Ethics / Aesthetics:
Post-Modern Positions

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A Postmodern Problematics

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There is something about this postmodern beast with which we are obsessed today that remains baffling: why has postmodernism been both acclaimed and decried by both ends of the political spectrum? What is it about postmodernism that has caused it to be labelled both radically revolutionary and nostalgically neo-conservative? The simple and obvious answer is that everyone is talking about different cultural phenomena—which they all label as postmodern. Rather than add to the confusion, let me state right away that what I shall mean by that label is modelled on the first relatively uncontested use of it—in postmodern architecture. Transcoded into other art forms, the postmodern, in this sense, is parodic or ironic in its relation to the past—both formal and social, aesthetic and ideological. In fiction, the postmodern is what I would call "historiographic metafiction," self-reflexive yet historically grounded. And there are equivalent manifestations in painting, video, film, dance, and other literary forms, as well as in contemporary theory.

But confusion about corpus cannot be the only reason for the political ambivalences of postmodernism. There is also something about this art itself that is paradoxical or doubly-encoded on both the formal and ideological levels. On the one hand, fiction like Doctorow's The Book of Daniel or Garcia Márquez's Chronicle of a Death Foretold overtly assert the arbitrariness and
conventionality of the borders of genre. But they do so by self-reflexively insisting on those very borders. Historiographic metafiction is self-consciously fiction, even if its discourse overlaps with that of history or biography or theory. Those conventions are both installed and subverted, used and abused.

Paralleling this formal paradox of the postmodern is an ideological one, for this art is both critical of and yet complicitous with the cultural dominants of our time: liberal humanism and mass consumer culture. Thus, seeing—or privileging—only half of this contradiction would allow for those totally opposite interpretations and evaluations of postmodernism. This art both inscribes and contests prevailing norms, both aesthetic and ideological. In the light of this definition, there obviously is such a thing as postmodern theory: the now familiar and inherently self-contradictory theories such as those Foucauldian totalizing negations of totalization or essentializations of the inessentializable (power, for instance), or those Lyotardian master narratives whose paradoxical plot is our loss of faith in master narratives. In this light, what I would argue is that we should perhaps look to both theory and artistic practice to discern what the common denominators defining the postmodern might be.

As a look at any journal of theory these days shows, the debate over the meaning and, finally, value of postmodernism is very much a current one. Looking at postmodern art today in the light of the early terms of the debate—as articulated by Lyotard (The Postmodern Condition) and Habermas ("Modernity:An Incomplete Project")—I would see what I call the postmodern as straddling, or perhaps more accurately, sitting on the fence, between the two camps. One the one hand, it inscribes a metanarrative, with precise values and premises (à la Habermas) but it then proceeds to problematize both the product and the very process of inscription (à la Lyotard). Lately, though, the Lyotard/Habermas terms of reference have waned a little in popularity and the more fashionable frameworks of debate are either Marxist or what we might call neo-Nietzschean. The latter derives at once its rhetorical and theoretical base from the nihilistic theorists of excess and decay, the patron saints of continental apocalyptic thought: Nietzsche, Bataille, Baudrillard. But there is a very real sense in which the new terms of reference for the debate both fail to take
into account their own position, the position from which the laments are launched. Nor do they always grant the very real complexities of the phenomena they claim to be describing. One of the lessons of the postmodern double encoding is that you cannot step outside of that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the values you choose to challenge.

And, while the bold assertion that the postmodern is "dehistoricized has made for dramatic headlines for the new debaters, this is a claim which would seem to have little relation to the actual works of what I am calling postmodern art. Historiographic metafiction's self-reflexivity works in tight conjunction with its seeming opposite (historical grounding) in order to reveal both the limits and powers of literary and historical knowledge. To challenge history and its writing like this, however, is not to deny either; it is, instead, itself potentially a profoundly historical act.

Baudrillard's immensely influential article, "The Precession of Simulacra," makes the error of substituting for analysis of actual postmodern practice a generalized apocalyptic vision which collapses differences and rejects the possible creative and contestatory impulses within the postmodern. He has argued that mass media has neutralized reality for us, and it has done so in stages: first reflecting, then masking reality, and then masking the absence of reality, and finally, bearing no relation to reality at all. This is the simulacrum, the final destruction of meaning. What I would want to argue is that postmodern art works to contest the "simulacrization" process of mass culture—not by denying it or lamenting it—but by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality, and by therein suggesting the potential naivety of the view upon which Baudrillard's laments are based. It is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist, as Baudrillard so absolutely claims; it is that they have ceased to be unproblematic issues. But, we appear to have forgotten that, at least since Plato, they never really have been unproblematic, and so what postmodernism does is ask us to confront our amnesia.

We are not witnessing what Baudrillard sees as a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what "real" can mean and of how we can know it. The function of the conjunction of the historiographic and the metafictive in
much contemporary fiction, from that of John Fowles and E. L. Doctorow to that of Maxine Hong Kingston and John Berger, is to make the reader aware of the distinction between the brute *events* of the past real and the *facts* through which we give meaning to that past, by which we assume to know it. Baudrillard's simulacrum theory is too neat; it resolves tensions which I see as ongoing and unresolvable, and which perhaps should form the basis of any definition of postmodernism that pretends to be faithful to actual cultural practice.

Baudrillard himself is aware of some contradictions that cannot be resolved, however. He accepts that all culture, whatever its overt claims to the contrary, acts in accord with the political logic of the capitalist system. But postmodernism, I think, inverts the terms of that paradox. It does not pretend to operate outside that system, for it knows it cannot; it therefore overtly acknowledges its complicity, only covertly to work to subvert the system's values from within. It is what Michael Ryan has called an "enclave" or a pocket within the dominant that can contest it through a strategy of pluralized and diversified struggles (218). It is not apolitical, then, any more than it is ahistorical. It partakes of what Edward Said labels "critical consciousness" (241-242), for it is always aware of differences, resistances, reactions. The postmodern does not deny that all discourses (including my own—but also Baudrillard's) work to legitimize power; instead, it questions how and why, and does so by self-consciously, even didactically, investigating the politics of the production and reception of art. To challenge a dominant ideology, it recognizes, is itself another ideology. To claim that questioning is a value in itself is ideological; it is done in the name of its own power investment in institutional and intellectual exchanges within academic and critical discourse. And, of course, the very act of questioning is one of inscribing (and then contesting) that which is being queried. In other words, the very form of interrogation enacts the postmodern paradox of being both complicitous with and critical of the prevailing norms—which it has inscribed by its very questioning.

The paradoxes of postmodernism work to instruct us in the inadequacies of totalizing systems and of fixed institutionalized boundaries (epistemological and ontological). Historiographic
metafiction's parody and self-reflexivity function both as markers of the literary and as challenges to its limitations. Its contradictory "contamination" of the self-consciously literary with the verifiably historical and referential challenges the borders we accept as existing between literature and the narrative discourses which surround it: history, biography, autobiography. This challenge to the limitations of the humanist privileging (and simultaneous marginalizing) of the literary has had repercussions that have overlapped with feminist and "minoritarian" contestings of the canon. Both theory and practice today work to show how, in Tony Bennett's terms, "literariness depends crucially not on the formal properties of a text in themselves but on the position which those properties establish for the text within matrices of the prevailing ideological field (59).

Postmodern art is both self-reflexive and "worldly" (Saïd 35). Its deliberately unresolved paradoxes serve to underline, not to smooth over, the complex contradictions within our socially determined patterns of thinking and acting (Russell 190). And much literature today has also been aiming at analyzing the same thing, but my guess is that the theory is the better known to most of us. Novels like John Berger's G. overtly theorize (as they narrativize) almost all the notions to be found in post-structuralist and Marxist postmodern theory, but today I suspect we are more likely to read—and legitimate—the theory than the fiction. There obviously exists an intimate complicity between theory and practice, and I think that may explain why some of the most provocative studies of the postmodern are coming from artist-theorists: Paolo Portoghesi, Victor Burgin, Rosalind Krauss, David Antin.

What we find if we look at both theory and practice is a postmodern "problematics": a set of problems and basic issues that have been created by the various discourses of postmodernism, issues that were not particularly problematic before but certainly are now. For example, we now query those boundaries between the literary and the traditionally extra-literary, between fiction and non-fiction, and ultimately, between art and life. We can only interrogate these borders, though, because we still posit them. We think we know the difference. The paradoxes of postmodernism serve to call to our attention both our continuing postulation of
that difference and also a newer epistemological doubt (do we know the difference? can we?). The focus of this doubt in postmodern art and theory is often on the historical. How can we know the past today? The questioning of historical knowledge is not new, but the powerful and unignorable conjunction of multiple challenges to any unproblematic concept of it in art and in theory today is one of the characteristics that I think define the postmodern.

A postmodern "problems" would also take into account the many issues which result from these challenges to the modes of knowing and writing history, issues such as the textuality of the archive and the inevitable intertextuality of all writing. And it is not only literature that is involved in these challenges. What Renato Barilli has dubbed the art of the "Nuovi Nuovi" in Italian painting is reappraising the past of both local and international art and its relation to global informational mass culture. Similarly, postmodern architecture's parodic return to the history of architectural form is an ironic reworking of both the structural and ideological inheritance that was deliberately wiped out of architectural memory by High Modernism. Parody is the ironic mode of intertextuality which enables such critical—not nostalgic—revisitations of the past.

This self-reflexive, parodic interrogating of history has also brought about a questioning of the assumptions beneath both modernist aesthetic autonomy and unproblematic realistic reference (Solomon-Godeau 81). The entire notion of the referent in art has been problematized by the postmodern mingling of the historical and self-reflexive. This is most obvious, perhaps, in historiographic metafictions like Ragtime, where Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung can ride through the Coney Island Tunnel of Love together in a way they historically did not, but symbolically always had. What, then, is the referent of the language of this fiction—of any fiction, or, for that matter, of historiography? How can we come to know the real past? Postmodernism does not deny that it existed; it merely questions how we can know real past "events" today, except through their traces, their texts—the "facts" we construct and to which we grant meaning.

Postmodernism's challenges to our humanist notions of
history also involve challenges to its implied notion of subjectivity. In Victor Burgin's terms: "the 'individual' presupposed in humanism is an autonomous being, possessed of self-knowledge and an irreducible core of 'humanity', a 'human essence' in which we all partake, an essence which strives over history progressively to perfect and realize itself" (32). Any contestation of this basic belief—from Freud's to Foucault's—has been attacked as the "enemy of civilized aspirations." But feminist and Black theory and practice, to name only the most evident, have qualified the (male, white, Euro-centered) post-structuralist rejection of the cogito and of bourgeois subjectivity: they have argued that they cannot reject that which they do not have, that to which they have not been allowed access. Feminist theory and art, for instance, first inscribe female subjectivity before they contest it. And this is what makes much feminist and other de-centered (or "ex-centric") discourses have such a powerful impact on the postmodern by means of their inevitable and productive contradictions.

That all postmodern positions are, in a sense, ex-centric (paradoxically both inside and outside the dominant they contest) is no cause for despair or apocalyptic wailing. The postmodern view is that contradictions are inevitable and, indeed, the condition of social as well as cultural experience. To smooth them over would be bad faith, even if it would also be our normal reaction within a humanist context. The narrator of Salman Rushdie's novel, Shame puts it this way: "I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile" (242). Postmodernism refuses to eliminate (and indeed foregrounds) what Andreas Huyssen calls "the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text," (221) and it does so by historicizing and contextualizing the separation between those discourses, which within a humanist frame of reference, have been seen as almost mutually incompatible.

What postmodernism questions, though, is not just liberal humanism's assertion of the real but also the more fashionable neo-Nietzschean apocalyptic murder of the real. The various postmodern discourses do not "liquidate referentials" (in Baudrillard's terms) so much as force a rethinking of the entire notion of reference, a rethinking that makes problematic both the
traditional realist transparency and the newer reduction of reference to simulacrum. It suggests that all we have ever had to work with is a system of signs, and that to call attention to this is not to deny the real, but to remember that we only give meaning to the real within those signifying systems. This is no radical new substitution of signs for the real. Postmodern art and theory merely foreground the fact that we can only know the real, especially the past real, through signs, and THAT is not the same as wholesale substitution. The postmodern still operates, in other words, in the realm of representation, not of simulation, even if it constantly questions the rules of that realm.

In writing of the avant-garde, Lyotard (Le Postmoderne 125) recently used the image of psychoanalysis: the attempt to understand the present by examining the past. The same image is suggestive for postmodernism's orientation toward the "presence of the past" (the title of the Venice Biennale that introduced postmodernism in architecture). It points to the postmodern rejection of either a positive utopian (Marxist) or negative apocalyptic (neo-Nietzschean) orientation toward the future (cf. Huysen 169). Its aims are more limited, I think—to make us look to the past from the acknowledged distance of the present, a distance which inevitably conditions our ability to know the past. The ironies produced by that distancing are what prevent the postmodern from being nostalgic; there is no desire to return to the past as a time of simpler or more worthy values. These ironies also prevent any antiquarianism; there is no value to the past in and of itself. This is the conjunction of the present and the past that is intended to make us question—that is, analyze and try to understand—both how we make and make sense of our culture. Postmodernism may well be, as so many want to claim, the expression of a culture in crisis, but it is not in itself any revolutionary breakthrough. It is too contradictory, too wilfully compromised by that which it challenges.

Instead of looking to totalize, then, I think what we need to do is to interrogate the limits and powers of postmodernist discourse, by investigating the overlappings within a plurality of manifestations in both art and theory, overlappings that point to the consistently problematized issues that I think define postmodernism: issues like historical knowledge, subjectivity,
narrativity, reference, textuality, discursive context. I would agree
with Habermas that this art does not "emit any clear signals" but,
then again, it does not try. It tries to problematize and, thereby,
to make us question. But it does not offer answers. It cannot,
without betraying its own anti-totalizing ideology. Yet, both the
detractors and promoters of postmodernism have found answers,
and this is because the paradoxes of the postmodern do allow for
answers—but only if you ignore the other half of the paradox. To
Habermas' question: "But where are the works which might fill
the negative slogan of 'postmodernism' with a positive content?"
("Neoconservative" 90), I would reply: everywhere—in today's
fiction, in painting, in film, in photography, in dance, in
architecture, in poetry, in drama. In this art's contradictions, as
in those of contemporary theory, we may find no answers, but the
questions that will make any answering process even possible are
at least starting to be asked.

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