

“The Postmodern Moment Has Passed”?!: Postmodernism in
Julian Barnes’ *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story*

Anna Röttgers

BA Thesis English Literature

Supervisor: Dr. Usha Wilbers

14th June 2019

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: Dr. Usha Wilbers

Title of document: “The Postmodern Moment Has Passed”?: Postmodernism in
Julian Barnes’ *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story*

Name of course: BA Thesis English Literature

Date of submission: 14th June 2019

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Signed

Name of student: Anna Röttgers

Student number:

Abstract

The present thesis focuses on the two most recent novels written by the critically acclaimed author Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time* (2016) and *The Only Story* (2018). At the point of writing these novels have received little attention in the field of British and European literature. The thesis sets out to explore if and how Postmodern elements are used in Barnes' recent works, and the two novels are used as case studies. The thesis argues that Postmodernism is not exhausted for Julian Barnes and is used as a means to write about universal themes. At the same time, it takes account of the complex nature of Postmodernism and the circumstance that it cannot be measured. In the textual analysis of the novels it is illustrated how recurring elements in Barnes' fiction come back in the two novels.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, *The Only Story*, Postmodernism, irony, history, refutation of truth claims, paranoia, epistemological questions, Barnesian

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Introduction

Julian Barnes is one of the most renowned contemporary anglophone writers. Many of his novels have been awarded a literary prize, which culminated in 2011, when *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) won the perhaps most important literary prize, the Man Booker. However, Julian Barnes is not only of interest to the wider public, but to British and European literature academics as well. This results in a multitude of scholarly publications on Julian Barnes's work, such as the works by Matthew Pateman, Peter Childs and the essay collection edited by Ezster Tory and Janina Vesztergom that all feature close readings of Barnes's novels from a variety of perspectives, such as post-structuralism and the identification and analysis of themes, such as time.¹ The aforementioned publications from the period between the 2000s and 2010s are thus fairly recent, but at the point of writing this thesis (first half of 2019), his two most recent novels have not received attention from British and European literature scholars yet. This thesis attempts to contribute to the reception of Barnes's work in the academic field of contemporary British literature research.

In the past, Barnes's work was often labelled as postmodern by critics and scholars. For example, Vanessa Guignery classifies the novel *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) as "postmodernist experimentation" in her book that analyses Barnes's fiction up to *Arthur & George* (2005).² Gregory Rubinson even labels Barnes a "Postmodernist," as the book's title suggests, *The Fiction of Rushdie, Barnes, Winterson and Carter Breaking Cultural and Literal Boundaries in the Work of Four Postmodernists*.³ In her chapter for the edited collection *Julian Barnes: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* by Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs, Christine Berberich argues that Barnes's early work "contributed to shaping high postmodernism."⁴ But Postmodernism in itself is a highly complex, impalpable and elusive term. Peter Barry defines it as a cultural mood, that opposes Modernism in that it celebrates bad taste and fragmentation and rejects the distinction between high and low art.⁵ In an attempt to characterise Postmodernism independently from Modernism, Bran Nicol links

1. Pateman, *Julian Barnes*; Childs, *Julian Barnes*; Tory and Vesztergom, *Stunned into Uncertainty*.

2. Guignery, *Fiction of Julian Barnes*, 146.

3. Rubinson, *Fiction of Rushdie, Barnes, Winterson and Carter*.

4. Berberich, "All Letters Quoted", 117.

5. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 80.

Postmodernism with the contemporary, which makes it “liable to change.”⁶ Important Postmodernist stylistic characteristics include irony, pastiche and fragmentation.

But since the early 2000s there is a shift away from Postmodernism in the academic British and European literature discussion and as a reflection, Postmodernism is under pressure. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson argue that Postmodernism is exhausted and identify three categories of how novelists have turned to other forms of writing;⁷ a detailed discussion of this follows in chapter one. Bearing this discussion in mind, the question arises whether Postmodernism really is as exhausted as it is asserted by scholars in the field, making it interesting to investigate if the label Postmodern is still applicable. In the case of the novels by Julian Barnes, the question this thesis will try to answer is to what extent can the label Postmodern be applied to the novels *The Noise of Time* (2016) and *The Only Story* (2018) written by Julian Barnes? The novel *The Noise of Time* (2016) is a historical novel, a genre that is favoured in Postmodernism.⁸ In both novels, recurring issues of life, such as love, memory, paranoia (with anxiety and fear) and power are explored. The emphasis on issues like this does not make the novels postmodern, however, but the way in which he writes about this, for example with irony, does.

The main method used in this research is a synthesis of textual analysis and applying a theoretical perspective to the novels *The Noise of Time* (2016) and *The Only Story* (2018). The two novels were chosen because on the one hand, there are no scholarly publications about them, as was argued earlier. On the other, because the critic Diane Scharper wrote in her review on *The Only Story* for *The Weekly Standard* that Barnes uses a postmodern technique in his narrative structure, that is, he varies the point of view of the narration from first to second to third person. In a review about *The Noise of Time* in *The New Yorker*, Nikil Saval characterises Barnes’s Shostakovich as “rueful postmodernist.”⁹ This bids the question whether these claims can also be supported from an academic viewpoint. The texts will be combed through thoroughly to find out its themes and motifs. Then it will be assessed whether these are postmodernist themes and based on this whether the term postmodern can be applied to the novels. The research is based upon the synthesis of the textual analysis of

6. Nicol, *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel*, 2.

7. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, *The 2000s*.

8. Dantye, “National Past / Personal Past”, 54.

9. Saval, “The Shostakovich Wars”.

the novels and the application of the theoretical framework of literary Postmodernism. The novels will be analysed in the light of current debates on Postmodernism, with the use of scholarly publications, such as the contribution to the debate around Postmodernism by Bentley, Hubble and Wilson.

This thesis contains three main chapters, which are followed by a conclusion. Chapter one focuses on the theoretical framework of Postmodernism. It begins with presenting the state of Postmodernism in the twenty-first century, moving to a short glance at the history of Postmodernism and an ensuing identification of stylistic and thematic characteristics of Postmodernism. The chapter concludes with an interpretation of the end of Postmodernism. Chapter two presents the results of the close reading of the novel *The Noise of Time*, which was published in 2016. The findings from the close reading of the 2018 novel *The Only Story* are discussed in chapter three. These so-called case study chapters will not only focus on the themes and techniques; they will also demonstrate that elements that are called ‘Barnesian’ come back in these novels. The ensuing conclusion presents a synthesis of the conducted research and discusses the implications of the results. Additionally, it seeks to provide food for thought for further research.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

“Let’s just say: it’s over.”¹⁰ This textual death knell is Linda Hutcheon’s straightforward way to pronounce Postmodernism dead. She claims that “the Postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first century world.”¹¹ In order to understand whether Julian Barnes’ novels *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story* are postmodern, one first has to understand what Postmodernism is. This chapter first seeks out to delineate several stylistic and thematic characteristics of Postmodernism. Postmodernism is a theory that is very difficult to grasp. The elusive quality of Postmodernity is evident in the plethora of definitions that exist. Postmodernism is understood as a cultural mood that opposes Modernism.¹² But it is also described as being concerned with the contemporary.¹³ As of late, the term ‘the contemporary’ enjoys some popularity, the definition of the term, however, varies among scholars. Due to the limited scope of this thesis this will not be discussed in further detail. Lyotard on the other hand, defines it as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”¹⁴ Thus, Postmodernism undermines metanarratives that give structure and meaning to life and things; in postmodern reality, these are illusions, everything is temporary and there is no fixed, absolute meaning or truth. Generally, it can be said that Postmodernism undermines Western metaphysics, and destructs key arguments that governed modern and ancient Western thought, such as language, identity, origin, voice, and mind. This stands in contrast with the prevailing (foundationalist) opinion “that it is possible to establish objective truths and universal values,” which was evaluated as inadequate by Postmodernists due to profound developments after World War Two.¹⁵

As it is the case with all other (stylistic) eras, it is virtually impossible to determine the exact period of Postmodernism. In the literary field the term Postmodern is current since Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). It thus

10. Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 166.

11. Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 181.

12. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 80.

13. Nicol, *Postmodernism and Contemporary Novel*, 2.

14. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

15. Heywood. *Political Theory: An Introduction*, 119.

emerged in the middle of the Cold War, which ensued after the end of World War Two. The period of the Cold War is one of anxiety and saw the development of globalisation and consumerism. The concomitant changes, such as mass production and advertising, heavily influenced Postmodernist theory.¹⁶ The disruption caused by these changes was used by Postmodernists as an opportunity to undermine virtually all aspects of life. As a result, Postmodernist literature is characterised by fragmentation, chance, hyperrealities, indeterminacy, subjectivity, the refutation of truth claims, self-reflexivity, paranoia and irony that serve the Postmodernist purpose of undermining.

The terms hyperreality and simulacra were coined by Jean Baudrillard. The advent of mass media and an unprecedented number of images concluded in the prevailing opinion that one can no longer distinguish between the real and the imagined, depth and surface. According to Baudrillard, this distinction becomes increasingly blurred and ultimately collapses altogether. This state is what he calls hyperreality; the loss of what is real. Baudrillard then continues by writing about the realm of semiotics, by establishing a series of steps that have led to the emptiness of signs. Signs, he states, are not an index for a reality anymore but signs are based on signs, resulting in a simulacrum, where everything is a model without any depth.

History is a focus of attention in the practice of literary Postmodernism. In 1988, Linda Hutcheon established the genre of historiographic metafiction for Postmodernist novels that play with self-reflexion and history. It is based on the intrinsically postmodern idea that “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction” are human-made constructs and it is this, which allows for the “rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.”¹⁷ Hence, it is no surprise that Postmodernism often plays with time in the narratological sense. The use of temporal disorder affects past and present alike.¹⁸ The distortion of history can take three manifestations, apocryphal history, anachronism and historical fantasy.¹⁹ Apocryphal history means the distortion of actual history with a counterfeit presentation of actual events; an example of this can be found in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*.

16. Barry, 84.

17. Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 5.

18. Lewis, “Postmodernism and Literature”, 124.

19. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 90-96.

Anachronism, on the other hand, places things, persons or ideas in a time in which they have not been invented or happened yet, e.g. a smartphone in the eighteenth century. To combine the real with the imagined, for example letting a real person such as Donald Trump interact with an imagined figure such as Peter Pan, is the concept behind historical fantasy. Not only the past, but also the present is overthrown. The linear coherence of the perception of significant events and the uneventful passing of time, each respectively derived from the Greek concepts ‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’, are twisted.

Self-reflexivity is also a symptom of Postmodernism.²⁰ Generally speaking, playing with the notion of artificiality is typical of Postmodernist writings as it reflects the emphasis on subjectivity and impressionism. Self-reflexivity in novels is expressed through the open reflection on the (artificial) process of composition. That is to say that novels repeatedly point out their fictional status.²¹ In this general area, the device *mise-en-abyme* must be mentioned. It refers to the “internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work,” a device that is popular with Postmodernists such as Italo Calvino.²² However, both concepts cannot exclusively be attributed to Postmodernism. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1609), there is a play within the play, namely *The Murder of Gonzago*, and Martin Amis openly comments on the writing process in his novel *London Fields* (1989). The device also functions in substantiating and capturing the belief that language, and therefore also novels, cannot function as a mirror to reality because they make reference to other language in a frame-within-a-frame way, which represents the exact opposite of Realism.

A variety of literature scholars identify the theme of paranoia as a characteristic of Postmodernist writing. Barry Lewis describes it as such:

Postmodernist writing reflects paranoid anxieties in many ways, including: the distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to anyone particular place or identity, the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others.²³

Paranoia means the belief that there is some constant threat in one’s life. This is not something merely real persons suffer from but also characters in postmodernist fiction. They

20. Nöth, “Self-referential postmodernity”, 16.

21. Baldick, “self-reflexive”.

22. Baldick, “mise-en-abyme”.

23. Lewis, “Postmodernism and Literature”, 130.

often suffer from a “dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action.”²⁴ Bywater argues that this paranoia is at the bottom of Postmodernism’s rejection of truth claims.²⁵

Postmodernists and Modernists both reflect on epistemological questions. However, the former do so in a more radical fashion. Subject of epistemological questions are concepts like fact, truth, representation or generally questions about how one knows things. Postmodernists use their answers on these questions as an “artistic device”; they radically subvert notions of truth, that is Postmodernists do not believe in fixed factual truth.²⁶ Consequently, constraints of time, location and cause are disrupted in Postmodernists’ narratives.²⁷ They create worlds which purposely ignore frameworks and distinctions agreed upon by convention. Truth allegations made by religions, ethics or even by the literary tradition are undermined.²⁸

Irony is a crucial rhetorical device in Postmodernism and “is utilized ... as a strategy of resistance and subversion.”²⁹ The (at least) two-fold of meaning that forms the basis of irony corresponds to the Postmodernist view that meaning is not something which is “single, decidable, or stable.”³⁰ What makes it interesting for Postmodernists is that irony has the ability to destruct meaning of messages and in a wider sense of meaning itself.³¹ Thus, Postmodernist irony cultivates fragmentation and variety.³²

“Postmodern disenchantment no longer dominates critical discourse or creative practice.”³³ This is only one example of the frequently claimed end of Postmodernism; Nicol

24. Tanner, *City of Words*, 15.

25. Bywater, “The Paranoia of Postmodernism”, 80.

26. Ibsch, “Refutation of Truth Claims”, 265.

27. Ibsch, 265.

28. Ibsch, 266.

29. Shugart, “Postmodern Irony”, 434.

30. Hutcheon, *Double Talking*, 13.

31. Shugart, “Postmodern Irony”, 436.

32. Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 21.

33. James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism”, 87-88.

also agrees by stating that the heyday of Postmodernism in academic discourse is over.³⁴ If Postmodernism really is dead, then the question arises to what other forms of writing novelists turn to. From the late 1990s onwards, there are initiations to leave Postmodernism behind. Vera Nünning identifies four “departures” at the turn of the twenty-first century. Firstly, the renewed interest in ethical questions and the return to realist narratives.³⁵ Secondly, literature that is influenced by and referring to popular culture, which is characterised as quite successful.³⁶ The third and fourth departures deal with the interest in topics of national identity and memory and the amalgamation of experiment and realism.³⁷

The process that began just before the new millennium, continues well into the twenty-first century. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson establish three strands of writing employed by British twenty-first century writers. Firstly, the “novelists who continue to use narrative techniques associated with Postmodernism but who have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions.”³⁸ Representatives of this strand are Ali Smith and David Mitchell.³⁹ The second strand novelists are “those who have attempted to return (or continue) to work in a broadly realist mode as an implicit rejection of postmodernism.”⁴⁰ This mode can be understood as quite opposed to Postmodernism, as Realist writing aims to establish truth claims instead of refuting them.⁴¹ The third and final response is made up by writers “who have self-consciously returned to modernist techniques as a way of return to a pre-postmodernist aesthetics.”⁴² The return to Modernist techniques, such as free indirect speech and stream of consciousness, constitutes the third and the final response of twenty-first century novelists.⁴³ Interesting in the context of this work is in which category David James

34. Nicol, *Postmodernism and Contemporary Novel*, 2-3.

35. Nünning, “Beyond Indifference”, 236.

36. Nünning, 241.

37. Nünning, 245-249.

38. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, “Introduction”, 17.

39. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, 17.

40. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, 17.

41. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, 18.

42. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, 17.

43. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, 19.

and Urmila Seshagiri place Julian Barnes. According to them, Barnes belongs to the novelists that style “their twenty-first-century literary innovations as explicit engagements with the innovations of early-twentieth-century writing.”⁴⁴

So far, this chapter presented a selected overview of Postmodernist characteristics that makes no claims of being complete. In the following chapters it will be discussed whether the postmodern elements of irony, refutation of truth claims, paranoia, history and the reflection on epistemological questions can be found in Barnes’s novels *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story*, despite the alleged death of Postmodernism. In other words, it will be determined whether the novels are a product or illustration of the theory that was described in this chapter. It is hypothesized that Barnes’ Postmodernism in the selected novels is especially focussed on the aspects above and not so much focussed on self-reflexivity and hyperrealities for example. Additionally, it is hypothesized that Barnes’ work is an example of Postmodernist discursive strategies and ideological critique that live on.

44. James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism”, 87.

Chapter 2: *The Noise of Time*

In chapter one it was argued that Postmodernism is indefinable but “it can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices”⁴⁵ in order to undermine fixed beliefs and truths. In this chapter Julian Barnes’ novel, *The Noise of Time* (2016) will be analysed, and it will be assessed whether the central techniques and themes, such as narrative style and art and power, can be classified as postmodern and whether it does undermine fixed structures and beliefs in the areas of politics, art and love. The main postmodern elements that will be considered are the engagement with history, irony, refutation of truth claims, paranoia and the reflection on epistemological questions. The main themes in the novel are paranoia linked with anxiety and fear as well as art in relation to politics and power. These themes show some overlap with what is called ‘Barnesian’. Tory and Vesztergom describe Barnesian as “concerned with art, love, memory and the fear of death.”⁴⁶

The Noise of Time features the fictionalised life of the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich (*1906 – †1975) in the Soviet Union. In the entry on Dmitri Shostakovich in the online version of the Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, it is said that “he is generally regarded as the greatest symphonist of the mid-20th century.”⁴⁷ The book begins in the year 1936 in which Shostakovich offends Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, with his latest opera. Only through sheer luck his life is spared and in the following two chapters, the book chronicles his life avoiding the Power but it finds him time and time again, in New York City in 1948 and in Russia in 1960. In 1948, he is made the star member of the Russian artistic delegation to New York by Stalin. There he is forced to parrot the regime’s opinions on art and music, which directly contravene his own beliefs. In 1960, he is made chairman of the Union of Composers but this is accompanied by having to enter the Party, resulting in further compromising Dmitri’s values.

The novel begins with a frame narrative of a beggar on a train platform who sings in hope for some money, when two men inside the train offer him some vodka and the three of them chink their glasses and drink. This narrative is written in italics, thereby demarcating it from the rest. The novel returns to this narrative at the end of the book and throughout the novel the reader learns that one of these men in the train is Dmitri Shostakovich. The novel is

45. Aylesworth, “Postmodernism“.

46. Tory and Vesztergom, *Stunned into Uncertainty*, 155.

47. Fay and Fanning, “Shostakovich, Dmitry”.

narrated in third person throughout the entire story. This third person narration inherently comes with some distance to what is narrated, thus never creating a thrilling or intense atmosphere while reading. But this stems not only from the narrative perspective but also from what several Hungarian scholars have called ‘Barnesian’ style.⁴⁸ Barnesian style is characterised as “wry, erudite, clever, playful, seemingly distanced but deeply personal at heart.”⁴⁹

Another striking aspect in terms of structure is the beginning of each chapter. The chapters start with the same sentence with light alterations. Thus, chapter one begins with: “All he knew was that this was the worst time.”⁵⁰ Chapter two begins slightly altered with: “All he knew was that *this* was the worst time.”⁵¹ Finally, “all he knew was that this was the worst time of all,” marks the first sentence of the third chapter. Another recurring element is the clause “those who did not know him, and who followed his music only from a distance.”⁵² This can be seen as an example of what is characterised as “intratextual markers reinforcing textual cohesion.”⁵³ It is argued that in Barnes’ novels, the reader never knows where he is but intertextual markers, like the repetition of the first sentence as cited above, “reinforce textual cohesion.”⁵⁴

Postmodernism changed the understanding of history, resulting in critically challenging concepts like historical truth and the linearity of history. *The Noise of Time* can be classified as a historical novel. The time order of the narrated events is not linear. Instead, the reader follows Shostakovich’s life in three chapters, 1: On the Landing, 2: On the Plane and 3: In the Car. Each of these situations in which Shostakovich finds himself is used and described as a framework, which provides the starting point for Shostakovich's memories and reflections. Shostakovich does not remember events and memories in the order in which they happened.

48. Tory and Vesztergom, *Stunned into Uncertainty*, 154.

49. Tory and Vesztergom, 154.

50. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 7.

51. Barnes, 61.

52. Barnes, 25, 75, 163.

53. Tory and Vesztergom, *Stunned into Uncertainty*, 149.

54. Tory and Vesztergom, 149.

Often, he reminisces about all things that seem to be relevant in contributing where he is right now, either on the landing of the apartment complex, sitting in a plane or in the car. This is another example for the non-linearity, that is to say that the memories do not come up in the order they occurred. This is also due to the fact that many memories are not dated. Two-thirds of the novel are set in the Cold War, the period in which Postmodernism is said to have emerged. The anxiety that many people felt for a plethora of reasons is also thematised in the novel, in particular the anxiety of Dmitri.

The novel discusses love, especially the concept of free love. This concept is described as:

All must be free to love as they wished; how carnal love lasted but a short time; how the sexes were entirely equal; how marriage ought to be abolished as an institution, but that if it continued in practice, the woman had the full right to an affair if she so desired, and if she then wanted a divorce, the man must accept it and take the blame; but how, in all of this, and despite everything, the children were sacred.⁵⁵

Dmitri's ideals in love stem from *Madame Parisse* written by Guy de Maupassant. The short story is about a young garrison who falls in love with Madame Parisse who is married to Monsieur Parisse. They agree to meet when Monsieur Parisse is out of town for business but when the news arrives that he will be back sooner, the garrison closes the city gates to be able to spend the night with Madame Parisse. Dmitri interprets the story's lesson as that one should love "without fear, without barriers, without thought for the morrow. And then, afterwards, without regret."⁵⁶ But over the course of his life these beliefs turn out to be not that easy to implement. Dmitri has an unstable love life, marries impulsively and divorces just to remarry his ex-wife Nina again.⁵⁷ And in a bid to grant each other their free love, they both have affairs and Dmitri often escapes to his music.⁵⁸ Dmitri himself calls his love life "muddle instead of music," which closely resembles the headline of the Pravda article in which his opera is denounced.⁵⁹ When the senior Dmitri reminisces about his relationships he remembers the Maupassant short story again but he realizes that he has forgotten a detail. The young garrison who locked the town in order to keep Madame Parisse's husband out, is

55. Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, 17.

56. Barnes, 34.

57. Barnes, 38.

58. Barnes, 140.

59. Barnes, 54.

punished for the fake emergency he used to be able to have sexual relations with the Madame. Before, he imagined himself as the young garrison but as he is older, he wonders whether he rather is Monsieur Parisse.⁶⁰ Throughout the book the narrator never judges Dmitri's actions and beliefs, even in matters of delicacy, such as love. Thus, there is no absolute statement the novel wants to convey. The certain subtlety of how the reader is set to reflect on his own, is remarkable, and something which some scholars and critics alike say is typical of Barnes.

As it was argued in chapter one, paranoia in fictional characters expresses itself through the fear that someone else is influencing their life and an outsider tries with all kinds of plots to steal their autonomy in all spheres of life, even in thought. Dmitri Shostakovich displays exactly this. After Stalin leaves the performance of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* because two instruments play too loudly, Shostakovich falls in disgrace. He is interrogated at "the Big House on Liteiny Prospekt."⁶¹ During the interrogation he is accused of having been part of a plot to assassinate Stalin with his friend Marshal Tukhachevsky.⁶² Dmitri denies this and he is released with the condition to overthink his statements and to come back in two days. When he returns for the second appointment, his interrogator is not there to receive him, and he is free to go. Dmitri now fears that he is taken away by the NKVD in the middle of the night. Because of this he packs a suitcase with belongings and stands fully dressed in the elevator all night to avoid being pulled out of his bed in front of his wife Nita and daughter Galya.⁶³ The waiting at the elevator also stems from the fear that his daughter will be brought to an orphanage "where she would be turned into a model Soviet citizen."⁶⁴ The immediate action he takes after the opera is finished, is to take a train to Arkhangelsk, in what seems like an attempt to flee. In part two when he is pressured by Stalin himself to become the star member of a Russian delegation to New York, he denies any interference of the regime in the arts, especially music, when questioned by the exile Russian Nicolas

60. Barnes, 142.

61. Barnes, 43.

62. Barnes, 46.

63. Barnes, 15.

64. Barnes, 15.

Nabokov.⁶⁵ His paranoia has grown so much that he permanently wears amulets of garlic, to protect him “against Power, against enemies, against hypocrites, and even against well-meaning friends.”⁶⁶ The novel also displays the presence of fear in other musicians such as the violinist Oistrakh, who witnesses how everyone in his apartment block is taken away at night except for him, making him afraid for the rest of his life.⁶⁷ Over the course of the novel the fear lessens but subliminal it is always there. His mind is never free. Dmitri does not stop seeing Power influencing his life or that of others. He is still, and always will be, on the landing by the lift waiting to be taken away.

The novel thematises art, especially in the context of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The young Shostakovich has a specific idea what music he wants to write and for whom, which becomes evident in the following: “He wrote music for everyone and no one. He wrote music for those who best appreciated the music he wrote, regardless of social origin. He wrote music for the ears that could hear.”⁶⁸ However, he did not reckon with the Party who will alter these ideals. Art in the Soviet Union was under control by the Party, and as a result composers and their music were made into a political instrument. So it is hardly surprising that the highest maxim that all musicians in the Soviet Union had to follow was formulated by Stalin: “art belongs to the people.”⁶⁹ But Shostakovich does not seem to comply with this, as the question “Tell me, whom does art belong to?” comes up in his head whenever he sees the student whom he asked this question in an examination in his role as a professor at the Conservatoire.⁷⁰ His answer to this is that “art does not exist for art’s sake: it exists for people’s sake.”⁷¹ In the quest of the Party to instrumentalise art, the Party is looking for a “Red Beethoven,”⁷² a composer whose music is the embodiment of the USSR, “a pure

65. Barnes, 102.

66. Barnes, 109-110.

67. Barnes, 63.

68. Barnes, 92.

69. Barnes, 91.

70. Barnes, 91.

71. Barnes, 91.

72. Barnes, 93.

proletarian and a member of the Party.”⁷³ But the search for him is unsuccessful and the blame is put on the musicologists who do not produce music that is accessible for the common public, that is, in terms of Soviet ideology, for the proletariat. The Party then often denounced these composers and labelled them as formalists, however, the term was used inconsistently. For the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to say that the term was used for anything that went against the socialist realism principles. The idea behind this was that music should sound optimistic and any lyrics should reflect the lives of proletariat and be supportive of the state. These principles also relate back to highest maxim by Stalin that art is for the people. In the novel Shostakovich’s opera is characterised as “non-political and confusing” and it is written for the “perverted taste of the bourgeois with its fidgety, neurotic music.”⁷⁴ The relationship of the themes of art and power in the Soviet Union is taken as a starting point to pose questions such as how to survive under a totalitarian regime and retaining one’s dignity. *The Noise of Time* gives no straight answer to this, as is typical of Postmodernism. Instead, it illustrates the personal life of Shostakovich as a fallible exemplary. In the context of Postmodernism, the status of art is of interest here. Postmodernism plays with the notion and understanding of good taste. Taste now is less influenced by traditional social structures, but consumers and artists alike “play with free-floating signifiers to continually reconstruct themselves using whatever imagery they find pleasurable.”⁷⁵ Contrary to Modernists they do not distinguish between high and low art. They oppose elitist art, similar to the Soviet regime, even though for different reasons. Generally, the way art in the USSR is described and discussed has a tongue-in-cheek quality to it.

The novel depicts irony as a way to cope with difficult political environments and the actions of it are ironic as well. Under the Soviet regime, many products were imported from the West where they were outdated and discarded and then rebranded in Soviet Russia.⁷⁶ This is ironical in the sense that they used exactly what they were opposing, capitalism and its products, as their own inventions after rebranding them. In the novel it is argued that the

73. Barnes, 93.

74. Barnes, 27.

75. Holt, “Cultural Capital Structure America”, 21.

76. Barnes. 84

sense for irony should only be developed later in life but as Dmitri comes in conflict with the Power he develops irony soon enough. He hopes that irony will protect his values, i.e. his family, love and music.⁷⁷ The reader is also a witness to ironic thoughts of Dmitri, when he praises Stalin over King Louis XIV as an absolute ruler.⁷⁸ His thoughts end with "...oh, enough, enough. He would make his own ears bleed."⁷⁹ Irony, indeed, becomes Dmitri's way to survive. Dmitri characterises irony as such:

Irony allows you to parrot the jargon of Power, to read out meaningless speeches written in your name, to gravely lament the absence of Stalin's portrait in your study while behind a half-open door your wife is holding herself against forbidden laughter. You welcome the appointment of a new Minister of Culture by commenting that there will be especial rejoicing in progressive musical circles, which have always placed their greatest hopes in him. You write a final movement to your Fifth Symphony which is the equivalent of painting a clown's grin on a corpse, then listen with a straight face to Power's response: 'Look, you can see he died happy, certain of the righteous and inevitable triumph of the Revolution.'⁸⁰

But he has to realize that this irony has its limits, for example one cannot be ironic in torture, and that irony also has the drawback that it is often not recognised as such, and by pointing it out, it loses its power. This use of irony is strikingly similar to the use of irony by Postmodernists. Dmitri uses irony to undermine the Party and its political agenda.

The themes of *The Noise of Time* mainly relate to the epistemological questions that Postmodernists ask. The most prevalent theme of art and its relationship with power illustrates exactly this. The question to whom belongs art is central in Dmitri's life and to the novel but love is also discussed. Here the novel illustrates the difficulty of practising 'free love', especially without hurting one another and even more difficulties arise when there are children involved. Dmitri's main coping strategy with the Power is being ironic. Irony is used in the sense of Postmodernism. Thus, it is used as a way to undermine and bid defiance to the Power, even though it is not always recognised as such. Over the course of his life, the certainties and principles of young Dmitri crumble; his circumstances make a mess out of the beliefs which seemed clear to Dmitri. This dilution of fixed beliefs can be viewed as being representative of the key postmodern belief that there is no fixed meaning or truth.

77. Barnes, 86.

78. Barnes, 118.

79. Barnes, 119.

80. Barnes, 173-174.

Furthermore, *The Noise of Time* is a case in point that postmodern fiction characters often suffer from anxiety. Dmitri's life is traversed by the fear of the Power and any plots that it may have against him.

Chapter Three: *The Only Story*

In the previous chapter Julian Barnes' twelfth novel *The Noise of Time* (2016) was analysed and it has been shown that the book does indeed contain postmodern elements such as irony and epistemological issues. In this chapter, Barnes' latest novel *The Only Story* (2018) will be analysed, considering the postmodern elements of the engagement with history, irony, refutation of truth claims, paranoia and the reflection on epistemological questions.

The Only Story begins in 1960s English suburbia, and tracks the story of Paul Roberts. Paul is a nineteen-year-old, who spends his university summer break at his parents' house. On the initiative of his parents, he joins the local tennis club where he meets and falls in love with the forty-eight-year-old married Susan Macleod. Soon they begin a secret romantic relationship. After some years they buy a house in London, move there and live together for ten years. But soon, the great love between the two begins to crumble. Susan becomes an alcoholic and Paul learns that love can be tough. The story is narrated by Paul, adopting three different perspectives, as a young lad, then as middle aged and finally as an elderly.

The book has three chapters, simply named 'One, Two, Three'. In each of these chapters the point of view of narration changes. In the first chapter there is a first-person narrator (Paul); in the second chapter the first-person narration gradually passes over to second-person narration: "You decide that, since you are a student..."⁸¹ The third and final chapter is narrated in third-person, except for the last few paragraphs when the narration switches back to first-person. As was argued in chapter two, third-person narration creates a distance from what is narrated. This contrasts with the first-person narration, which projects the reader in Paul's consciousness. The second-person narration is "extremely rare."⁸² A well-known example is *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, a postmodern novel by Italo Calvino. The choice of narrative point of view becomes especially meaningful if one takes into consideration the events that are narrated in the chapters. In chapter one Paul only narrates the nice memories he has of his relationship with Susan; at the end of the chapter he even says, "and this is how I would remember it all, if could. But I can't."⁸³ Paul foreshadows some important but ugly memories. These are only gradually revealed to the reader in chapter

81. Barnes, *The Only Story*, 93.

82. Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading*, 262.

83. Barnes, *The Only Story*, 83.

two and three and each chapter adds a new perspective and details to the story. The pleasurable memories are told in first-person, but the unpleasant ones are told with more distance, creating the sense that Paul tries to prevent that these memories get too close to him. Paul, as the narrator of the story, is a typical Barnesian narrator, a “sad English person, preferably male.”⁸⁴ He is also a typical “Barnesian character, [who] tends to wonder about life instead of living it and to meditate on ... issues ... instead of taking action. Often, he fails to be in control of his life and realises only in hindsight, when it is probably too late, what has become of him.”⁸⁵ This also applies to the narrator of *The Noise of Time*, Dmitri and has an impact on how the story is told.

“Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less?”⁸⁶ This question opens the novel and also introduces its main theme, love. However, this is not a real question. We cannot choose how much we love, if we can then it is not love.⁸⁷ This is only one of the many aspects of love that the novel dwells upon. In another instance, it contemplates about first love and how it influences one’s life:

First love fixes a life for ever: this much I have discovered over the years. It may not outrank subsequent loves, but they will always be affected by its existence. It may serve as model, or as counterexample. It may overshadow subsequent loves; on the other hand, it can make them easier, better. Though sometimes, first love cauterizes the heart, and all any searcher will find thereafter is scar tissue.⁸⁸

The latter is the case with Paul, even though the novel leaves it to the reader to come to this conclusion. This subtlety was also illustrated in *The Noise of Time*, which is indicative that this indeed is something typical of Barnes’ novels. When Paul finally leaves Susan and hands her to Susan’s daughters he works in several countries. He builds a social circle and has new relationships, but he usually moves on after a few years.⁸⁹ Paul is metaphorically scarred for life as he observes that this lifestyle “was all he felt able to sustain.”⁹⁰ He also debates

84. Tory and Vesztergom, *Stunned into Uncertainty*, 149.

85. Tory and Vesztergom, 135.

86. Barnes, *The Only Story*, 3.

87. Barnes, 3.

88. Barnes, 71.

89. Barnes, 178.

90. Barnes, 178.

whether this coping strategy, “his policy of moving on – from place to place, woman to woman – was courageous in admitting his own limitations, or cowardly accepting them.”⁹¹

Paul records people’s statements about love in a notebook.⁹² One of the entries is the famous quote from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “In Memoriam”: “It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”⁹³ Over the years he reads his notebook a couple of times and crosses out quotes he does not believe to be true (anymore). One entry, however, ‘survives’ several reviews: “In love, everything is both true and false; it’s the one subject on which it’s impossible to say anything absurd.”⁹⁴ This quote was written by the French writer Sébastien Nicolas de Chamfort. Paul extends and interprets the quote on his own; his relationship with Susan, “an improbable attachment,”⁹⁵ is frowned upon by society, nonetheless this “love itself is never absurd, neither are any of its participants.”⁹⁶ There is also a quote from the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev’s play *A Month in the Country*: “In my opinion, every love, happy or unhappy, is a real disaster once you give yourself over to it entirely.”⁹⁷ This is not the first time that Barnes uses this quote; it is also featured in a short story of Barnes in the short story collection *The Lemon Table* (2004). Thus, we can see a variety of intertextual references, however they are not marked as such in the text. The assigning of the quotes to their respective authors was part of the research of this paper. In postmodern theory intertextuality plays a role in expressing the idea that “reproduction takes over from authentic production.”⁹⁸ Nothing is original, and in the case of love, everyone has already said something about it.

So far, the novel presented a variety of definitions regarding love. At the end of the novel, Paul concludes that “perhaps he had always been wasting his time. Perhaps love could never

91. Barnes, 178.

92. Barnes, 161.

93. Barnes, 165.

94. Barnes, 169.

95. Barnes, 170.

96. Barnes, 169.

97. Barnes, 206.

98. Allen, *Intertextuality*, 182.

be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story.”⁹⁹ This is also an instance of self-reflexivity, because the novel tries exactly to do this, capture love by telling the story of Paul Roberts. As love seems undefinable, it seems probable to draw a parallel between Postmodernism and love. As soon as one tries to define either of the terms, it will slip through one’s fingers. The definitions of love are not exactly falsified but the novel subtly undermines the truth claims of these definitions, as love cannot be pinned down in a definition but can only be grasped in an ‘only story’.

In Barnes’ Man Booker Prize-winning *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), memory is a main theme. In *The Only Story* Barnes returns to this theme. Tony Webster, the protagonist of *The Sense of an Ending*, also struggles with the idea of a malleable memory but Paul delves deeper into the issue by, among others, openly admitting the deficiencies of his memory. He openly questions whether retelling memories, or in this case the retelling of his story, “bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away?”¹⁰⁰ There are numerous instances where Paul says that he is not entirely sure about what he remembers.¹⁰¹ An example of this is when he remembers the time when he and Susan are visited by a man in their house in London: “He was a man of fiftyish, I suppose. In my memory I have given him – or he has acquired over the years – a trench-coat, and perhaps a broad-brimmed hat, underneath which he wore a suit and tie.”¹⁰² In this quote it becomes visible that Paul is very aware of the fact that memories change over time. This makes Paul a more reliable character but as a reader, one should be careful not to believe everything. Paul also comments on the nature of memory. He says that “memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer ... Memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. So there would be a self-interest in bringing happier memories to the surface first.”¹⁰³ The last sentence also explains why in chapter one only the happy memories of Paul’s relationship with Susan are retold. But there are also less direct allusions to the malleable nature of memory. Throughout the chapters Paul’s memory of Gordon Macleod, the husband of Susan, changes. In chapter one Paul does not really care for Gordon; he feels

99. Barnes, *The Only Story*, 206.

100. Barnes, 3.

102. Barnes, 91.

103. Barnes, *The Only Story*, 16.

that Gordon has nothing to do with the relationship between him and Susan.¹⁰⁴ In part two, when the reader learns about the abuse of Macleod both towards Paul and Susan that Pauls previously left out, he develops a more hateful attitude towards him but as he ages this feeling fades; it becomes irrelevant.¹⁰⁵ This process is so subtle that it is questionable that Paul is aware of it as the novel only implies this change very subtly.

Thus, Paul recognises the bias and unreliability of memory. The elderly Paul contemplates about whether memory is directed towards optimism or pessimism.¹⁰⁶ He argues for both sides but does not come to a final conclusion. On the one hand he argues that an optimistic memory “remembers your past in cheerful terms because this validated your existence.”¹⁰⁷ On the other, a pessimistic memory that makes all appear “blacker and bleaker than it actually was, then this might make life easier to leave behind.”¹⁰⁸ It is typical of Barnes as well as Postmodernism that the question remains unanswered as they refute truth claims.

History is addressed in the novel by the concept of ‘pre-history’. However, it is never really explained what this exactly means. The term first appears when Susan tells Paul of her generation, which actively experienced the Second World War. Paul describes this as her pre-history.¹⁰⁹ Paul is still quite young at the time and this might explain why he calls it her pre-history. Young adolescents often do not want to realize and understand that the older generation also once was young and has their problems. Pre-history comes with a certain negative connotation if a young person uses it to describe an older generation. However, Paul does acknowledge that “pre-history is central to all relationships.”¹¹⁰ It is quite ironic here that Paul believes in this but does not try to act upon it. He fails to use this knowledge to understand Susan’s alcoholism. How successful that would have been, however, is another matter. As the reader knows by chapter three, the relationship did not go too well. Significantly, Paul never really muses about who is to which degree to blame. He simply

104. Barnes, 60.

105. Barnes, 171.

106. Barnes, 162-163.

107. Barnes, 162.

108. Barnes, 163.

109. Barnes, 39.

110. Barnes, 46.

thinks that “if you wanted to attribute fault, you were straight away into pre-history, which now, in two of their three cases, had become inaccessible.”¹¹¹ He settles for the easy way; he simply cannot figure it out anymore since two people involved are dead.

Barnes’ novels deal with deeply human issues of life. In the context of the relationship, the novel alludes to shame. Paul and Susan both feel ashamed for various reasons. Susan is ashamed of her unhappy and abusive marriage with Gordon and that she cannot admit this in public and divorce him.¹¹² Susan’s shame expands when she becomes an alcoholic. Paul manages to get her to see a consultant psychiatrist but this attempt to get help fails. In this situation Paul is ashamed of her being addicted to alcohol.¹¹³ When he is older, Paul realises “that love, by some ruthless, almost chemical process, could resolve into pity and anger. ... And anger in a man caused him disgust.”¹¹⁴ This adds a new aspect to Paul’s shame; he is ashamed of his self-disgust. Paul never really specifies what their shame is respectively. It seems as if it is something that the elderly Paul does not want to dwell upon too much. This hints at the unreliability of Paul, even though he endeavours to be honest about his shortcomings.

Barnes’ novels are deeply engaged with the “subjectivity and impenetrable nature of knowledge and the illusory nature of the truth.”¹¹⁵ This also holds true for the novel at hand, *The Only Story*. As it was argued in the preceding chapters, the engagement with epistemological questions is one of many elements of Postmodernism. It is important to stress at this point that Postmodernism is very complex and it is impossible to measure it. However, it is possible to identify elements that are associated with Postmodernism. In the present novel, reflections on life are omnipresent. The main focus lies on love and themes that are associated with love. History and the nature of memory are important themes of the novel as well.

The postmodern element of the refutation of truth claims is limited to the theme love. The novel does this in a very subtle manner. The general subtlety whereby the novel expresses ideas, is typical of Barnes and Postmodernism. In the analysis some postmodern elements

111. Barnes, 172.

112. Barnes, 107.

113. Barnes, 132.

114. Barnes, 177.

115. Bijman, “Mixed Doubles”.

that were discussed in chapter one, such as irony and paranoia, were not found. However, this does not curtail the degree to which this novel might be labelled as postmodern, as it is impossible to measure Postmodernism. This chapter also briefly introduced another postmodern element that was not included before, intertextuality. Intertextuality can be hard to recognize if one is not familiar with the text that is referred to; which is why it has not been explained. In the conclusion of this paper it will be discussed whether the considered postmodern elements in *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story* are a form of Barnes' adjusted form of Postmodernism. This idea will be further developed in the following conclusion of this paper, along with the synthesis of the research results.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to determine whether the two most recent novels *The Noise of Time* (2016) and *The Only Story* (2018) by Julian Barnes can be labelled as postmodern. The postmodern elements of irony, refutation of truth claims, paranoia, history and the reflection on epistemological questions in due consideration of the complexity of Postmodernism were worked out in chapter one. It was explained that Postmodernism is a very slippery term and therefore hard to define. Additionally, the current state of Postmodernism was discussed. Postmodernism is proclaimed to be dead and exhausted in the twenty-first century.

Statements from scholars like these have inspired, among other reasons, this bachelor thesis.

The novels *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story* were chosen as case studies because they have received almost no attention in the academic field of British and European literature at the point of writing. Additionally, the two most recent novels fall into the time after the heyday of Postmodernism and in a time in which authors supposedly return to other stylistic eras such as Realism and Postmodernism. Within the context of this, the thesis opposes the statement made by Bentley, Hubble and Wilson that Barnes is one of the authors that in his writing has returned to early twentieth-century writing, the period of Modernism. As this research has shown, Barnes still uses postmodern techniques to write about deeply human issues such as love and the vulnerability of humans.

This thesis's hypothesis was that Barnes does make use of postmodern elements, especially those of irony, the refutation of truth claims, paranoia, history and the reflection on epistemological questions. This turned out to be correct, however, not always to the same extent. For example, in *The Noise of Time* there was a heavier focus on paranoia than in *The Only Story* where it did not come up at all. Again, it is important to stress that Postmodernism is a complex theory that cannot be grasped easily and that it is not as easy as ticking off a list with postmodern elements to be able to say this is what Postmodernism consists of or that a certain novel is postmodern. This complication also applies to answering the thesis research question. However, it is difficult to answer this question, as Postmodernism is not something that can be measured, that is it cannot be said that one book is more postmodern than another, simply based on how many postmodern elements it employs to make a (subtle) standpoint on a certain topic. Nonetheless, what can be said is that Barnes does use postmodern elements to write about universal human questions and issues of life.

The Noise of Time, as well as *The Only Story* each respectively have one main theme. In the former this is the relation of art and power and in the latter, it is love. These big issues of

life are two examples of epistemological questions that Postmodernists engage with. However, the novels never make definitive statements about either of these themes, which is both typical of Barnes writing and of Postmodernism. The postmodern techniques and themes play a crucial part in contributing to the novels' engagement with epistemological questions.

Another important point that came up in the analyses of *The Noise of Time* and *The Only Story* is the fact that elements repeatedly surface in Barnes' writing. The engagement with epistemological questions is not only an element of Postmodernism but also a characteristic of Barnes' work in general. Furthermore, it was also illustrated that the narrator of Barnes's novels tends to be male and does not actively live his life but only lives it through retro perspective.

What can be learnt from this research are answers to two underlying questions of this research. Does Barnes use Postmodernism and if yes, in which way? What can be learnt from Barnes and Postmodernism? As this thesis has shown with the combination of textual analysis and the application of the theoretical framework of Postmodernism, Julian Barnes still uses postmodern techniques in his two most recent novels. Contrary to the prevailing opinion in the academic debate that Postmodernism is exhausted, Julian Barnes still effectively uses postmodern techniques in his books to write about general questions of life. Thus, Postmodernism is not as dead as one might think. To return to the original research question, if one had to decide whether the label postmodern can be applied to the novels – based on the research results – the answer would be yes, but one has to keep in mind that the theory of Postmodernism only allows tendencies and not definite answers.

To put it in a nutshell the research results have proved that the alleged death of Postmodernism does not hold true for Julian Barnes, who still uses postmodern techniques and ideas to write about recurring issues of life. The theoretical framework of literary Postmodernism is very complex and difficult to define. Nonetheless, it turned out that the novels make use of postmodern elements. In the future it is of interest to explore recent works of other contemporary renowned writers to map the alleged death of Postmodernism.

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