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A review-essay on *Theory, Culture & Society* ["Special Issue on 'Postmodernism' "]. Ed. M. Featherstone. No. 5 (1988).

Genesis. According to Köhler[1] and Featherstone,[2] the term "postmodernism" was first used by a Spanish critic, Federico de Onis, in his *Antologia de la poesia española y hispanoamericana* (1934) to indicate a mild reaction to modernism. The term was then used by Toynbee (1947) to indicate a new historical cycle in Western civilization which began around 1875. Charles Olson, during the fifties, spoke often of postmodernism but in a fleeting and ambiguous manner. In 1959 and in 1960 Irving Howe and Harry Levin wrote about postmodernism as a form of decadence and opposed it to the morally sound modernism. In the 1960s the term became much more popular when a young generation of artists and critics (Cage, Fielder, Hassan, Barthelme, Barth, and Sontag) in New York used it "to refer to a movement beyond the 'exhausted' high modernism which was rejected because of its institutionalization in the museum and academy" (203). In the 1970s it was widely used in discussions about architecture, visual and performing arts, and music. From the end of 1970s, especially after the publication of Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979), and throughout the 1980s, the term has become central to discussions not only in the arts, but also in sociology, philosophy, politics, economics, and

urban planning. It has attracted the interest of the most important American and European theorists of our time like Bell, Kristeva, Lyotard, Vattimo, Derrida, Habermas, Baudrillard, and Jameson, among others. As we can see, the term postmodernism has extended its domain culturally and geographically in the last decade. However, what it stands for and when it began is still not clear and, probably, will never be, since it is considered to be indescribable, undefinable, undecidable.

Philosophy. What is clear is that postmodernism is, at least theoretically, anti-modernism and anti-modernity (even if not everyone means the same thing by modernism and there is no consensus as to when it began). For example, in "The Question of Modernism" (*PL* 103), Hassan opposes, in a schematized, dualistic manner, the main features of postmodernism to those of modernism. Modernism has generally been identified with representation, referentiality, egocentrism, Saussurian linguistics, the model of communication, binary oppositions, hierarchy, unity, identity, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and capitalism. These notions are perceived by Lokke[3] as the building blocks of a "metaphysics of the same," of "meaning determinism," of "objectivist/foundationalist" rational philosophy; a philosophy which, in the Cartesian-Lockian-Kantian traditions, postulates a centered self, certain of the "existence of a continuing entity of self-identity," of an "autonomous, indivisible, immaterial . . . self pre-existing experience,"[4] as well as of an external, objective, material world.

Against this deterministic, foundationalist view of the modern self, the postmodern subject is seen as deconstructively indeterminate. According to Lyotard, to live as we do, in a time marked by "the critique of the subject," means that whenever we discuss

> the notion of the subject, we carry the Kantian and Wittgensteinian heritage with us, and that we cannot continue to think under the general regime of the "cogito." The evidence for the "I" think for us is as scarce as it could possibly be. . . . We have to deal with a crisis of subject which is much more serious. It concerns the unification of the heterogeneous or autonomous regimes of judgement [truth, beauty, good]. (294)

The differentiation between the regimes of judgment, the fact that "there is no reason, only reasons" (278), has immensely contributed to the "deconstruction" of the ontological, metaphysical, essentialist subject, i.e., an individual whose mental activity was

grounded in an absolute, unique, indivisible reason. As a result, as Shusterman argues, we are left with

> "quasi-persons" composed of "incompatible systems of belief and desire." . . . Rather than something unified and consistent emerging from an autonomous, stable and rational core, the self is seen as "centerless," a collection of "quasi-selves," the product of "random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs," shaped and modified by a "host of idiosyncratic, accidental episodes." (341)

What are the consequences of this fragmented, centerless subject which "dislodges the individual as a locus of meaning, denies the existence of an historical transcendent self"[5] on our lives, on the arts, on our culture?

Linguistics. In linguistics the Saussurian-structuralist-semiotic notion of the sign—which posits "an unseverable bond between signifier and signified" (Berman 169)—is rejected in favor of a Peircian, post-structuralist, "uncertain semiotics" according to which the bond between signifier and signified has become so weak as to allow a gap to appear between them; a space which has been filled by skepticism. Language itself has long been seen as an arbitrary "free play of signifiers" (Allen 279), a play of differences; a play in which the signified withers away and the signifier itself "begins to function as a referent." It is this notion of the sign, of signifiers as referents, that forms the basis for Scott Lash's interesting definition of postmodernism as "de-differentiated semiotics"—modernism being "differentiated semiotics" (31).

Arts. In the visual and verbal postmodern arts, the de-differentiation of the difference, the erasure of the difference between the signifier and signified—or, for that matter, between all binary oppositions—has led to such a display of arbitrariness whereby each reality can only be perceived, in Boyne's words, "as inherently meaningless or meaningful as any other" (527); to the effacement of the distinction between art and life; "to the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/culture; [to] a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; [to] parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface" (203). Moreover, the effacement of the difference between signifier and signified has also brought about, in Ryan's view, an emphasis on "reflexivity, artifice, randomness, anarchy, fragmentation and allegory" (559). All these features can, and for some writers and critics clearly do, substantiate, as Kellner has observed, a postmodern "populist anything goes aesthetic," the happy co-existence of "a pluralism of aesthetic styles and games" (239-40).

Criticism. If these aspects characterize postmodern art, what is postmodern criticism like? In Boyne's view, interpretation can no longer attempt to "understand" or to "judge" art; it cannot even try to locate it within the history of art, as gender studies do. Criticism can only ask "what [the art work] does: the embodied reaction that it summons up for . . . audience" (530). For Boyne, then, the verbalization of the "emotional" reaction of the spectator or reader is the most important function of postmodern critique, just like literature for Sontag should be the expression of bodily sensations. But what are the consequences of this view? First, there would be no difference between art and criticism and, ideally, it would enact the postmodern project of de-differentiation. Second, this kind of criticism can and does solicit a variety of unrestrained, individual responses which can be construed from one point of view as healthy pluralism or, from the opposite point of view, as chaos and anarchy. Third, this (neo-expressionistic?) form of criticism cannot escape, pace Boyne, the following paradox: the inevitably rational and proto-scientific translation of emotions and sensations into words which mean what they say and say what they mean: something which all critics, including Boyne, assume. Finally, Boyne's is only one of many critical discourses—one apparently associated with a psychoanalytical reader-response criticism that privileges the id instead of the ego—which claim to be the ideal approach for a postmodern criticism. Among the contenders there are as differing forms of criticism as deconstruction, neo-marxism, neo-historicism, post-structuralism, (new) hermeneutics, semiotics, reader-response, and feminist criticism—11 forms of criticism which have emerged in the last twenty-five years or so, all opposed to the preceding, modernist forms of criticism, including their own history, as in the case of neo-marxism, neo-historicism and post-structuralism (Vattimo, 400).

History and Sociology. Is there a link between the aspects of postmodern arts and other fields of culture? Apparently yes, and a close one at that. History, for example, as Veerman has argued, is no longer "the product of a unifying teleology but rather of many complex and incommensurable teleologies" (275). Sociologically, even the possibility of a clear, unique, postmodern social theory is rejected because "attempts to devise a theory of postmodern society . . . or delineate the role of postmodernism within the social order, are essentially flawed efforts to totalize or systemize" (204). They are reactionary moves because to totalize is typical of "authoritarian tendencies," while postmodernism considers itself anti-authoritarian and anti-totalitarian. For these

reasons a postmodern social theorist must abandon the modernist practice of "sociological synthesis . . . for the playful deconstruction and the privileging of the aesthetic mode . . . must relinquish the attractions of a postmodern sociology and work towards a sociological account of postmodernism" (205).

Politics. If postmodernism defies definition because it privileges heterogeneity, arbitrariness, indeterminism, and undecidability, it would seem logical that a postmodern politics should also be undecidable. But what, in practice, is an undecidable politics? That it is neither capitalist nor neo-marxist, neither neo-conservative nor progressive, or that it is both conservative and progressive? Probably the latter, since in the "real" world—even if the product of simulations—nothing is apolitical. In fact, as Scott Lash has noted, "some sorts of postmodernist de-differentiation are implicitly 'reactionary,' and other sorts potentially integral to a reconstructed left political culture" (303). Lash identifies "postmodernist de-differentiation of representations and commodities," that is, the colonization of commodity by culture, with "reactionary politics" (334), and a postmodern culture "rooted in the principles of pluralism and difference" with a radical, progressive, leftist politics. Also for Michael Ryan, "the political valence of postmodernism is . . . at least, undecidable" (561) since it can be seen either as a movement

> towards artifice, informationalism and a techno-culture of entirely simulated realities that support capitalist ideology . . . or as a movement with progressive possibilities that signals the ability to reshape the supposedly immovable material universe that can no longer be thought of as external and determining in relation to culture. (568)

Postmodern culture, then, can support both a reactionary, capitalist, neo-conservative politics and a progressive, leftist one. But it is still not clear how a progressive postmodern culture can be acapitalistic, even if anti-capitalist, and whether it is post-capitalistic. Jameson, a Marxist supportive of progressive ideals, has been strongly criticized by postmodernist, neo-marxist critics for arguing that postmodernism falls within the logic of late capitalism. Ryan, for example, attacks Jameson on the grounds that his view is based on a theory of representation according to which art reflects economic conditions and/or preexisting substances. For Ryan, instead, "late capitalism has the effect of creating cultural possibilities that become detached from the realm of economic necessity" (560); a culture that does not reflect a pre-

existing substance and that "contains within itself the positive lineaments of a post-capitalist world." In other words, "capitalist culture at its farthest reach [where 'culture or simulation subsume reality entirely'] becomes the instrument for fabricating a post-capitalist culture" (560).

According to this view, late capitalism is capable of creating a postmodern culture, Daniel Bell's culture of simulations, which has the potential not only to generate a post-capitalist culture or world, but also, and most importantly, to displace late capitalism itself. Postmodernism is not post-capitalism: it is a product of late capitalism that has the potential to destroy its producer. It is like a rebellious son of modernism/late capitalism whose purpose is to kill the father and to be a bridge to a post-capitalist culture.

It seems clear that postmodern culture is not post-capitalistic, and that, although anti-capitalistic, it does not, cannot, escape the law of commodification simply because it is produced and consumed in a Western capitalist system which transforms even the most anti-capitalistic cultural artifacts into objects of consumption. Nevertheless, if postmodern, progressive, leftist culture cannot escape the hegemony of capital, it still represents its most powerful critique and one of the most important contributions to the theoretical formulation and configuration of a post-capitalist world. Such a world can become a reality only if, paraphrasing Vattimo (401), a true dialogue among the first, second, and third worlds takes place and addresses the many pressing issues which confront us, such as gender, race, economic inequality, and pollution. Only when these and other needs are satisfied can the global community produce and enjoy a culture which privileges the transformation of politics into "an aesthetic activity: a spectacle,"[6] or the transformation of "the aesthetic life" into "the ethically good life," as Rorty, according to Shusterman (338), would like. In the transitory stage of postmodernism which we inhabit, such callings cannot but appear reactionary since they too easily overlook the fact that differences predominate and determine daily experiences. A progressive postmodern discourse must continue to challenge those who too readily accept, while continuing to strongly criticize, those who theorize the aesthetization of life. Against such trends, postmodern critique should continue to argue for a political and ethical rendering of the aesthetic.

1. Michael Köhler " 'Postmodernismo': un panorama storico-concettuale," in P. Carravetta and P. Spedicato, eds., *Postmoderno e Letteratura* (Milano: Bompiani, 1984), 109-22. Hereafter *PL*.

2. Mike Featherstone, "In Pursuit of the Postmodern," in *Theory, Culture & Society* 5 (1988), 203-09. Further references will be made by page number in parenthesis.

3. Virgil Lokke, "Contextualizing the Either/Or," in C. Koelb and V. Lokke, eds., *The Current in Criticism* (Indiana: Purdue UP, 1987), 225.

4. Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction* (Urbana & Chicago: Illinois UP, 1988), 20—hereafter noted as Berman.

5. Carolyn J. Allen, "Feminist Criticism and Postmodernism," in J. Natoli, ed., *Tracing Literary Theory* (Urbana & Chicago: Illinois UP, 1987), 279—further references to Allen's essay will be incorporated in the text.

6. Dana P. Dolan, " 'Above All Else to Make Sense': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle," in J. Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986), 56.