Introduction

Now… bring me that horizon.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl, 2003[1]

Since its first appearance in the second half of the 1990s under the impetus of new technologies, digimodernism has decisively displaced postmodernism to establish itself as the twenty-first century's new cultural paradigm. It owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship. These in turn become the hallmarks of a group of texts in new and established modes which also manifest the digimodernist traits of infantilism, earnestness, endlessness and apparent reality. Digimodernist texts are found across contemporary culture, ranging from "reality TV" to Hollywood fantasy blockbusters, from Web 2.0 platforms to the most sophisticated videogames, and from certain kinds of radio show to crossover fiction. In its pure form the digimodernist text permits the reader or viewer to intervene textually, physically to make text, to add visible content or tangibly shape narrative development. Hence "digimodernism", properly understood as a contraction of "digital modernism", is a pun: it's where digital technology meets textuality and text is (re)formulated by the fingers and thumbs (the digits) clicking and keying and pressing in the positive act of partial or obscurely-collective textual elaboration.

Of all the definitions of postmodernism, the form of digimodernism recalls the one given by Fredric Jameson. It too is "a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm"; not a blanket description of all contemporary cultural production but "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses… [including] 'residual' and 'emergent' forms of cultural production… must make their way".[2] Like Jameson, I feel that if "we do not achieve some

general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference… [The aim is] to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm".[3] Twenty years later, however, the horizon has changed; the dominant cultural force field and systematic norm is different: what was postmodernist is now digimodernist.

The relationships between digimodernism and postmodernism are various. First, digimodernism is the successor to postmodernism: emerging in the mid-late 1990s, it gradually eclipsed it as the dominant cultural, technological, social and political expression of our times. Second, in its early years a burgeoning digimodernism co-existed with a weakened, retreating postmodernism; it's the era of the hybrid or borderline text (The Blair Witch Project, The Office, the Harry Potter novels). Third, it can be argued that many of the flaws of early digimodernism derive from its contamination by the worst features of a decomposing postmodernism; one of the tasks of a new digimodernist criticism will therefore be to cleanse its subject of its toxic inheritance. Fourth, digimodernism is a reaction against postmodernism: certain of its traits (earnestness, the apparently real) resemble a repudiation of typical postmodern characteristics. Fifth, historically adjacent and expressed in part through the same cultural forms, digimodernism appears socially and politically as the logical effect of postmodernism, suggesting a modulated continuity more than a rupture. These versions of the relationship between the two are not incompatible but reflect their highly complex, multiple identities.

On the whole I don't believe there is such a thing as "digimodernity". This book is not going to argue that we have entered into a totally new phase of history. My sense is that, whatever its current relevance in other fields, postmodernism's insistence on locating an absolute break in all human experience between the disappeared past and the stranded present has lost all plausibility. The last third of the twentieth century was marked by a discourse of

endings, of the "post-" prefix and the "no longer" structure, an aftershock of 1960s' radicalism and a sort of intellectual millenarianism which seems to have had its day. Like Habermas, my feeling is that, ever more crisis-ridden, modernity continued throughout this period as an "unfinished project". Although the imponderable evils of the 1930s and 40s could only trigger a breakdown of faith in inherited cultural and historical world-views such as the Enlightenment, the nature and scale of this reaction were overstated by some writers. In so far as it exists, "digimodernity" is, then, another stage within modernity, a shift from one phase of its history into another.

Certain other kinds of discourse are also not to be found here. I won't be looking at how digitization actually works technically; and I won't do more than touch on the industrial consequences, the (re)organization of TV channels, film studios, Web start-ups etc. which it's occasioned. I'm a cultural critic, and my interest here is in the new cultural climate thrown up by digitization. My focus is textual: what are these new movies, new TV programs, these videogames and Web 2.0 applications like to read, watch and use? What do they signify, and how? Digimodernism, as well as a break in textuality, brings a new textual form, content and value, new kinds of cultural meaning, structure and use, and they will be the object of this book.

Equally, while digimodernism has far-reaching philosophical implications with regard to such matters as selfhood, truth, meaning, representation and time, they are not directly explored here. It's true that these arguments first saw the light of day in an article I wrote for Philosophy Now in 2006, but the cultural landscape was even then my primary interest.[4] In that article I called what I now label digimodernism "pseudo-modernism", a name which on reflection seemed to overemphasize the importance of certain concomitant social shifts (discussed here in chapter seven). The notion of pseudo-modernity is finally a dimension of one aspect of digimodernism. The article was written largely in the spirit of intellectual

provocation; uploaded to the Web, it drew a response which eventually persuaded me the subject deserved more detailed and scrupulous attention. I've tried to address here a hybrid audience, and for an important reason: on one side, it seemed hardly worth discussing such a near-universal issue without trying to reach out to the general reader; on the other, it seemed equally pointless to analyze such a complex, multifaceted and shifting phenomenon without a level of scholarly precision. Whatever the result may be, this approach is justified, even necessitated, by the status and nature of the theme. Finally, considerations of space precluded extensive discussion of postmodernism, and the text therefore assumes that we all know well enough what it is/was. Anyone wishing for a fuller account is advised to read one of the many introductions available such as Simon Malpas's The Postmodern (2005), Steven Connor's Postmodernist Culture (1997, 2nd edition), or Hans Bertens's The Idea of the Postmodern (1995).

I begin by assessing the case for the decline and fall since the mid-late 1990s of postmodernism, in part as a way of outlining the context within which its successor appeared. In chapter two I discuss digimodernism's most recognizable feature, its new textuality; I then sketch a pre-history of its traits in the period before the emergence of its technological basis. Chapter four examines instances of digimodernism on the Internet, while chapter six considers its impact on pre-existing cultural and textual forms. They are separated by a study of aesthetic characteristics common to all digimodernist textual modes, electronic or not. I finish with some remarks on the possibility of a digimodernist society.

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