

A spectre haunts contemporary art and culture. The spectre of postmodernism. Nowhere is this observation more striking than in the recent documentary work of Adam Curtis. This paper seeks to offer an analysis of three recent works – *Bitter Lake* (2015), *HyperNormalisation* (2016), *Can't Get You Out of My Head* (2021) - by the British documentary filmmaker, Adam Curtis, and will suggest that they reflect much of the trappings of postmodern theory. It will be argued that the films can be deemed 'postmodern' both in terms of their content (narrative structure, central themes, historical context, etc.) and their style (film composition, image arrangement, use of music/sound). 'Postmodernism', whose influence on the history of ideas arguably reached its peak around 20 years ago, at the turn of the millennium, before falling from favour in the early 21st century, should be understood as a ghost which haunts such work as its societal implications (on politics, art, culture, etc.) have remained largely ignored or overlooked. It will be argued that despite the term's relative fall from grace in recent years, its influence looms large in the films, as well as in so many aspects of 21st century life in general. This paper suggests that the films contribute to building a conceptual framework of the contemporary world which chimes with the visions of the postmodern theorists of the later 20th century (Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson) yet, at the same time, the films themselves serve as postmodern 'artefacts' which proclaim the loss of "any alternative vision of society" (*HyperNormalisation*, 2016) and whose hypnotic musical excerpts and endless flows of images also paradoxically contribute to a postmodern 'crisis of historicity' (Jameson, 1991). In addition, and perhaps not entirely unrelated (?), the equally influential concept and political technique of 'populism' emerges as another 'ghost' which seems to haunt much of the director's work and his compelling extradiegetic commentary. Thus, this paper will also attempt to sketch a vision of 'populism' as seen through the films in which an image of the 'people' (as a collective) powerfully (yet dangerously?) emerges which casts them as lost in a complex tapestry of interconnected events and as the potential victims of manipulation. Finally, and somewhat optimistically, the paper will try to suggest how the two concepts - 'populism' and 'postmodernism' - can be understood as vaguely symbiotic; the former (in its contemporary form) emerging out of the ideological abyss left by the latter.

Mason, M. R. (2021). Spectres of populism and postmodernism in the documentary work of Adam Curtis (2015-2021). Abstract from Spring Seminar 2021: Spectrology, Haunting and Ghosts, Porto, Portugal.