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POSTMODERNISM: ROOTS AND POLITICS

What Are They Talking About?

Something must be at stake in the edgy debates circulating around and about something called postmodernism. What, then? Commentators pro, con, serious, fey, academic, and accessible seem agreed that something postmodern has happened, even if we are all (or virtually all) Mr. Jones who doesn't know what it is. (At times the critical world seems to divide between those who speak with assurance about what it is and those who are struggling to keep up.) The volume and pitch of the commentary and controversy seem to imply that something about this postmodern something *matters*. In the pages of art journals, popular and obscure, abundant passion flows on about passionlessness. It would be cute but glib and shortsighted to dismiss the talk as so much time-serving space-filling, the shoring up of positions for the sake of amassing theoretical property, or propriety, or priority. There is *anxiety* at work and at play here. I think it is reasonable, or at least interesting, to assume that the anxiety that surfaces in the course of the discussion—and I confess I share in it—is called for. A certain anxiety is entirely commensurate with what is at stake.

"Postmodernism" usually refers to a certain constellation of styles and tones in cultural works: pastiche; blankness; a sense of exhaustion; a mixture of levels, forms, styles; a relish for copies and repetition; a knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony; acute self-consciousness about the formal, constructed nature of the work; pleasure in the play of surfaces; a rejection of history. It is Michael Graves's Portland Building and Philip Johnson's AT&T, and hundreds of more or less skillful derivatives; it is photorealism, David Hockney, Rauschenberg's silkscreens, Warhol's multiple-image paintings and Brillo boxes, Larry Rivers's erasures and pseudo-pageantry, Sherrie Levine's photographs of "classic" photographs; it is Disneyland, Las Vegas, suburban strips, shopping malls, mirror glass facades, William Burroughs, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, Monty Python, Don DeLillo, Isuzu "He's lying" commercials, *Star Wars,* Spalding Gray, David Byrne, Twyla Tharp, the Flying Karamazov Brothers, George Coates, the Kronos Quartet, Frederick Barthelme, Laurie Anderson, David Letterman, John Ashbery, Paul Auster, the Centre Pompidou, the Hyatt Regency, *The White Hotel, Less Than Zero,* Kathy Acker, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (but not *Portnoy's Complaint*), the epilogue to Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz;* it is Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard; it is bricolage fashion; it is news commentary cluing us in to the image-making and "positioning" strategies of the candidates; it is remote-control-equipped viewers "zapping" around the television dial.

To join the conversation I am going to use the term to refer to art located somewhere in this constellation. But I am also going to argue that what is at stake in the debate—and thus the root of the general anxiety—goes beyond art: it extends to the question of what sort of disposition toward the contemporary world is

going to prevail throughout Western culture. Postmodernism in the arts corresponds to postmodernism in life, as sketched by the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard: "[o]ne listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo, and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong." The entire elusive phenomenon that has been categorized as postmodernism is best understood not just as a style but as a general orientation, as a way of apprehending and experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness, in it. (Just whose place or placelessness is at issue is an entirely legitimate question I shall return to.) Likewise, controversies about postmodernism—the whole of what inevitably has to be called "the postmodernism discourse"— are in no small part discussions about how to live, feel, think in a specific world, our own: a world in nuclear jeopardy; a world economically both alluring and nerveracking for the fitful middle classes; a world two decades from the hopes and desperate innocence of the sixties; a world unimpressed by the affirmative futurology of Marxism. Not for the first time, debates over cultural politics intersect with larger intellectual and political currents, prefiguring or tracing conflicts that have emerged, or ought to emerge, in the sphere of politics strictly understood. When the *Partisan Review* embraced modernism in the 1930s, for example, it took a position on more than style: it took a position on reason, the State, the (ir)rationality of history; finally, it drove a revisionary wedge into left-wing politics in the large. Postwar American versions of modernism, as artistic practice and critical exegesis, can also be understood as a way to inhabit a drastically changed political space.

I am going to take the position that the discussion of postmodernism is, *among other things*, a deflected and displaced discussion of the contours of political thought—in the largest sense—during the seventies and eighties. The aesthetics of postmodernism are situated, historical. The question is, What is postmodernism's relation to this historical moment, to its political possibilities and torments?

I want to broach some intersecting questions: What do we mean by postmodernism? Why has it come to pass? What is troubling about it? Finally, postmodern is pre-what? What is the relation between postmodern aesthetics and a possible politics?

What is Postmodernism?

Things must be made to look crystalline for a moment before complications set in. Here, then, is one person's grid—hopelessly crude, in the manner of first approximations—for distinguishing among premodernism (realism), modernism, and postmodernism. These are ideal types, mind you, not adequate descriptions. And they are not necessarily ideal types of the work "itself"; rather, of the work as it is understood and judged by some consensus (albeit shifting) of artists, critics, and audiences.

The premodernist work aspires to a unity of vision. It cherishes continuity, speaking with a single narrative voice or addressing a single visual center. It honors sequence and causality in time or space. Through the consecutive, the linear, it claims to represent reality. It may contain a critique of the established order, in the name of the obstructed ambitions of individuals; or it may uphold individuals as the embodiments of society at its best. In either event, individuals matter. The work observes, highlights, renders judgments, and exudes passions in their names. Standing apart from reality, the work aspires to an order of beauty, which, in a sense, judges reality. Lyrical forms, heightened speech, rhythm and rhyme, Renaissance perspective, and compositional "laws" go to work in the interest of beauty. Finally, the work may borrow stories or tunes from popular materials but it holds itself (and is held by its audience) above its origins; high culture holds the line against the popular.

The modernist work still aspires to unity, but this unity, if that is what it is, has been (is still being?) constructed, assembled from fragments, or shocks, or juxtapositions of difference. It shifts abruptly among a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, materials. Continuity is disrupted, and with enthusiasm: it is as if the work is punctuated with exclamation marks. The orders of conventional reality—inside versus outside, subject versus object, self

versus other—are called into question. So are the hitherto self-enclosed orders of art: poetry vs. prose, painting vs. sculpture, representation vs. reality. The work is apocalyptic, often fused with a longing for some long-gone organic whole sometimes identified with a fascist present or future. The protagonist is not so much wholeheartedly opposed as estranged. Instead of passion, or alongside it, there is ambivalence toward the prevailing authorities. The work composes beauty out of discord. Aiming to bring into sharp relief the line between art and life, modernism appropriates selected shards of popular culture, quotes from them.

In the postmodernist sensibility, the search for unity has apparently been abandoned altogether. Instead we have textuality, a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces. ("Surface is illusion but so is depth."—David Hockney.) The work calls attention to its arbitrariness, constructedness; it interrupts itself. Instead of a single center, there is pastiche, cultural recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else. Everything takes place in the present, "here," that is, nowhere in particular. Not only has the master voice dissolved, but any sense of loss is rendered deadpan. The work labors under no illusions: we are all deliberately playing, pretending here, get the point? There is a premium on copies; everything has been done. Shock, now routine, is greeted with the glazed stare of the absolute ironist. The implied subject is fragmented, unstable, even decomposed; it is finally nothing more than a crosshatch of discourses. Where there was passion or ambivalence, there is now a collapse of feeling, a blankness. Beauty, deprived of its power of criticism in an age of packaging, has been reduced to the decoration of reality, and so is crossed off the postmodernist agenda. Genres are spliced; so are cultural gradations. Dance can be built on Beach Boys songs (Twyla Tharp, "Deuce Coupe"); a circus can include cabaret jokes (Circus Oz); avant-garde music can include radio gospel (David Byrne and Brian Eno, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*). "High culture" doesn't so much quote from popular culture as blur into it.

All master styles aim to remake the history that precedes them, just as Eliot said individual talents reorder tradition. In one sense, then, postmodernism remakes the relation between premodernism and modernism: In the light of postmodern disdain for representational conventions, the continuity between the preceding stages comes to seem more striking than the chasm dividing them. Yet it is worth noticing that "postmodernist"—in the spirit of its recombinant enterprise—is a compound term. It is as if the very term had trouble establishing the originality of the concept. If the phenomenon were more clearly demarcated from its predecessor, it might have been able to stand, semantically, on its own feet. Instead, *post*-modernism defines the present cultural space as a sequel—as what it is not. Postmodernism is known by the company it succeeds. It shadows modernism. Modernism lurks in its sequel, haunts it. The very fact that a phenomenon is called "postmodernism"—that it differs from modernism by nothing more than a prefix—pays tribute to the power of modernism's cultural force field and suggests that postmodernism might be no more (or less) than an aftermath or a hiatus.

So what's new? It has been argued, with considerable force, that the lineaments of postmodernism are already present in one or another version of modernism, that postmodernism is simply the current incarnation, or phase, in a still unfolding modernism. Roger Shattuck, for example, has recently made the point that Cubism, Futurism, and artistic spiritualists like Kandinsky "shared one compositional principle: the juxtaposition of states of mind, of different times and places, of different points of view." Collage, montage: These are of the essence of modernism high and low. Then what is so special about (1) Philip Johnson's AT&T building, with its Chippendale pediment on high and quasi-classical columns below; (2) the Australian Circus Oz, which combines jugglers who comment on their juggling and crack political jokes along with (their list) "Aboriginal influences, vaudeville, Chinese acrobatics, Japanese martial arts, fireman's balances, Indonesian instruments and rhythms, video, Middle Eastern tunes, B-grade detective movies, modern dance, Irish jigs, and the

ubiquitous present of corporate marketing"; (3) the student who walks into my office dressed in green jersey, orange skirt, and black tights?

Put it this way: Modernism tore up unity and postmodernism has been enjoying the shreds. Surely nothing is without precedent; surely modernism had to set asunder what postmodernism is mixing in and about. Modernism's multiplication of perspective led to postmodernism's utter dispersion of voices; modernist collage made possible postmodernist genre-splicing. The point is not only juxtaposition but its attitude. The quality of postmodern juxtaposition is distinct: There is a deliberate self-consciousness, a skating of the edge dividing irony from dismay or endorsement, which makes up a distinct cultural mood. Picasso, Boccioni, Tatlin, Pound, Joyce, Woolf in their various ways thundered and hungered. Their work was radiant with passion for a new world/work. Today's postmodernists are blasé; they've seen it all. They are bemused (though not necessarily by bemusement). The quality of deliberateness and the sense of exhaustion in the postmodern are what set it apart.

It might be objected that we are talking about nothing more than a fad. We read in a "Design Notebook" column in the *New York Times* of March 12, 1987, that "Post-Modernism Appears to Retreat." Apparently *Progressive Architecture* is no longer giving its awards to pastiches of columns, capitals, and cornices; the writer suggests that the popularization of the premium architectural style of the last ten years signals its uniformity, mediocrity, and impending end. Actually, postmodernism as a stylistic avant-garde movement in architecture had probably already reached a plateau (but does this mean it ended?) at the moment when photographs of Michael Graves's buildings were featured in the *New York Times Magazine*. But what is interesting about postmodernism goes beyond the fashion in architecture—for the recombinatory thrust, the blankness, the self-regarding irony, the play of surfaces, the self-referentiality and self-bemusement that characterize postmodernism are still very much with us. What is interesting is not a single set of architectural tropes but postmodernism as what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling"—an interlocking cultural complex, or what he called "a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones"—that forecasts the common future as it colors the common experience of a society just at or beneath the threshold of awareness. In this flickering half-light, postmodernism is significant because its amalgam of spirits has penetrated architecture, fiction, painting, poetry, planning, performance, music, television, and many other domains. It is one wing, at least, of the zeitgeist.

Why this Postmodernism?

If this is so, the interesting question is, Why? We can distinguish more or less five approaches to an answer. These are not at all necessarily incompatible. To the contrary: Several forces are converging to produce the postmodernist moment.

The first is the bleak Marxist account sketched with flair in a series of essays by Fredric Jameson. The postmodernist spirit, with its superseding of the problem of authenticity, belongs to, is coupled to, corresponds to, expresses—the relation is not altogether clear—the culture of multinational capitalism, in which capital, that infinitely transferable abstraction, has abolished particularity as such along with the coherent self in whom history, depth, and subjectivity unite. Authentic use value has been overcome by the universality of exchange value. The characteristic machine of this period is the computer, which enthrones (or fetishizes) the fragment, the "bit," and in the process places a premium on process and reproduction that is aped in postmodernist art. Surfaces meet surfaces in these postmodern forms because a new human nature—a human second nature—has formed to feel at home in a homeless world political economy.

Postmodernists ransack history for shards because there is no here here; because historical continuity is shattered by the permanent revolution that is capitalism (which, by the way, I find it clumsy and inconsistent to call "late capitalism," a formulation haunted by a peculiar nostalgia for sequential time—as if we could know whether it is late early, middle, or early late). Uprooted juxtaposition is how people live: not only displaced peasants cast

into the megalopolis, where decontextualized images proliferate, but also TV viewers confronted with the interruptus of American television as well as financial honchos shifting bits of information and blips of capital around the world at will and high speed. Art expresses this abstract unity and vast, weightless indifference through its blank repetitions (think of Warhol or Philip Glass), its exhausted anti-romance, its I've-seen-it-all, striving, at best, for a kind of all-embracing surface that radiates from the world temple of the postmodern, the glorious Centre Pompidou in Paris.

A second stab at explanation calls attention to our political rather than strictly economic moment. In this light, the crucial location of the postmodern is *after the 1960s*. The postmodern is an aftermath, or a waiting game, because that is what we are living in: a prolonged cultural moment that is oddly weightless, shadowed by incomplete revolts, haunted by absences—a Counterreformation beating against an unfinished, indeed barely begun, Reformation. From this point of view, postmodernism rejects historical continuity and takes up residence somewhere beyond it because history *was* ruptured: by the Bomb-fueled vision of a possible material end of history; by Vietnam, by drugs, by youth revolts, by women's and gay movements; in general, by the erosion of that false and devastating universality embodied in the rule of the trinity of Father, Science, and State.

It was faith in a rule of progress under the sway of that trinity that had underlain our assumptions that the world displays linear order, historical sequence, and moral clarities. But cultural contradiction burst open the premises of the old cultural complex. The cultural upwellings and wildness of the sixties kicked out the props of a teetering moral structure, but the new house has not been built. The culture has not found a language for articulating the new understandings we are trying, haltingly, to live with. Postmodernism dispenses with moorings, then, because old certitudes have actually crumbled. It is straining to make the most of seriality, endless recirculation and repetition in the collective image warehouse, because so much of reality *is* serial. As Donald Barthelme's fiction knows, we live in a forest of images mass-produced and endlessly, alluringly empty. Individuality has become a parody of itself: another word for a fashion choice, a life-style compound, a talk-show self-advertisement logo. It might even be argued that postmodernism plays in and with surfaces because that is what it must do to carry on with its evasions: because there are large cultural terrors that broke into common consciousness in the sixties and there is no clear way to live out their implications in a conservative, contracting period.

From this point of view, postmodernism is blank because it wants to have its commodification and eat it. That is, it knows that the cultural industry will tailor virtually any cultural goods for the sake of sales; it also wants to display its knowingness, thereby demonstrating how superior it is to the trash market. Choose one: the resulting ironic spiral either mocks the game by playing it or plays it by mocking it. A knowing blankness results; how to decode it is a difficult matter. Take, for instance, the "Joe Isuzu" commercials in which the spokesman, a transparently slick version of the archetypal TV huckster, grossly lies about what the car will do, how much it costs, and so on, while the subtitles tell us he's lying, and by how much. The company takes for granted a culture of lies, then aims to ingratiate itself by mocking the conventions of the hard sell.

Or consider the early episodes of *Max Headroom* during the spring of 1987, which in nine weeks melted down from a blunt critique of television itself to a mishmash of adorability. "20 Minutes into the Future"—so the pilot film shows us—the computer-generated Max fights the tyranny of the ratings-crazed Network 23, whose decidedly sinister (shot from below with wide-angle lens) board-room tycoons will stop at no crime in their pursuit of profits. (Cherchez la japanoise: the venal Zik-Zak corporation that brings on the ratings panic is conveniently Japanese.) Is Max a revolutionary guerrilla or a sales gimmick? In the British prototype, he throws in with a revolution against Network 23; in the American version, the self-proclaimed revolutionaries are

thuggish terrorists, as despicable as the Network bosses. In any event, Max in his early American weeks reaches out of the fictional frame to yawn in the face of ABC's impending commercials. As the weeks pass, however, Max loses his computerized bite and becomes regressively cuter. The same Max is marched forward to promote Coca-Cola over Pepsi, as if Coke were both subversive and mandatory (the "wave" to be "caught")—to an audience encouraged to laugh at the distinction and still, as consumers, act on it. Commerce incorporates popular cynicism and political unease while flattering the audience that it has now, at last, seen through all the sham: Cynicism, Inc., Mark Miller has named it. Andy Warhol would have grasped the point in a second, or fifteen.

A third approach to explaining postmodernism is a refinement of the second: an argument not about history in general but about a specific generation and class. Postmodernism appears as an outlook for (though not necessarily *by*) Yuppies—urban, professional products of the late baby boom, born in the late fifties and early sixties. Theirs is an experience of aftermath, privatization, weightlessness: They can remember political commitment but were not animated by it—more, they suspect it; it leads to trouble. They cannot remember a time before television, suburbs, shopping malls.* They are accustomed, therefore, to rapid cuts, discontinuities, breaches of attention, culture to be indulged and disdained at the same time. They grew up taking drugs, taking them for granted, but do not associate them with spirituality or the hunger for transcendence. Knowing indifference is their "structure of feeling"—thus a taste for cultural bricolage. They are, though, disabused of authority. The association of passion and politics rubs them the wrong way. Their idea of government is shadowed by Vietnam and Watergate. *Their* television runs through *Saturday Night Live* and MTV. Their mores lean toward the libertarian and, at least until the AIDS terror, the libertine. They like the idea of the free market as long as it promises them an endless accumulation of crafted goods, as in the (half-joking?) bumper sticker: "The One With the Most Toys Wins." The idea of public life—whether party participation or military intervention—fills them with weariness; the adventures that matter to them are adventures of private life. But they are not in any conventional sense "right-wing": They float beyond belief. The important thing is that their assemblage of "values" corresponds to their class biographies.

A fourth approach starts from the fact that postmodernism is specifically, though not exclusively, *American*. Andreas Huyssen makes an interesting argument that carries us partway but needs to be extended. Postmodernism couldn't have developed in Germany, because postwar Germans were too busy trying to reappropriate a suppressed modernism. Where it developed in France at all, it did so without antagonism to or rupture from modernism. But in America, the artistic avant-garde, in order to break from cold war orthodoxy and corporate-sponsored smugness, had to revolt against the officially enshrined modernism of the postwar period, had to smash the Modern Art idol. I would add the obvious: that postmodernism is born in the U. S. A. because juxtaposition is one of the things we do best. It is one of the defining currents of American culture, especially with Emancipation and the rise of immigration in the latter part of the nineteenth century. (The other principal current is the opposite: assimilation into standard American styles and myths.) Juxtaposition is the Strip, the shopping mall, the Galleria, Las Vegas; it is the marketplace jamboree, the divinely grotesque disorder, amazing diversity striving for reconciliation, the ethereal and ungrounded radiance of signs, the shimmer of the evanescent, the good-times beat of the tall tale meant to be simultaneously disbelieved and appreciated; it is vulgarized pluralism; it is the cultural logic of laissez-faire but perhaps, the suspicion arises, even more—of an elbows-out, noisy, jostling, bottom-up version of something that can pass as democracy. We are, central myths and homogenizations and oligopolies notwith-

* Cecelia Tichi argues that the blank-toned fiction of Ann Beattie, Bret Easton Ellis, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Tama Janowitz, among others, is the anesthetized expression of a TV-saturated generation.

standing, an immigrant culture, less melting pot than grab bag, perennially replenished by aliens and their singular points of view. As long ago as 1916, Randolph Bourne wrote that "there is no distinctively American culture. It is apparently our lot rather to be a federation of cultures." Hollywood and the radio and TV networks flattened the culture, but there is still life in Bourne's vision. The postmodernist, from this point of view, is hitching high art to the raucous, disrespectful quality that accompanies American popular culture from its beginnings. And indeed, the essential contribution of postmodernist art is that it obliterates the line—or the brow—separating the high from the low. What could be more American?

Postmodernism and Poststructuralist Theory: Unstable Bedrock.

I want to lurch, in properly postmodern style, to the domain of high theory. For the forms of representation displayed in postmodernist art rhyme or dovetail with—extend? extenuate? correspond to?—a crisis of thought that runs throughout poststructuralist theory, what we could call a crisis of bottomlessness. The territory of theory and the territory of art share an intimacy greater than ordinary. Among the practitioners of postmodernism are peculiarly a generation schooled in poststructuralist theory: variously, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lacan, Derrida. Characteristically, it is critics who have named the phenomenon that the practitioners practice as they wriggle away from it, insisting in virtual chorus on their individual artistry.

All theoretical maps have empty spaces; there are things they cannot disclose, even acknowledge. I think of a graduate student I met in 1987. She presented herself as a committed feminist working the deconstructionist beat. She was partial to the notion that the world "is"—in quotation marks—everything that is agreed to be the case. Or as Lily Tomlin puts it, that reality is a widely shared hunch. The category of "lived experience" is, from this point of view, an atavistic concealment; what one "lives" is expressed as, constituted by, a layer of discourse that has no more—or less—standing than any other system of discourse. I asked her if she wasn't troubled by the fact that her politics was rooted in a decision to pursue the cues supplied by her experience as a woman, yet from the poststructuralist point of view her emotions were to be forbidden any primacy. Yes, she said, it bothered, chagrined, embarrassed her. As a feminist she was unwilling to make her commitments dissolve into ungrounded discourse. Yet as a theorist she was compelled to explode the very ground on which she stood as a political person—the very ground that had brought her to discourse theories in the first place.

This self-exploding quality is the fundamental anomaly for poststructural theories. One is drawn to a politics out of a complex of understandings and feelings—*moral* feelings. They crystallize into the Archimedean point, the unmoved and essential standing place, for one's intellectual project. Proceeding from that point, one tries to locate oneself in history. One employs a language of unmasking. Ideology, one comes to understand, freezes privilege and encases it in a spurious idea of the natural. Now one sets out to thaw the world, to show how the "natural" is situated, arbitrary, partial. Discourse, one discovers, is a means through which domination takes place. The dominated collaborate with the dominators when they take for granted their discourse and their definition of the situation.

We can only sympathize with the project. Yet discourse theories cannot account for the impulse from which the politics proceeded in the first place. Indeed, they hold, quite clearly, that such impulses should not be taken at face value. There *is* no human experience—at least none that deserves special treatment. It is discourse all the way down—analogous to postmodernism's endless play of surfaces. Poststructuralist critics generally agree that the concept of "literature," say, "assumes that something recognizable as human experience or human nature exists, aside from any form of words and from any form of society, and that this experience is put into words by an author"—thus Diane Macdonell, as if the idea that there is "human experience" were as dismissable as the idea that there is "human nature." But then the ideal of a way of thinking that liberates has been thrown—thrown *funda-*

mentally—into question. What constitutes liberation, and who says? Who is entitled to say?

The impulse toward this sort of unmasking is certainly political: it stemmed from a desire to undo the hold of one system of knowledge/language/power over another. It followed from the sixties' revelation that various systems of knowledge were fundamentally implicated in injustice and violence—whether racist or sexist exclusions from literary canons or the language and science of militarism and imperial justification. But the poststructuralist move in theory has flushed the Archimedean point away with the sewage of discourse.

If there is one theorist whose work seems, at first, to be animated by the promise of the postmodern, it is Michel Foucault. Foucault's popularity today stems in good measure from the flair with which he engaged "the politics of the personal" in a succession of *tour de force* studies documenting the ways in which institutions (psychiatry, medicine, prisons, sexuality) are encrustations of power and assumptions. His insistence on the unavoidability and irreducibility of power relations—a revival of anarchist traditions long eclipsed by Marxism—was refreshing: it shattered any lingering idea that all oppression amounts, "ultimately," to that of capital over labor. It thereby appealed to academics desirous of a radical stance beyond Marxism.

But perhaps there is also something in his popularity that suggests a radicalism of gesture and not of action, suggests the paralysis of radical politics rather than the fruition of it. Alas, Foucault's work was interrupted. But the last phase to reverberate throughout the Anglo-American world, the phase that culminated in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality,* outlined a world of power that not only instigated resistance but required it, channeled it, and turned its energy back upon it. Power was everywhere, "micropower," strategies constantly "deploying" (to use the military language Foucault was partial to) against other strategies—apparently without a basis for solidarity or a reason to support resistance against power. Against Enlightenment ideas of universal rationality, serving to justify the suppression of those found wanting in rationality, Foucault constituted a considerable advance: an anticolonial respect for the principle of human diversity. But as universalist structures were swept away, something essential was left wanting. As Foucault said to a group of us in Berkeley in November 1983, "There is no universal criteri[on] which permits [us] to say, This category of power relations [is] bad and those are good"—although Foucault the person had no trouble taking political positions. Why support some resistances and not others? He could or would not say. As we pressed him to articulate the ground of his positions, he took refuge in exasperated modesty—there was no general principle at stake and no substantial lacuna for his system (which was not, after all, intended to be "a system"). Altogether too easy. A theoretical nihilism, then, is a fair charge to level against the discourse move; it is the equivalent of the blank stare of the postmodern. What, in short, is the ethical basis for politics?

As the ontological bedrock shakes, nostalgia will return for the old unmoved movers—the unbudgeable signified, the true, the essential, the godly. How tempting it will be, for example, to regress to a labor theory of value, a notion of labor-power as human essence, with alienation reduced to the theft of the fruits of labor. How tempting to trumpet forth, yet once more, the incantation to class struggle—as if it were long since ordained what constituted a class, what impelled a class to make history, and what was defensible (and not) in its "struggle." I call this regression for two reasons: first, because it screens out the dreadful history of "state socialism"—neglects, on the theoretical plane, the problem of state power; and second, because it fails to honor the contribution of the discourse-theory move, namely to have pointed out how discourse not only reflects but helps *constitute* the domain of production in which class relations are rooted.

This is not the place to try to develop a political point of view that would transcend Foucaultian relativism without taking refuge in an unworkable universalism. But I do want to outline where I think we ought to be looking. The overarching concept we need is *a politics*

of limits. Simply, there must be limits to what human beings can be permitted to do with their powers. Most of the atrocities to which our species is prone can be understood as violations of limits. The essence of a politics must be rooted in three protections: (1) The ecological: the earth and human life must be protected against the Bomb and other manmade depredations; (2) The pluralist: the social group must be protected against domination by other social groups; (3) The libertarian: the individual must be protected against domination by collectives. A politics of limits respects horizontal social relations—multiplicity over hierarchy, juxtaposition over usurpation, difference over deference: finally, disorderly life in its flux against orderly death in its finality. The democratic, vital edge of the postmodern, the love of difference and flux and the exuberantly unfinished, deserves to infuse the spirit of politics. Needless to say, this way of putting the matter leaves many questions unsettled: most grievously, what happens when there are conflicts and internal fissures among these objectives? What kind of authority, what kind of difference, is legitimate? Respect for uncertainties is of the essence. This is the properly postmodern note on which I suspend the discussion for now.

What After Postmodernism?

Alongside blasé postmodernism, I am trying to maintain, there is another variant in which pluralist exuberance and critical intelligence reinforce each other. Here we find jubilant disrespect for the boundaries that are supposed to segregate culture castes, but disrespect of this sort does not imply a leveling down, profaning the holy precincts of high culture. Where fey, blasé postmodernism skates along the edge, cheerfully or cheerlessly leaving doubt whether it is to be taken as critical or affirmative, the exuberant and parodic kind tries to undermine the apparently solid ground of belief. Absorbing every scrap of leftover culture, it gets involved with nothing. It is suspicious of crusades and commitments outside the self; it does not galvanize citizenship in a larger community—or imperial enthusiasms, for that matter. The music of the "Vietnam syndrome" is strangely akin to the music, if that is the word, of commodities trading.

The postmodernist arts, in toto, express a spirit that comports well with American culture in the eighties. Alongside ostensible belief, actual disengagement. The standard ideological configurations of "liberal" and "conservative" belief are decomposing, although the decomposition is masked by the fact that the old political language is still in force. The patriotic words are mouthed while the performers signal, in the manner of *Moonlighting* (and Reagan at his self-deprecating best), that they don't really mean them (quite). There is *laissez-faire* in economics as long as you can find an apartment you can afford and as long as you have not thought too long about near-collisions between passenger planes. In *Stranger than Paradise* and David Letterman as well as in the Republican party there is a love for the common people and their kitsch tastes that is indistinguishable from contempt. In politics as in the arts distrust runs rampant while, beneath the surface, as David Byrne and Brian Eno have put it, "America is waiting for a message of some sort or another."

Postmodernism is an art of erosion. Make the most of stagnation, it says, and give up gracefully. That is perhaps its defining break from modernism, which was, whatever its subversive practices, a series of declarations of faith—Suprematism's future, Joyce's present, Eliot's unsurpassable past. What is not clear is whether postmodernism, living off borrowed materials, has the resources for continuing self-renewal. A car with a dead battery can run off its generator only so long. Exhaustion is finally exhausting. But if it is true that deep social forces have been at work for a long time to produce the present cultural anesthesia, then postmodernism is not going to fade automatically. How does a culture renew itself? Not easily. At the least, artists—and theorists—will have to do something else. They will have to cease being stenographers of the surfaces. They will have to decide not to coast down the currents of least resistance. □