their birth date. Specifically, he divides postmodern writers into three generations: the first generation includes authors born in the 1920s and 1930s, the second and third generation consist of authors born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Wagner-Martin illustrates Coowart's idea, according to which an examination of these authors' works makes it possible to understand how and to what extent earlier postmodern authors influence those of the second and third generation. Cowart's approach is an inclusive one, as he encompasses several works with different characteristics. This inclusivity results from the fact that he writes about authors who belong to minorities, such as women, Native Americans, and African-Americans. Against the background of Coowart's theory, Wagner-Martin has the chance to better explore postmodernism and to create a new postmodern canon, where marginalized writers and less popular genres are included.

Chapter 6, entitled "The Fusion of Genres," dwells on postmodern genres and their features, and it deals with the blurred boundaries between genres typical of this aesthetic. In the first part of the chapter, poetry is analyzed: postmodern poetry seems to have its origins in Beat Poetry and to be identified with writing that has become known as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Postmodern poesy does not have a well-defined form: its structure may change and it does not use only the typical devices of language in verses, but it also adopts some strategies used in prose. Having analysed the new language of postmodern poetry, the author also analyses the intersection of genres in prose. She presents some examples of hybrid genres. Particularly, she focuses on novel, autobiography, memoir, and New Journalism. Wagner- Martin's purpose is to explain how these forms became popular during the same years as postmodernism. Wagner-Martin stresses the fact that one of the main features of postmodern writing is the synthesis of different genres to create something unusual.

Also aware of the shock produced by the events of 9/11, Wagner-Martin includes a reflection on writers who have decided to deal with this occurrence. She dwells on the dynamics through which writing may be understood as a way to elaborate the trauma caused by the terrorist attacks. It is noticed that in a number of narratives describing that tragic day, writers employ different images, such as that of the falling man, in order to fully

portray what people saw. After the Twin Towers were destroyed and thousands of people died, writers felt the need to give an account of what happened. At the beginning, they only expressed the sorrow and the loss through poetry and short prose. However, after some years they felt the necessity to question the events and describe what they saw through novels and memoirs. The urgency to cope with the grief caused by 9/11 and inscribe that day in American history thus provoked the rise of a new genre called the 9/11 novel or post-9/11 novel. Wagner-Martin tries to identify the features of these novels and explains that, according to the critic Marni Gauthier, they cannot be considered postmodern works. However, it is not clear if she agrees or disagrees with Gauthier's statement in *Amnesia and Redress in Contemporary American Literature* (2011).

In the last chapter the author tries to understand the meaning of the term postmodernism in the twenty-first century and if this word is still useable. To understand what remains of postmodernism today, Wagner-Martin analyses the works written in the twenty-first century by some of the most prominent postmodern writers, trying to understand if in them some of the typical postmodern structures and techniques continue to be used.

*The Routledge Introduction to American Postmodernism* traces the origins of the postmodern movement in the US, analyses a good number of genres, writers, and features related to it. Nevertheless, it has some drawbacks, as Linda Wagner-Martin lingers excessively on the description of the works of the authors she considers to be postmodernist: she fully narrates their plots, but she does not give a complete account of the reasons why they can be labelled as postmodern. Moreover, the book lacks useful information about the cultural, political, and historical background against which the movement developed. Even if *The Routledge Introduction to American Postmodernism* is a book that scholars of postmodernism should certainly read to improve their knowledge of the issue, it is not suitable for people who have never approached postmodernism before, since its understanding implies that its readers already know some fundamental information about the movement.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gauthier, Marni. 2011. *Amnesia and Redress in Contemporary American Literature*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Sarah Brandi** graduated in 2016 in Modern European languages, cultures and literature at the University of Naples Federico II. Her Bachelor's thesis focused on the English writer Virginia Woolf and her essays. She also has a Master's Degree in Modern European languages and literature. She graduated in 2018, with a dissertation titled «Un penny blood per Il XXI secolo: *Penny Dreadful* di John Logan tra letteratura e televisione». In her dissertation she explores the use of several literary genres and classics in the British-American television series *Penny Dreadful*. Among her research interests are Translation Studies with a focus on Adaptation and Postmodern rewriting of the Arthurian legend and English literary classics.