

# On the Possibilities of Live Conversation in a Postmodern Context

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of  
Texas State University San-Marcos  
In Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements  
For Graduation in the Mitte Honors Program

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## PART I: Introduction and Personal Narrative

One hears much about the term 'postmodern', admittedly more so when roaming the dark halls of an English department as a fledgling major. In that context, it is generally the winding down of a semester-long discussion on literary criticism, and, after so much tangibility and the decisiveness offered by other critical windows, often remains a confusing or negative note to end with for professors and students alike. That has at any rate been my own experience, and I have heard the postmodern described alternately as utterly vacant or a muddled mess, illusory (in that it doesn't actually exist), solipsistic, nihilistic, dense, elitist, and anarchic. Obviously not all of these can actually describe the postmodern, but the general concern in these various labels appears to be for a lack of definitive truth values, from which follows the obliterated possibility of genuine communication of individual experience, and without which communal experience is unfounded. This status, this non-relationship, then provides, at best, a shaky foundation for community, for communal experience, and for communal morality.

And yet the subject continues to attract a type of attention few other critical lenses might. The nature of the topic is diaphanous; the discussion of "what is postmodernism?" still appears open to debate, has not yet become fully concretized, and so an examination of the postmodern is fertile ground for conversation and experimentation. Due in large part to the privileging of the experimental, for scholars, politicians and artists of a broad range, postmodernism promises freedom; with change itself as a broad aesthetic principle,

expression faces no significant need to be confined by tradition or the success or failure of previous projects. Postmodern art acknowledges debt to no previous movements, and thus is free to cannibalize from any movement or none. However, for some this does not represent liberation so much as repetition, for example, the account given by social theorist Frederic Jameson, who sees postmodern culture as merely “complacent play of historical allusion,” a “world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles” (*Postmodernism and Consumer Society* 7).

In the plain, descriptive sense, to say the word “postmodern” is simply to acknowledge a kind of culture, one containing myriad, and often conflicting, identities. This is a conflict that has always existed, as long as cultures have come into contact and competition, but was many times mitigated, or silenced, by the privileged status of specific identities, often those described as Truth, The Correct Way, or Civilization, even when this was not exactly true. Like buried fault lines, conflicting identities create narrative tension, spilling over into displacement and of course, violence. Thus, setting aside the privileged identity, postmodern cultural and political theory has intended to seek the classically external voice, the displaced, and recognizes instead a wide variety of voice. But in the relinquishment of the One True Identity, the postmodern, so it is said, has expounded the banishment of all Truth Values, as it can no longer believe that there is a Good way and a Bad way to go about living in the world. I caricature somewhat, but it is the case that with the puncturing of traditional cultural truth comes the puncturing of the traditional cultural

role; postmodernism strips the individual and art object alike of obligation to normative standards. Thus, while the postmodern exudes the freedom of unfettered exploration and an open personal identity, it also involves the rejection of reassuring and comfortable conventions, and thus claims and possibly achieves a vacancy that might be seen as a frighteningly empty display of values. And thus, the plunge of the individual into a nightmare existence of aesthetic, moral and political solipsism.

Despite the fear or exaltation with which one may regard this situation, there are aspects of the postmodern of which I believe require little justification to speak of as hopeful. In the arts, in political and ethical discourse, the act of criticism can be seen as a benevolent act, especially if one expects to generalize from the past in order to move into the future. For any who would opine optimism either in the possibilities of personal expression or in the continuing projects of group culture and government, the constant reanalyzing of historical tendencies and pressures and the revaluation of tradition is a necessary exercise. That critical analysis, informed and oriented towards justice both practical and humane, can be used to evaluate principles which constantly reorient to a changing world, remains one possibility for an open and still stabled culture. This possibility also allows us to charges of nihilism and anarchy.

However, my purpose here is to show that, despite all attempts at the postmodern renunciation of value, it appears to this writer that postmodernism remains in actuality,

heavily value-laden, in practice if not always recognized in theory; I would comment as well that descriptions of the movement and normative evaluations which invite us to extend our attentions to future possibilities, which do not take into account real world outcomes remain useless for anything other than a conversation which might have been stripped from a Woody Allen film. Postmodernism contains preferences, tendencies and paradoxes, and its rejection of historicity is not enough to guard it from critical rebuke, nor does its rejection of personal identity so erase personal identity that it cannot be held accountable by the persons it fails to identify. Further, postmodernism may exude a kind of freedom, but its stricture against 'totalization' severely restricts dialogue, even while the cringing vastness of possibility offered to the postmodern creature has become its own kind of determinism, for who can name inequalities and injustice under the guise of such variety of personal choice? Like the existentialist who accepts her slavery as an aspect of freedom, the bewildered dweller of the postmodern galaxy, overrun with variety, texture, color and choice, for all appearances, has been stunned into submission. As exotic foods in a grocery store or works of art in a museum, vast variety laid complacently side-by-side is stripped of all difference, revoking any chance an audience had of considering the worthiness of the individual object.

## Part II Distinctions, Definitions, and Descriptions

It is necessary to make a few distinctions on the topic as it shall be treated in this paper.

Obviously there is not time or space to give adequate treatment to such a broad topic, nor

would I expect to raise my voice over the myriad of theorists who call the topic their scholarly abode. That said, in a cursory examination of introductory-style postmodernism, one almost invariably runs across the same descriptors, and in the coming sections I will speak briefly of a few of the more common items on the list. First however, in order to discuss the apparent lingering effects of the Modernist enterprise upon the Postmodern conception, I will offer my rather general definitions of two distinguishable, and often distinguished, Modernisms, the later of which in some ways appears to its heir apparent than its predecessor.

Postmodernism in a sense has lost the faith of prior social and literary movements, or, more likely, represents something closer to the complete annihilation of faith which later Modernists would claim for themselves and early Modernists might have decried; in the displacement of the traditional value systems desired by early Modernists, one senses a lurking Utopian conception of the new world, one made beautiful by its efficiency alone. The Modernist movement, especially in its early incarnations, is traceable to Enlightenment values, especially but not only the ideal of a centralized value structure involving the human being as a rational creature with definable goals and moving towards an intelligible end. Modernism first colludes with this teleology in a technological form, and then in later incarnations, attempts to reject the model and its values, thus giving the entire Modernist enterprise a kind of arc with two distinguishable projects at either side but no distinguishable break to mark a clear difference, temporal or

otherwise, between them.

### Part III On Modernism

Although I speak out of necessity of these movements as if they were self-enclosed and easily labeled, pinpointing the beginning of the modernist era is itself a difficulty worth a broad area of study. “Modernism,” in what appears to me an ironically post-modern fashion, is a nebulous term, one associated with, as well as opposed to, the ideals of, and then rejection of, progress, as it is tied to technology and advancement in an ever-shrinking world. Depending on how one reads the term, the roots of the modern can be traced back centuries and more. If an emphasis on individual learning and maturation is an expectation of modernism, the movement finds its beginnings in the scholasticism of early monasteries. One can read modernism as beginning with Descartes' recognition of the individual mind (the subject/object split), or with the reformatory processes of the new science involved in the Copernican Revolution; with the splintering of the authority of the Catholic Church as consecrated by Luther, or with the Romantic criticism of dominant power structures and positivist values displayed by the Victorians. If one understands the modern as the essential undermining of the wholesale metaphysical meaning lent to the human experience by religion, one probably need not look any further than Darwin or the development of the geologic time scale. Fredric Jameson considers modernism possible only after an awareness of history and of “being historical” has come into being, and quotes Antoine Compagnon in order to illustrate a variety of culturally

modified modernisms: “In France, the modern is understood in the sense of that modernity which begins with Baudelaire and Nietzsche and thus includes nihilism... in Germany, however, the modern begins with the Enlightenment, and to give it up would mean abandoning civilized ideals” (*A Singular Modernity* 25). (Interestingly, Terry Eagleton notes: “It would be ironic, incidentally, if the idea that desire is primary was thought to be a criticism of the Enlightenment, since from Hobbes to Holbach this is precisely an Enlightenment creed” (16)). Thus modernity can be read alternately as incorporating Enlightenment values, critiquing Enlightenment values, or abandoning Enlightenment values, a process whose completion possibly becomes more fully realized with later Modernisms and finally, the Postmodern itself.

In its earliest incarnation, Modernism encompasses a fair amount of optimism, represented by the belief in the possibility of technology and science (dare we say faith in rationality?) as mitigating the discomfort and horrors of human life:

“The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life -- that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life” (Habermas 9).

For a clear example of this optimism, we can look briefly at distinctions made by



Auguste Comte, who named the Theological, Metaphysical, and Scientific as the three phases of societal development. The Theological refers to the phase preceding the Enlightenment, wherein the identity of the human being is determined by a relationship to God or other mythos; the Metaphysical phase recognizes universal human rights and searches for explanations of natural phenomena; the Scientific phase, the apex of the evolution of human thought, is that period in which logic and reason can be increasingly applied to the problems of the world (see *Cours de philosophie positive*, chapters 14-15). Similar optimisms can be seen in Marx's proletariat revolution or Bentham's Utilitarianism; in one form or another, technology and rationality, properly applied, will save us, will create room for personality and personal freedom, will organize justice, alleviate suffering and condense the general nastiness of the common life into ever evolving comfort; so spake the early modernists.

In its infancy, modernism was itself simply considered avant-garde; its interests lay predominantly in sweeping away old values and traditions seen as hindering progress and possibility. Although the first uses of the word "modernism" was as a slur more than a descriptive (such as Swift's Letter to the Pope in July of 1737: "The corruption of English by those Scribblers who send us over their trash in Prose and Verse, with abominable curtailings and quaint modernisms...") early modernism is a movement of possibility and hopefulness. I would suggest also that the grand fracturing of artistic inclination and philosophic and social ideal that accompanied the end of the 19th century, while a high-

water mark of Modernism, is also a nod into the future, the fracturing of the constant that makes postmodernism possible.

Or one can seek out the early tensions in Modernism, perhaps by pointing to the simultaneous exploration and colonization of the world by the British Empire; the associated multiplicity of voices accompanying a new multiplicity of cultures at once caused the world to become varied and faceted, bringing a recognition that some truths might be mitigated by culture, but also hardened the cultural assumptions of social Darwinism and white man's burden, concretizing the monism of European superiority and ideals; thus we have Civilization. Fredric Jameson considers the dialogue of modernism to heavily incorporate European values:

“...you can still suggest that the so-called underdeveloped countries might want to look forward to simple 'modernity' itself. Never mind the fact that all the viable nation states in the world today have long since been 'modern' in every conceivable sense, from the technological onwards: what is encouraged is the illusion that the West has something no one else possesses- but which they ought to desire for themselves” (*A Singular Modernity* 8).

Herein is a central tension in modernism, that a process of social awareness, an interest in change and progress and a recognition of diversity, would come to propel the subduction of less privileged cultures and the silencing of less privileged identities; or is this tension the result of a subversion of the modern ideal? This is a key question in the modernist project; does the modern itself incorporate the tensions which lead to perverse

realities such as but not limited to domination, or is the modern an incomplete project, a goal yet unrealized towards which we can continue to evolve? The Holocaust remains one of the most obvious and definitive cases of the question of modernism; is the rise of National Socialism and all of its terrible consequences, a perversion of the modernist doctrine or, more chillingly, an inevitable corollary of technology and nationalism?

“The Heidegger question merely personalizes the basic situation of the war: that European learning, the Enlightenment tradition, and the Ideals of Reason as embodied in the Nation State, were as much a cause of the war as a break to it. For to understand how Heidegger could be complicit in the Second War is to understand how the Second War is not an aberration but an extension of the Logos of Western Civilization” (Bernstein 3).

This stance is commonly applied to the modernist project; Theodore Adorno, for example, held that flaws within modernist logic inevitably give way to domination. Yet it appears to this writer that only when certain modernist/enlightenment values (nationalism, technology) are privileged over others (the value of life, worth of the individual identity, freedom), can the destructiveness and genocide of the Second World War be considered in any way inevitable. As Jameson says,

“Thus external history sometimes brutally interrupts the model of internal evolution complacently suggested by notions of this or that national tradition. So the modernisms of Germany are cut short by Nazism, and those... of the Soviet cultural revolution of the 1920's are cut short by Stalinism and its official aesthetics. The paradox will be sharpened by the reminder that both movements are characterized, in very different ways, by intensified modernization...” (A *Singular Modernity* 102).

Although this too is a subject well worth its own study, I myself see the emphasis on only

particular modernist values as being a narrow interpretation of modernism and thus incomplete. It is worth noting that the early modernist conception, which I have noted as optimistic, was meant to destroy tyranny, not collude with it.

The First World War brings the modernist conception to the foreground through new forms of popular art, but also through new concepts of consumer culture:

“The American 1920s, the time in which the full-fledged media-consumer culture was born, invented the decade as a marketing device and a fashion statement--a time unit, in other words, not as the product of historians' hindsight, but as an advertisement for the present. Earlier eras in the West, as outside it, had tended to name themselves and their predecessors by quasipolitical or philosophical labels, often honoring a monarch or a movement along the way: the various dynasties in Chinese history, the Restoration in Great Britain, the Enlightenment era in Europe, or the Victorian age in Great Britain and the United States. However, the commercially and cosmetically minded American 1920s called itself the Jazz Age, the lost decade, and the lost generation, and spoke of the Gay [18]90s and the Feminine [18]50s. History was commodified into colorful sound bites, a habit the American media continued in following decades with the Beat Generation, baby boomers, and the Woodstock Generation” (Douglas 72).

Additionally, new forms of warfare provided sufficient disillusionment in progress and technology, and sufficient moral ambiguity, to strip modernism of any remaining pretenses of faith. By the time of the full-blown inception of modernism as a literary and creative movement at the beginning of the 20th century, and certainly by the height of modernism during and after the second World War, later modernists had witnessed first hand the large-scale destructiveness of which technology is capable. Increased

sophistication of armament made possible two world wars, ecological devastation, and urban miseries rooted in industrial urbanization that further concretized class stratification, and all around the project of the early modernists appeared an utter failure. Modernist artists from T.S. Eliot to Allen Ginsberg and philosophers from Adorno to Lyotard opined a far bleaker version of technological soft determinism, one in which technology is not a panacea, but a Pandora's box.

Modernism thus contains within itself tensions leading to its own dismantling. There are perhaps few more examples of artists so constituted upon this tension as the Beat Generation, beloved American poets who demand utter freedom for their own egos to explore (some would say exploit) their realities, even while denying the same identity to others. The voice of women in the movement is notoriously minute, despite a plethora of female participants, who supported their male counterparts while they attended to their creative duties, and a fair number of talented female poets. Although it is well documented that women were moved as both poets and readers by the new range of choices the Beats advocated, the role of women within the philosophy of the movement is generally restricted to that of the sexual object, a depiction disguised as benevolent by the corresponding representation of the female as muse. This is yet another subject deserving of its own discussion, but illustrates even in brief how tensions in the modernist identity became pressurized and problematic.

As the modernist conception became the dominant critical lens of art, culture and society, displacements and ironies congealed within the body of modernism became more apparent. Modernism simultaneously decries consumer culture and its easy products, and reaffirms the distinction between high and low culture, keeping for itself an elite class of art and artists and rejecting the masses as possible participants. For example, see critic Clement Greenburg's distinctions between true culture and kitsch, or Walter Benjamin, who affirms that mass reproduction is a detriment to the original piece. Aesthetically, consumers were charged to change the nature of appreciative viewing in order to appreciate the beauty of the new movement, but modernist architecture with its no frills boxes and utilitarian form seemed to deaden the personal aesthetic, not reawaken it. Finally as I have mentioned, modernism recognizes a new multiplicity of identities, but remains in many ways stubbornly elitist, assuming not only that mass culture is not a fitting participant in discourse, but that a singular definition of "modern", that is, one tied to a certain idea of advancement (one conception of technology), economy (one conception of capitalism), and social norms (one conception of ethics, law and the family unit), is the only proper way to recognize the truly advanced and heroic modern man.

#### Part IV The Postmodern Response

Thus, as the tensions in modernism bore themselves out, a kind of self-critiquing became available, the turning of the critical eye to the chinks and chasms of its own body. When what was once a revolutionary and critical mindset becomes the status quo,

autocannibalism is at once unavoidable and truly destructive. The postmodern critique then is not hermetically sealed from prior history, but conceives of the modern as it was conceived of by the modern: “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (Lyotard 77). “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard 79).

Conceptualizing the postmodern is difficult at best, and, given the strictures against totalizing and periodizing, perhaps, by its own hand completely impossible; a “traditional” (rational, ultimately answerable) reading would seem at odds and ironic here. However, we can note that the term “post-modern” turns up in critical discourse as early as 1949, in J. Hudnut's *Architecture and the Spirit of Man*, “He shall be a modern owner, a post-modern owner, if such a thing is conceivable. Free from all sentimentality or fantasy or caprice” (119). For our purposes, a more interesting distinction is made in 1959 by C. W. Mills in the work, *The Sociological Imagination*: “Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy...so now the Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period. Perhaps we may call it: The Fourth Epoch” (166). Thus we can consider the postmodern response to reference a particular time period, beginning in or about the 1960's, wherein modernist tropes had finally exhausted themselves to the point of disintegration, even if elements of postmodern alienation and

disregard can be sought out for decades beforehand, and even if the term did not come to wide use until nearly twenty years later. Lyotard considered the postmodern to include the zenith of modernity as it referenced and included Enlightenment ideas, and thus as an extension or cumulation of the modern, although this is at odds with the postmodern demand for the negation of meta narratives as well as the idea that the postmodern represents an utter break from the past, an unlikely notion given prevalent modernist values which reverberate through the postmodern as both a reiteration and a critique of themselves.

For a brief conception of the postmodern condition, we can turn to Jean-Francois Lyotard "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" (1979). "The Postmodern Condition" concerns itself with the question of how knowledge is legitimated: "Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age"; "The "producers" and users of knowledge must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn. Research on translating machines is already well advanced. Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge" statements." Thus for Lyotard, theory is never objective or neutral, but rather, "The relationships of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly



tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.” Thus, “Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself.” The validation of scientific knowledge becomes problematic, as science cannot claim that it is the truth without reference to another narrative, another kind of knowledge that science itself considers not to be knowledge at all. Without this outside grounding, science is in the position of presupposing its own validity and thus committing fallaciousness which it itself condemns, acting on prejudice and begging the question (29). Lyotard attacks the assumptions that knowledge is itself progressive (moving towards an end of completion), unified (that all sciences collude under the umbrella of the One Knowledge- Truth), and universal (that knowledge represents goods which are applicable to all peoples). Thus, the postmodern science no longer seeks the one particular solution to the overarching problem, but carries out a more limited narrative under the particular jargon and limited categories of each discipline’s locale.

In opposition to, or extension of, high modernist movements, the postmodern decries the belief in value, the belief in progress, the belief in technology, history and “man”. In art, the postmodern recognizes no distinction between “high” and “low,” and plays on humor, paradox, superficiality, and process over rigid form and the completed object. In politics

and culture, postmodernism recognizes a multiplicity of voices and possibilities over a correct cultural norm (this is superficially tied in with the lack of faith in progress, but more on this in a few minutes), and, importantly, is strictly suspicious at attempts to totalize. The postmodern “destruction” of value appears from this vantage to refine the modernist destruction of value, that is, seems to embody the same aspiration that served as the rallying desire of so many modern art movements, the commandment to rebel against, even destroy, ideals and expectations, in order to have room to create. Thus the postmodern like its (defunct?) predecessor seeks a maximized and widely accessible freedom, unhindered by considerations of norms and privileged traditions, and above all and in its most benevolent form, speaks to us of the possibility of the individual seeking of the good life, without the restrictions of genericized cultural roles.

The postmodern in art refers more specifically to a style or amalgam of styles which display a general kind of attitude such as favoring radicality and the individual experience over preconceived categories of expression and perception; Jameson considers the possibility that Gertrude Stein and Duchamp are postmodernists, and under this conception, postmodern art, while derived from elements of postmodern and pre-postmodern culture, is not necessarily and directly tied to post modern culture, but instead colludes with and is informed by underlying motifs constituting social culture and daily life. Thus “postmodern” reflects a specific time period, the failure/transformation of modernism, as well as an aesthetic outlook, one tied to the relentlessly experimental, but

an experimental that expresses itself through consumer culture.

#### Part V Problems In the Postmodern Playland

And here the postmodern runs into problems. Claiming the destruction of favored Enlightenment values (justice, rationality, telos), does nothing to stifle the inner protest of one who becomes aware of some unmitigated injustice, for example, an act of random and terrible violence. As Terry Eagleton says, "It [postmodern culture] has produced in the same breath an invigorating and a paralyzing skepticism, and unseated the sovereignty of Western Man, in theory at least, by means of a full-blooded cultural relativism which is powerless to defend either Western or Eastern Women against degrading social practices" (27). Or Lyotard: "You're not done living because you chalk it up to artifice" (vii). And this is one of the most startling and troubling questions about postmodernism: why the lack of a privileged narrative leaves us so helpless to make significant moral decisions? Why, lacking the imposition of a single dominate culture, must we simply through up our hands in dismay and confirm that, lacking the One Truth, we can have no truth at all? "As the capitalist system evolves, however... it begins inevitably to undermine its own universalist reality... The system is accordingly confronted with a choice: either to continue insisting on the universal nature of its own rationality... or to throw in the towel and go relativist, gloomily genially accepting that it can muster no ultimate foundations to legitimate it's activities" (Eagleton 39). To simply equate a lack of teleology and the destruction of the dominate narrative with an utter lack

of value does little more than signify the importance of and need for teleology and the dominant narrative- does little more than reinforce the logic of the original meta-narrative, without which, we are apparently indecisive, isolated and lost.

Further, postmodernism shows itself to be insoluble in practice (as Eagleton succulently says, "... given its formalist prejudice against 'dominance' as such...logically speaking, it [postmodernism] could only hope that its own values would never come to power (3)). In the extreme, the dissolution of common values and ethical statements destroys any attempt at conversation, creativity or art. Both discourse and art are impossibilities without value, preferences and beliefs, if for no other reason than for love of an audience; in order to speak, one must believe they have something worth speaking of, and in order to converse, others must be willing to listen, must, in other words, believe they have something to gain. Despite the positivist's of the 1920's attempt to divest language of all gradation and fuzziness by relying on the verifiability criterion of meaning (holding that a statement is meaningful only if it is empirically verifiable), language itself represents a mass of interwoven meaning, related to culture, time and place, which the average person enters into with only a varying degree of knowledge: "To inhabit a language is already by that very token to inhabit a good deal more than it, and that there is that which transcends language is exactly what the interior of our language informs us of" (Eagleton 13). Language, saturated with value and historicity, implies shared experience and commonalities. Words carry varieties of connotations and ambiguities, or summon

concepts specific to the individual; I myself was instructed in writing this passage to remove the work “reeks,” (it was replaced with “saturated” above), as it carries a negative charge. No intrapersonal transference of value indeed!

In addition to the mechanics of communication grounded in culture and shifting preferences, I would note that the creative spirit itself also speaks of something more than the isolated individual experience. The desire to create art is, many times if not always, the desire to communicate, and communication implies the possibility of shared experience, ideas, beliefs. Further, the notion of an “art” object after the fact of its creation (and postmodern art is art none-the-less) involves privileging, that I admire and enjoy an object in an aesthetic or expressive sense, and thus that art is valuable to me. Postmodern art has seen its share of museums and although, beginning with Duchamp, the postmodern attempts to collapse the distinction between high (and privileged) art and low art, the postmodern art object contains no less an air of authority in its cultural commentary; this comodification may simply be contained in the notion of the art object itself, but it is not simply left behind with the renunciation of the high and low culture. It seems to this writer that a truly postmodern art would reflect more pragmatic values, would entirely escape the museums and altar-like walls to which it is often pinned and attempt the mundane, casual and lowly status of the useful. The trope of “shock” favored by postmodernists recreates the “high” and “low” by recreating the status of the artist as the outsider, by leaving art itself in a separate and unknowable category, for once it is

known it is not shocking; for most people, this is an art that is distant, dense and thus uninteresting, despite or because of its attempt at shock. “And this [dependence of the postmodern on modernist categories of new] is indeed no small or insignificant contradiction for postmodernity, which is unable to divest itself of the supreme value of innovation (despite the end of style and the death of the subject), if only because the museums and the art galleries can scarcely function without it” (*A Singular Modernity* 5). Indeed, the art world itself still functions and still functions on a base of money, commodities and patronage that imbue the free light of art with a taint of market-driven value. The utopian vision of free creativity is marred by the specter that art remains economically divided, with access (not mitigated through anthologies and museums) the privilege of a few with the leisure and economy to indulge. Even the museum, a collection of myriad voices pulled from respective historical situations (surely a fine illustration of the postmodern notion of plurality and the generous access of the masses to consecrated work) is tied to national image, corporate benevolence and, above all, the economy of capitalism: “The museum becomes the sanctuary of priceless things, validating the corresponding scale of wealth outside- a medium that measures monetary value by defining its quarantined objects as 'priceless'. They are also ways of recuperating the image of wealth as corporate benefaction of culture under the sign of nationalism” (Rasula 13).

Postmodern art, which claims to be free from all such considerations, is generally tied to

other elitist notions; for example, Madonna is famously written of as being the ideal postmodern musical artist. However, despite the casual accessibility of her music (dance music not tied to any scholarly considerations), I would note that Madonna personifies a perfectly standard image of exhibitionist female sexuality (that is, female sexuality specifically displayed for an audience), and in that sense is little more than the standard conception of the female role: to be looked upon. Is this intended to be liberating? Except that one might now act as a participant in ones own lack of live choices, I cannot see how it might be so. Further, the culture of the recording industry is no more accessible to the casual listener than Hollywood is to the casual moviegoer. The casual viewer is no longer excluded as an audience member, but as a participant in any other form, any form that is, other than purchasing power, excluded they certainly are. The casual viewer is completely excluded from the culture of utter indulgence lived in actuality by movie and music elite, the “stars” that form America's royalty. This is a lifestyle made possible only by the desire of the common viewer to own a piece of glamour. The promise of Madonna's image is one completely unfulfilled; she is not common, casual, touchable but distant and privileged; the image and the promise is a lie. Thus I note that the postmodern promise of art free from all value, free from the incapacitating ties of tradition, free from cultural norms, and free from elitist notions of high and low, inclusion and exclusion, is utterly an illusion.

What then, of the postmodern critique? Have we given up our values, our beloved

classics, simply to repeat the mistakes of our renegade modernist parents? Have we sold our traditions for the image of a life impossible to achieve? Not so, I say, for despite the hesitations I have displayed at the postmodern conception of art, I would note that the power of such art is exactly in the experimentation I have decried above. The problem is not with the experimentation, but with an unwillingness to admit that art tied up with capitalism and consumer culture, as ours undoubtedly is, is exclusionary and thus privileged. As I have pointed out and am about to point out again, critique is a significant part of creative thinking; an unwillingness to recognize practical truths can only be detrimental. But, again at its most benevolent, the postmodern view of art has much to say to us about the nature of art itself that is relevant, even life-affirming. The actions and products of art represent a desire to capture and preserve, to communicate, but as Theodore Adorno tells us, the act of recognition also sounds the death of art: “when something becomes too familiar it stops making sense.” Or as Richard Wilbur tells us: “The beautiful changes/ in such kind ways/ wishing ever to sunder/ things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose/ for a moment all that it touches to wonder.” By destroying the continuous identity of the beautiful, that the beautiful is static, dormant and can always be called to the supper table on a whim, the acidic postmodern aesthetic forces the beautiful (or worthy, interesting, important) to retreat in order that we find it again; forces us to reexamine, to engage in a new search for a new object, and thus to look again with the excitement of looking for the first time. Postmodern aesthetics at its worst may cause us to be the recipients of much art that is dull, mechanic and obtuse, but



at its most joyful, postmodernism faces us with the continuous shock of always seeking out the new, for static beauty, comfortable beauty, ceases to be beauty at all. Herein we are reminded that active curiosity, joy and pursuit are key components of the beautiful.

A second benevolent reading of the postmodern desire to destroy value might simply be as the desire to destroy hegemony; it is not value per se that has been destroyed but the acquisition of value through persuasive norms, such as absorption of the individual into culture or, as has often been the case, through brute force. The postmodern agent-orange aesthetic, that is the rejection of all art and discourse tied to paradigms, tradition and teleology, finds its roots in the modernist desire to remove all vestiges of the influence of history. The rejection of convention was conceived for purposes of creativity and benevolence: “In the Dada rebellion against bourgeois values in life and art, logic was considered a correlative of traditional authority, both of which were condemned for corrupting and imprisoning humankind” (Bohn xv). And so art is not dead; what is supposedly dead is the privileging of some arts, those considered high-minded, over the art of the every day bourgeois (although, as I have noted, the postmodern itself often colludes with elitism). Elitism, especially the tyranny made possible by aesthetic subversion to a dominating culture, so we are told, is dead.

#### Part VI: Benevolence in the Postmodern Conception and Concluding Thoughts

And so I would argue that the complexities of postmodern art do not speak to a lack of

value, but to a plurality of it. In refusing to toe the line of a logo-centric, dominant paradigm, postmodernism is not lessening the values of its conversation, but raising the possibility of more value. The desire to destroy can itself be rooted in the desire to build, as modernists and avant-garde artists and revolutionaries have recognized; in order to know a stronger future, we must be aware of the mistakes of the past and, more importantly, the sense in which those mistakes still haunt us. For love of art we must be willing to destroy art, or at least our conceptions of it, and for love of social progress we must be willing to destroy social progress, or at least certain ideas about progress, especially that which actually hinders, complicates and represses. Ah! We are starting to see some light leak through the dense postmodern conception! Something similarly then, can be said of the postmodern claim to “destroy” history, even while the very fact that we continue to gather and distribute data and ideas and tell one another stories, continue to age and create and reproduce ourselves in children as well as texts, says that the history of this race will continue until the race itself is dead. I have implied that the postmodern is no more an utter break from the past than any other radical movement, that it in fact is deeply rooted in previous movements from the Enlightenment to the Dada, despite what the postmodernists themselves may say. The possibility that postmodernism itself is the end of critical stages, that is, after the postmodern critique of history, no other “stages” are possible, only seems likely given the postmodern refutation of history (History); even the possibility of a decentered and localized dialectic allows for the possibility that history remains a fertile constituent of how we shape and view our social lives. The

postmodern rebuke of History deals with a the concern for totalizing, for totalizing carries with it the stamp of identity: “Managing time or history by naming it has been largely a western and white obsession, a function, in other words, of power elites stamping their image on the world at large. Even among the white elites of the West, time-naming as a mainstream and highly interpretative activity is of fairly recent origin” (Douglas 72). Modernism, as Jameson has told us, carries with it a self-awareness of the historical cannon, a self-awareness unlikely to be set aside. What has been destroyed then, beginning with the modernists and finding (near) completion with the postmodernists, is faith in history, that history has one binding collective story that we can know as easily as I examine an item in a curio shop, which, if read correctly, will reveal its truth and define our present. Chances are that the collective story aligns itself with unerring accuracy to my own identity, to the dominant identity of the storywriters. Again, if postmodernism teaches us anything, it is that we have traditionally undervalued the pluralities of the stories that come to us through artifacts and texts, as well as undervalued the gaps and holes in the stories which we then filled ourselves- we have created our own meaning even without realizing it, called it truth in the narrative, decisive sense, and proceeded to subdue the rest of the world according to its teachings. History as a meta-narrative is dead, and in a sense was always something of an illusion; history as a pantheon of human loss and achievement, complex and inconsistent though it may be, is very much alive.

Thus the postmodern critique does not necessarily rise out of a sense of bleak ontological

isolation, but out of genuine concern that the shortcomings of modernism had become reified so concretely that modernism itself was no longer a viable, honest option. The utter displacement of value can be read as the desire to reexamine; we can in a sense find our selves pulled back into the process of Descartes, doubting all that one can in order to find the propositions which are worthy, but without the credibility or even possibility of absolute assuredness in our maxims, which is precisely why constant reevaluation is necessary. Descartes sought a foundation that would be true for all time, but in a shifting and imprecise world, we can only be sure that our foundations will need constant reappraisal. Thus the strength of the postmodern is its critical ability, even while its ontological conceptions are paralyzing.

It is interesting that in this age we call postmodernism, in the face of a blunt lack of historical purposiveness, the desire for progress has not ceased though progress shows itself in a myriad of (sometimes conflicting) fashions even while the debate over what constitutes progress continues. “This new [radical] idealism would no doubt go hand in hand with that particular form of reductionism known as culturalism... which drastically undervalues what men and women have in common as natural, material creatures... and overestimates the significance of cultural difference” (Eagleton 14). Although there is little time for it here, the alleviation of suffering through medicine, education, and just law is probably a primary contestant as an analog of progress, and there is ample evidence that this is a matter of interest to all manners of persons. The postmodern

critique of progress is an observation that critical distance, thus the capacity for judgment, is incomplete. And yet, Eagleton tells us that “not looking at totality is just code for not looking at capitalism” (11). Thus while Lyotard’s conception is that the grand narrative of knowledge has been replaced with a narration of efficiency (“The question (overt or implied) now asked by the professional student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?'" (51)), Eagleton reminds us: “You can always heed the advice of the pragmatists and see your cognitive propositions simply as ways of promoting your desired political goals; but if you do not wish to end up as a Stalinist you would be well counseled not to do so” (Eagleton 13). Perhaps the most hopeful aspect of the postmodern response is its possible self- critique: we do not have to accept relativity, not when the individual still exists, still thrives, and still values.

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