



A POETICS OF  
POSTMODERNISM  
HISTORY, THEORY, FICTION

LINDA HUTCHEON

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HISTORY, THEORY  
FICTION

LINDA HUTCHEON



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Similarly parts of this book have appeared in shorter and earlier versions (often with quite different foci) in various journals (*Textual Practice*, *Cultural Critique*, *Diacritics*, *Genre*, *English Studies in Canada*) and in essay collections (*Gender and Theory: A Dialogue between the Sexes* [ed. L.Kauffman], *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction* [ed. P.O'Donnell and R.Con Davis], *Future Indicative: Canadian Literature and Literary Theory* [ed. J.Moss]). To the editors' interest in and support of work in progress I am greatly indebted.

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Linda Hutcheon  
Toronto 1987

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## PREFACE

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What will no longer do is either to eulogize or to ridicule postmodernism *en bloc*. The postmodern must be salvaged from its champions and from its detractors. *Andreas Huyssen*

This study is neither a defense nor yet another denigration of the cultural enterprise we seem determined to call postmodernism. You will not find here any claims of radical revolutionary change or any apocalyptic wailing about the decline of the west under late capitalism. Rather than either eulogize or ridicule, what I have tried to do is study a current cultural phenomenon that exists, has attracted much public debate, and so deserves *critical* attention. Based on the notion that any theorizing must derive from that which it purports to study, my focus here is on those points of significant overlap of theory with aesthetic practice which might guide us to articulate what I want to call a “poetics” of postmodernism, a flexible conceptual structure which could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture and our discourses both about it and adjacent to it. The points of overlap that seem most evident to me are those of the paradoxes set up when modernist aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity come up against a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world. The model I have used is that of postmodern architecture, as theorized by Paolo Portoghesi and Charles Jencks and as actualized by Ricardo Bofill, Aldo Rossi, Robert Stern, Charles Moore, and others. By analogy, what would characterize postmodernism in fiction would be what I here call “historiographic metafiction,” those popular paradoxical works like García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, Fowles’s *A Maggot*, Doctorow’s *Loon Lake*, Reed’s *The Terrible Twos*, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Findley’s *Famous Last Words*, Rushdie’s *Shame*, and the list could go on. There are also parallel

paradoxical manifestations of the postmodern in film, video, photography, painting, dance, music, and other literary genres, and these form part of the sample from which this poetics will be derived.

In *Narcissistic Narrative*, my interest had been in the “metafictional paradox” of self-conscious narratives which demanded of the reader both detachment and involvement. In *A Theory of Parody*, my interest shifted to the more general issue of the paradoxes of parody—as signaling ironic difference at the heart of similarity and as an authorized transgression of convention. Given this definition, parody appeared to require investigation by a doubled model that combined the semiotic (pragmatics) with the formally intertextual. But it was in moving to an even more general consideration of postmodern art (which is both intensively self-reflexive and parodic, yet it also attempts to root itself in that which both reflexivity and parody appear to short-circuit: the historical world) that I realized that the formalist and pragmatic approaches I had used in the other two studies would need expanding to include historical and ideological considerations demanded by these unresolved postmodern contradictions that worked to challenge our entire concept of both historical and literary knowledge, as well as our awareness of our ideological implication in our dominant culture. This is where my personal interests have coincided with what Frank Lentricchia has called a crisis in literary studies today, caught as it is between the urge to essentialize literature and its language into a unique, vast, closed textual preserve and the contrasting urge to make literature “relevant” by locating it in larger discursive contexts (1980, xiii). Postmodern art and theory both incarnate this very crisis, not by choosing sides, but by living out the contradiction of giving in to both urges.

Paradoxes, in general, can delight or trouble. Depending on temperamental make-up, we shall be either seduced by their stimulating teasing or upset with their frustrating lack of resolution. There is no dialectic in the postmodern: the self-reflexive remains distinct from its traditionally accepted contrary—the historico-political context in which it is embedded. The result of this deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions is a contesting of what Lyotard (1984a) calls the totalizing master narratives of our culture, those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any contradictions in order to make them fit. This challenge foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art, but also in broader discursive terms: it foregrounds, for instance, how we make historical “facts” out of brute “events” of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience.

None of this is new to postmodernism. As Umberto Eco showed with such bravado in *The Name of the Rose*, the encoding and decoding of signs and their interrelations was also an interest of the medieval period. And the contradictions of the self-reflexive and the historical can be found in Shakespeare’s history plays, not to mention *Don Quixote*. What is newer is the constant attendant irony of the context of the postmodern version of

these contradictions and also their obsessively recurring presence as well. This explains, perhaps, why so many of our finest cultural critics have felt the need to address the topic of postmodernism. What their debates have shown is that the postmodern is, if it is anything, a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the “natural.” But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited). In Foucault’s (1985, 14–22) sense of the notion of problematizing—as generating discourses—postmodernism has certainly created its own problematic, its own set of problems or issues (which were once taken for granted) and possible approaches to them.

I admit that “problematize” is an awkward term—as are others I have deliberately and unavoidably used in this study: theorize, contextualize, totalize, particularize, textualize, and so on. My reason for choosing what to some readers will seem linguistic barbarisms is that they are all now already part of the discourse of postmodernism. Just as new objects require new names, so new theoretical concepts require new designations. For example “to totalize” does not just mean to unify, but rather means to unify with an eye to power and control, and as such, this term points to the hidden power relations behind our humanist and positivist systems of unifying disparate materials, be they aesthetic or scientific. My second reason for using the “-ize” form of each of these terms is to underline the concept of *process* that is at the heart of postmodernism: whether it be in fiction like Swift’s *Waterland* or in films like Schell’s *Marlene*, it is the process of negotiating the postmodern contradictions that is brought to the fore, not any satisfactorily completed and closed product that results from their resolution.

The six chapters of Part I constitute a presentation, from as broad a sample base as possible, of a framework in which to discuss the postmodern: its history in relation to modernism and the 1960s; its structural model derived from the architecture that first gave it its name; its relation to the “ex-centric” minoritarian discourses that shaped it; its challenges to those theories and practices that suppress the “situating” of discourse (production, reception, historical/social/political/aesthetic contexts). In using examples from many art forms and a variety of theoretical perspectives what I want to avoid is the very common kind of vagueness about just what is being called postmodern, as well as the radical simplifications that lead to misreadings of the complexity of postmodern cultural practices. Often the theory is just based on too partial a sampling of the various discourses available to it. In addition to outlining the model and historical background of postmodernism, this section presents what I see as the major points of overlap between theory and practice. In investigating these points, however, I have become very aware of the danger of recuperating the specificity of each manifestation and have tried to avoid any such “totalizing” in the name of the postmodern. For example, although feminism has had a major impact on the direction and focus of postmodernism, I would not want to equate the feminist with

the postmodern for two reasons. First, this would obscure the many different kinds of feminisms that exist, ranging from liberal humanist to radical poststructuralist. But even more important, to co-opt the feminist project into the unresolved and contradictory postmodern one would be to simplify and undo the important political agenda of feminism. I have tried to retain the tension between discrete independence from and influence upon postmodernism in my discussion of not only feminist, but also black, Asian, native, ethnic, gay, and other important (oppositional) minoritarian perspectives.

Part I ends with a detailed consideration of what is, in fact, the guiding concern of the entire book: the problematizing of history by postmodernism. Despite its detractors, the postmodern is not ahistorical or dehistoricized, though it does question our (perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge. Neither is it nostalgic or antiquarian in its critical revisiting of history. The recent work of Hayden White, Paul Veyne, Michel de Certeau, Dominick LaCapra, Louis O. Mink, Fredric Jameson, Lionel Gossman, and Edward Said, among others, has raised the same issues about historical discourse and its relation to the literary as has historiographic metafiction: issues such as those of narrative form, of intertextuality, of strategies of representation, of the role of language, of the relation between historical fact and experiential event, and, in general, of the epistemological and ontological consequences of the act of rendering problematic that which was once taken for granted by historiography—and literature.

The seven chapters of Part II are more specifically focused on historiographic metafiction. Chapter 7 acts as an introduction to the ones that follow in presenting the major implications of that problematic confrontation of history with metafiction. Works like E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* or Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* mark the "return" of plot and questions of reference which had been bracketed by late modernist attempts to explode realist narrative conventions: the French New New Novel or the texts of *Tel Quel*, the Italian *neoavanguardia*, American surfiction. These are all more radical in form than postmodern novels, which are more compromised, if you like, in their paradoxical inscribing *and* contesting of these same conventions. Historiographic metafiction's somewhat different strategy subverts, but only through irony, not through rejection. Problematizing replaces exploding. Novels like Thomas's *The White Hotel* or Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* do the same with notions of subject-formation: they challenge the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it. The tenets of our dominant ideology (to which we, perhaps somewhat simplistically, give the label "liberal humanist") are what is being contested by postmodernism: from the notion of authorial originality and authority to the separation of the aesthetic from the political. Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the

conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning. And, in art, it does so by leaving overt the contradictions between its self-reflexivity and its historical grounding. In theory, be it poststructuralist (a term we now seem to use to cover everything from deconstruction to discourse analysis), Marxist, feminist, or New Historicist, the contradictions are not always this overt, but are often implied—as in the Barthesian anti-authorizing authority or the Lyotardian master-narrativizing of our suspicion of master narratives. These paradoxes are, I believe, what has led to the political ambidexterity of postmodernism in general, for it has been celebrated and decried by both ends of the political spectrum. If you ignore half of the contradiction, however, it becomes quite easy to see the postmodern as either neoconservatively nostalgic/reactionary or radically disruptive/revolutionary. I would argue that we must beware of this suppression of the full complexity of postmodernist paradoxes.

Wilfully contradictory, then, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. It can only problematize what Barthes (1973) has called the “given” or “what goes without saying” in our culture. History, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts—these are some of the notions which, at various moments, have appeared as “natural” or unproblematically common-sensical. And these are what get interrogated. Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric that often accompanies it, the postmodern marks neither a radical Utopian change nor a lamentable decline to hyperreal simulacra. There is not a break—or not yet, at any rate. This study is an attempt to see what happens when culture is challenged from within: challenged or questioned or contested, but not imploded.



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# PART I

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## THEORIZING THE POSTMODERN: TOWARD A POETICS

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### I

Clearly, then, the time has come to theorize the term [postmodernism], if not to define it, before it fades from awkward neologism to derelict cliché without ever attaining to the dignity of a cultural concept. *Ihab Hassan*

Of all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writing on the arts, postmodernism must be the most overand under-defined. It is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization. What all of these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes—*dis*, *de*, *in*, *anti*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest—as does, I suppose, the term postmodernism itself. I point to this simple verbal fact in order to begin “theorizing” the cultural enterprise to which we seem to have given such a provocative label. Given all the confusion and vagueness associated with the term itself (see Paterson 1986), I would like to begin by arguing that, for me, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography. These are some of the realms from which my “theorizing” will proceed, and my examples will always be specific, because what I want to avoid are those polemical generalizations—often by those inimical to postmodernism: Jameson (1984a), Eagleton (1985), Newman (1985)—that leave us guessing about just what it is that is being called postmodernist, though never in doubt as to its undesirability. Some assume a generally accepted “tacit definition” (Caramello 1983); others locate the beast by temporal (after 1945? 1968? 1970? 1980?) or economic signposting (late capitalism). But in as pluralist and fragmented a culture as that of the western world today,

such designations are not terribly useful if they intend to generalize about all the vagaries of our culture. After all, what does television's "Dallas" have in common with the architecture of Ricardo Bofill? What does John Cage's music share with a play (or film) like *Amadeus*?

In other words, postmodernism cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary (cf. Kroker and Cook 1986). And it does not really describe an international cultural phenomenon, for it is primarily European and American (North and South). Although the concept of *modernism* is largely an Anglo-American one (Suleiman 1986), this should not limit the poetics of *postmodernism* to that culture, especially since those who would argue that very stand are usually the ones to find room to sneak in the French *nouveau roman* (A. Wilde 1981; Brooke-Rose 1981; Lodge 1977). And almost everyone (e.g. Barth 1980) wants to be sure to include what Severo Sarduy (1974) has labelled—not postmodern—but "neo-baroque" in a Spanish culture where "modernism" has a rather different meaning.

I offer instead, then, a specific, if polemical, start from which to operate: as a cultural activity that can be discerned in most art forms and many currents of thought today, what I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of "the presence of the past." This was the title given to the 1980 Venice Biennale which marked the institutional recognition of postmodernism in architecture. Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi's (1983) analysis of the twenty facades of the "Strada Novissima"—whose very newness lay paradoxically in its historical parody—shows how architecture has been rethinking modernism's purist break with history. This is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary of architectural forms. "The past whose presence we claim is not a golden age to be recuperated," argues Portoghesi (1983, 26). Its aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection. The same is true of the postmodernist rethinking of figurative painting in art and historical narrative in fiction and poetry (see Perloff 1985, 155–71): it is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic "return." Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism. Stanley Tigerman's dialogue with history in his projects for family houses modelled on Raphael's palatial Villa Madama is an ironic one: his miniaturization of the monumental forces a rethinking of the social function of architecture—both then and now (see Chapter 2).

Because it is contradictory and works within the very systems it attempts to subvert, postmodernism can probably not be considered a new paradigm (even in some extension of the Kuhnian sense of the term). It has not replaced liberal humanism, even if it has seriously challenged it. It may mark, however, the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new. The manifestations in art of this struggle may be those almost undefinable and certainly bizarre

works like Terry Gilliam's film, *Brazil*. The postmodern ironic rethinking of history is here textualized in the many general parodic references to other movies: *A Clockwork Orange*, 1984, Gilliam's own *Time Bandits* and Monty Python sketches, and Japanese epics, to name but a few. The more specific parodic recalls range from *Star Wars'* Darth Vader to the Odessa Steps sequence of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. In *Brazil*, however, the famous shot of the baby carriage on the steps is replaced by one of a floor cleaner, and the result is to reduce epic tragedy to the bathos of the mechanical and debased. Along with this ironic reworking of the history of film comes a temporal historical warp: the movie is set, we are told, at 8:49 am, sometime in the twentieth century. The decor does not help us identify the time more precisely. The fashions mix the absurdly futuristic with 1930s styling; an oddly old-fashioned and dingy setting belies the omnipresence of computers—though even they are not the sleekly designed creatures of today. Among the other typically postmodern contradictions in this movie is the co-existence of heterogenous filmic genres: fantasy Utopia and grim dystopia; absurd slapstick comedy and tragedy (the Tuttle/Buttle mix-up); the romantic adventure tale and the political documentary.

While all forms of contemporary art and thought offer examples of this kind of postmodernist contradiction, this book (like most others on the subject) will be privileging the novel genre, and one form in particular, a form that I want to call "historiographic metafiction." By this I mean those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Midnight's Children*, *Ragtime*, *Legs, G.*, *Famous Last Words*. In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative—be it in literature, history, or theory—that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. This kind of fiction has often been noticed by critics, but its paradigmatic quality has been passed by: it is commonly labelled in terms of something else—for example as "midfiction" (A.Wilde 1981) or "paramodernist" (Malmgren 1985). Such labeling is another mark of the inherent contradictoriness of historiographic metafiction, for it always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them. It is not just metafictional; nor is it just another version of the historical novel or the non-fictional novel. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has often been discussed in exactly the contradictory terms that I think define postmodernism. For example Larry McCaffery sees it as both metafictionally self-reflexive and yet speaking to us powerfully about real political and historical realities: "It has thus become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis...but yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page" (1982, 264). What McCaffery here adds as almost an

afterthought at the end of his book, *The Metafictional Muse*, is in many ways my starting point.

Most theorists of postmodernism who see it as a “cultural dominant” (Jameson 1984a, 56) agree that it is characterized by the results of late capitalist dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture (see Jameson 1984a [via Lefebvre 1968]; Russell 1980a; Egbert 1970; Calinescu 1977). I would agree and, in fact, argue that the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge. Challenge, but not deny. But it does seek to assert difference, not homogeneous identity. Of course, the very concept of difference could be said to entail a typically postmodern contradiction: “difference,” unlike “otherness,” has no exact opposite against which to define itself. Thomas Pynchon allegorizes otherness in *Gravity’s Rainbow* through the single, if anarchic, “we-system” that exists as the counterforce of the totalizing “They-system” (though also implicated in it). Postmodern difference or rather differences, in the plural, are always multiple and provisional.

Postmodern culture, then, has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture. It does not deny it, as some have asserted (Newman 1985, 42; Palmer 1977, 364). Instead, it contests it from within its own assumptions. Modernists like Eliot and Joyce have usually been seen as profoundly humanistic (e.g. Stern 1971, 26) in their paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of their realization of the inevitable absence of such universals. Postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them: it refuses to posit any structure or, what Lyotard (1984a) calls, master narrative—such as art or myth—which, for such modernists, would have been consolatory. It argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less illusory. For Lyotard, postmodernism is characterized by exactly this kind of incredulity toward master or metanarratives: those who lament the “loss of meaning” in the world or in art are really mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer primarily narrative knowledge of this kind (1984a, 26). This does not mean that knowledge somehow disappears. There is no radically new paradigm here, even if there is change.

It is no longer big news that the master narratives of bourgeois liberalism are under attack. There is a long history of many such skeptical sieges to positivism and humanism, and today’s footsoldiers of theory—Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, Vattimo, Baudrillard—follow in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud, to name but a few, in their attempts to challenge the empiricist, rationalist, humanist assumptions of our cultural systems, including those of science (Graham, 1982, 148; Toulmin 1972). Foucault’s early rethinking of the history of ideas in terms of an “archaeology” (in *The Order of Things*, 1970; *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,

1972) that might stand outside the universalizing assumptions of humanism is one such attempt, whatever its obvious weaknesses. So is Derrida's more radical contesting of Cartesian and Platonic views of the mind as a system of closed meanings (see B.Harrison 1985, 6). Like Gianni Vattimo's *pensiero debole* (weak thought) (1983; 1985), these challenges characteristically operate in clearly paradoxical terms, knowing that to claim epistemological authority is to be caught up in what they seek to displace. The same applies to Habermas's work, though it often appears somewhat less radical in its determined desire to work from within the system of "Enlightenment" rationality and yet manage to critique it at the same time. This is what Lyotard has attacked as just another totalizing narrative (1984b). And Jameson (1984b) has argued that both Lyotard and Habermas are resting their arguments on different but equally strong legitimizing "narrative archetypes."

This game of meta-narrative one-upmanship could go on and on, since arguably Jameson's Marxism leaves him vulnerable too (see Chapter 12). But this is not the point. What is important in all these internalized challenges to humanism is the interrogating of the notion of consensus. Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of differences—in theory and in artistic practice. In its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus, whether it be defined in terms of minority (educated, sensitive, élitist) or mass (commercial, popular, conventional) culture, for *both* are manifestations of late capitalist, bourgeois, informational, postindustrial society, a society in which social reality is structured by discourses (in the plural)—or so postmodernism endeavors to teach.

What this means is that the familiar humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order *versus* chaos and disorder) no longer holds. Postmodernist contradictory art still installs that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning (D'Haen 1986, 225). For example, within a positivistic frame of reference, photographs could be accepted as neutral representations, as technological windows on the world. In the postmodern photos of Heribert Berkert or Ger Dekkers, they still represent (for they cannot avoid reference) but what they represent is self-consciously shown to be highly filtered by the discursive and aesthetic assumptions of the cameraholder (D.Davis 1977). While not wanting to go as far as Morse Peckham (1965) and argue that the arts are somehow "biologically" necessary for social change, I would like to suggest that, in its very contradictions, postmodernist art (like Brecht's epic theater) might be able to dramatize and even provoke change from within. It is not that the modernist world was "a world in need of mending" and the postmodernist one "beyond repair" (A. Wilde 1981, 131). Postmodernism works to show that all repairs are human constructs, but that, from that

very fact, they derive their value as well as their limitation. All repairs are both comforting and illusory. Postmodernist interrogations of humanist certainties live within this kind of contradiction.

Perhaps it is another inheritance from the 1960s to believe that challenging and questioning are positive values (even if solutions to problems are not offered), for the knowledge derived from such inquiry may be the only possible condition of change. In the late 1950s in *Mythologies* (1973), Roland Barthes had prefigured this kind of thinking in his Brechtian challenges to all that is “natural” or “goes without saying” in our culture—that is, all that is considered universal and eternal, and therefore unchangeable. He suggested the need to question and demystify first, and then work for change. The 1960s were the time of ideological formation for many of the postmodernist thinkers and artists of the 1980s and it is now that we can see the results of that formation (see Chapter 12).

Perhaps, as some have argued, the 1960s themselves (that is, at the time) produced no enduring innovation in aesthetics, but I would argue that they did provide the background, though not the definition, of the postmodern (cf. Bertens 1986, 17), for they were crucial in developing a different concept of the possible function of art, one that would contest the “Arnoldian” or humanist moral view with its potentially élitist class bias (see R. Williams 1960, xiii). One of the functions of art in mass culture, argued Susan Sontag, would be to “modify consciousness” (1967, 304). And many cultural commentators since have argued that the energies of the 1960s have changed the framework and structure of how we consider art (e.g. Wasson 1974). The conservatism of the late 1970s and 1980s may have their impact when the thinkers and artists being formed now begin to produce their work (cf. McCaffery 1982), but to call Foucault or Lyotard a neoconservative—as did Habermas (1983, 14)—is historically and ideologically inaccurate (see too Calinescu 1986, 246; Giddens 1981, 17).

The political, social, and intellectual experience of the 1960s helped make it possible for postmodernism to be seen as what Kristeva calls “writing-as-experience-of-limits” (1980a, 137): limits of language, of subjectivity, of sexual identity, and we might also add: of systematization and uniformization. This interrogating (and even pushing) of limits has contributed to the “crisis in legitimation” that Lyotard and Habermas see (differently) as part of the postmodern condition. It has certainly meant a rethinking and putting into question of the bases of our western modes of thinking that we usually label, perhaps rather too generally, as liberal humanism.

## II

What is the postmodern scene? Baudrillard’s excremental culture? Or a final homecoming to a technoscape where a “body without organs” (Artaud), a “negative space” (Rosalind Krauss), a “pure implosion” (Lyotard), a “looking away” (Barthes) or an “aleatory



mechanism" (Serres) is now first nature and thus the terrain of a new political refusal? *Arthur Kroker and David Cook*

What precisely, though, is being challenged by postmodernism? First of all, institutions have come under scrutiny: from the media to the university, from museums to theaters. Much postmodern dance, for instance, contests theatrical space by moving out into the street. Sometimes it is overtly measured by the clock, thereby foregrounding the unspoken conventions of theatrical time (see Pops 1984, 59). Make-believe or illusionist conventions of art are often bared in order to challenge the institutions in which they find a home—and a meaning. Similarly Michael Asher sandblasted a wall of the Toselli Gallery in Milan in 1973 to reveal the plaster beneath. This was his "work of art," one that collapsed together the "work" and the gallery so as to reveal at once their collusion and the strong but usually unacknowledged power of the gallery's invisibility as a dominant (and dominating) cultural institution (see Kibbins 1983).

The important contemporary debate about the margins and the boundaries of social and artistic conventions (see Culler 1983, 1984) is also the result of a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits: those of particular arts, of genres, of art itself. Rauschenberg's narrative (or discursive) work, *Rebus*, or Cy Twombly's series on Spenserian texts, or Shosaku Arakawa's poster-like pages of *The Mechanism of Meaning* are indicative of the fruitful straddling of the borderline between the literary and visual arts. As early as 1969, Theodore Ziolkowski had noted that the

new arts are so closely related that we cannot hide complacently behind the arbitrary walls of self-contained disciplines: poetics inevitably gives way to general aesthetics, considerations of the novel move easily to the film, while the new poetry often has more in common with contemporary music and art than with the poetry of the past.

(1969, 113)

The years since have only verified and intensified this perception. The borders between literary genres have become fluid: who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection (Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*), the novel and the long poem (Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*), the novel and autobiography (Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*), the novel and history (Salman Rushdie's *Shame*), the novel and biography (John Banville's *Kepler*)? But, in any of these examples, the conventions of the two genres are played off against each other; there is no simple, unproblematic merging.

In Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, the title already points to the ironic inversion of biographical conventions: it is the death, not the life, that will be the focus. The subsequent narrative complications of three voices (first-, second-, and third-person) and three tenses (present, future, past) disseminate but also reassert (in a typically postmodernist way) the



enunciative situation or discursive context of the work (see Chapter 5). The traditional verifying third-person past tense voice of history and realism is both installed and undercut by the others. In other works, like Italian writer Giorgio Manganelli's *Amore*, the genres of theoretical treatise, literary dialogue, and novel are played off against one another (see Lucente 1986, 317). Eco's *The Name of the Rose* contains at least three major registers of discourse: the literary-historical, the theological-philosophical, and the popular-cultural (de Lauretis 1985, 16), thereby paralleling Eco's own three areas of critical activity.

The most radical boundaries crossed, however, have been those between fiction and non-fiction and—by extension—between art and life. In the March 1986 issue of *Esquire* magazine, Jerzy Kosinski published a piece in the "Documentary" section called "Death in Cannes," a narrative of the last days and subsequent death of French biologist, Jacques Monod. Typically postmodern, the text refuses the omniscience and omnipresence of the third person and engages instead in a dialogue between a narrative voice (which both is and is not Kosinski's) and a projected reader. Its viewpoint is avowedly limited, provisional, personal. However, it also works (and plays) with the conventions of both literary realism and journalistic facticity: the text is accompanied by photographs of the author and the subject. The commentary uses these photos to make us, as readers, aware of our expectations of both narrative and pictorial interpretation, including our naive but common trust in the representational veracity of photography. One set of photos is introduced with: "I bet the smiling picture was taken last, I always bet on a happy ending" (1986, 82), but the subsequent prose section ends with: "look at the pictures if you must but...don't bet on them. Bet on the worth of a word" (82). But we come to learn later that there are events—like Monod's death—that are beyond both words and pictures.

Kosinski calls this postmodern form of writing "autofiction": "fiction" because all memory is fictionalizing; "auto" because it is, for him, "a literary genre, generous enough to let the author adopt the nature of his fictional protagonist—not the other way around" (1986, 82). When he "quotes" Monod, he tells the fictive and questioning reader that it is in his own "*autolingua*—the inner language of the storyteller" (86). In his earlier novel, *Blind Date*, Kosinski had used Monod's death and the text of his *Chance and Necessity* as structuring concepts in the novel: from both, he learned of our need to rid ourselves of illusions of totalizing explanations and systems of ethics. But it is not just this kind of historiographic metafiction that challenges the life/art borders or that plays on the margins of genre. Painting and sculpture, for instance, come together with similar impact in some of the three-dimensional canvasses of Robert Rauschenberg and Tom Wesselman (see D'Haen 1986 and Owens 1980b). And, of course, much has been made of the blurring of the distinctions between the discourses of theory and literature in the works of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes—or somewhat less fashionably, if no less provocatively, in some of the writing of Ihab Hassan

(1975; 1980a) and Zulfikar Ghose (1983). Rosalind Krauss has called this sort of work “paraliterary” and sees it as challenging both the concept of the “work of art” and the separation of that concept from the domain of the academic critical establishment: “The paraliterary space is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of art” (1980, 37). This is the space of the postmodern.

In addition to being “borderline” inquiries, most of these postmodernist contradictory texts are also specifically parodic in their intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved. When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that is contested in postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity (Hutcheon 1985). Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions (see Chapter 8). While *theorists* like Jameson (1983, 114–19) see this loss of the modernist unique, individual style as a negative, as an imprisoning of the text in the past through pastiche, it has been seen by postmodern *artists* as a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought. On Rauschenberg’s use of reproduction and parody in his work, Douglas Crimp writes: “The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence... are undermined” (1983, 53). The same is true of the fiction of John Fowles or the music of George Rochberg. As Foucault noted, the concepts of subjective consciousness and continuity that are now being questioned are tied up with an entire set of ideas that have been dominant in our culture until now: “the point of creation, the unity of a work, of a period, of a theme...the mark of originality and the infinite wealth of hidden meanings” (1972, 230).

Another consequence of this far-reaching postmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity is the frequent challenge to traditional notions of perspective, especially in narrative and painting. The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate (as in D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel*) or resolutely provisional and limited—often undermining their own seeming omniscience (as in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*). (See Chapter 10.) In Charles Russell’s terms, with postmodernism we start to encounter and are challenged by “an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning” (1980a, 192).

As Foucault and others have suggested, linked to this contesting of the

unified and coherent subject is a more general questioning of *any* totalizing or homogenizing system. Provisionality and heterogeneity contaminate any neat attempts at unifying coherence (formal or thematic). Historical and narrative continuity and closure are contested, but again, from within. The teleology of art forms—from fiction to music—is both suggested and transformed. The centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentered perspective, the “marginal” and what I will be calling (Chapter 4) the “ex-centric” (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way, as I have argued, to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community—another postmodern paradox. The local and the regional are stressed in the face of mass culture and a kind of vast global informational village that McLuhan could only have dreamed of. Culture (with a capital C and in the singular) has become cultures (uncapitalized and plural), as documented at length by our social scientists. And this appears to be happening in spite of and, I would argue, maybe even because of—the homogenizing impulse of the consumer society of late capitalism: yet another postmodern contradiction.

In attempting to define what he called the “trans-avant-garde,” Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva found he had to talk of differences as much as similarities from country to country (1984, 71–3): it would seem that the “presence of the past” depends on the local and culture-specific nature of each past. The questioning of the universal and totalizing in the name of the local and particular does not automatically entail the end of all consensus. As Victor Burgin reminds us: “Of course moralities and histories are ‘relative’, but this does not mean they do not *exist*” (1986, 198). Postmodernism is careful not to make the marginal into a new center, for it knows, in Burgin’s words, that “[what] have expired are the absolute guarantees issued by overriding metaphysical systems” (198). Any certainties we do have are what he calls “positional,” that is, derived from complex networks of local and contingent conditions.

In this sort of context, different kinds of texts will take on value—the ones that operate what Derrida calls “breaches or infractions”—for it is they that can lead us to suspect the very concept of “art” (1981a, 69). In Derrida’s words, such artistic practices seem “to mark and to organize a structure of resistance to the philosophical conceptuality that allegedly dominated and comprehended them, whether directly, or whether through categories derived from this philosophical fund, the categories of esthetics, rhetoric, or traditional criticism” (69). Of course, Derrida’s own texts belong solely to neither philosophical nor literary discourse, though they partake of both in a deliberately self-reflexive and contradictory (postmodern) manner.

Derrida's constant self-consciousness about the status of his own discourse raises another question that must be faced by anyone—like myself—writing on postmodernism. From what position can one “theorize” (even self-consciously) a disparate, contradictory, multivalent, current cultural phenomenon? Stanley Fish (1986) has wittily pointed out the “antifoundationalist” paradox that I too find myself in when I comment on the importance of Derrida's critical self-consciousness. In Fish's ironic terms: “Ye shall know that truth is not what it seems and *that* truth shall set you free.” Barthes, of course, had seen the same danger earlier as he watched (and helped) demystification become part of the *doxa* (1977, 166). Similarly Christopher Norris has noted that in textualizing all forms of knowledge, deconstruction theory often, in its very unmasking of rhetorical strategies, itself still lays claim to the status of “theoretical knowledge” (1985, 22). Most postmodern theory, however, realizes this paradox or contradiction. Rorty, Baudrillard, Foucault, Lyotard, and others seem to imply that any knowledge cannot escape complicity with some meta-narrative, with the fictions that render possible any claim to “truth,” however provisional. What they add, however, is that *no* narrative can be a natural “master” narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct. It is this kind of self-implicating questioning that should allow postmodernist theorizing to challenge narratives that do presume to “master” status, without necessarily assuming that status for itself.

Postmodern art similarly asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control, and identity (Russell 1985, 247) that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism. Those humanistic principles are still operative in our culture, but for many they are no longer seen as eternal and unchallengeable. The contradictions of both postmodern theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. This does not necessarily destroy their “truth” value, but it does define the conditions of that “truth.” Such a process reveals rather than conceals the tracks of the signifying systems that constitute our world—that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs. However important these systems are, they are not natural, given, or universal (see Chapter 11). The very limitations imposed by the postmodern view are also perhaps ways of opening new doors: perhaps now we can better study the interrelations of social, aesthetic, philosophical, and ideological constructs. In order to do so, postmodernist critique must acknowledge its own position as an ideological one (Newman 1985, 60). I think the formal and thematic contradictions of postmodern art and theory work to do just that: to call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response to that, and to do so in a self-aware way that admits its own provisionality. In Barthesian terms (1972, 256), it is criticism which would include in its own discourse an implicit (or explicit) reflection upon itself.

In writing about these postmodern contradictions, then, I clearly would

not want to fall into the trap of suggesting any “transcendental identity” (Radhakrishnan 1983, 33) or essence for postmodernism. Instead, I see it as an ongoing cultural process or activity, and I think that what we need, more than a fixed and fixing definition, is a “poetics,” an open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures. This would not be a poetics in the structuralist sense of the word, but would go beyond the study of literary discourse to the study of cultural practice and theory. As Tzvetan Todorov realized, in a later expanding and translating of his 1968 *Introduction to Poetics*: “Literature is inconceivable outside a typology of discourses” (1981a, 71). Art and theory about art (and culture) should both be part of a poetics of postmodernism. Richard Rorty has posited the existence of “poetic” moments “as occurring periodically in many different areas of culture—science, philosophy, painting and politics, as well as the lyric and the drama” (1984b, 4). But this is no coincidental moment; it is made, not found. As Rorty explains (23n):

it is a mistake to think that Derrida, or anybody else, “recognized” problems about the nature of textuality or writing which had been ignored by the tradition. What he did was to think up ways of speaking which made old ways of speaking optional, and thus more or less dubious.

It is both a way of speaking—a discourse—and a cultural process involving the expressions of thought (Lyotard 1986, 125) that a poetics would seek to articulate.

A poetics of postmodernism would not posit any relation of causality or identity either among the arts or between art and theory. It would merely offer, as provisional hypotheses, perceived overlappings of concern, here specifically with regard to the contradictions that I see as characterizing postmodernism. It would be a matter of reading literature through its surrounding theoretical discourses (Cox 1985, 57), rather than as continuous with theory. It would not mean seeing literary theory as a particularly imperialistic intellectual practice that has overrun art (H. White 1978b, 261); nor would it mean blaming self-reflexive art for having created an “ingrown” theory wherein “specific critical and literary trends [have] buttressed each other into a hegemonic network” (Chénétier 1985, 654). The interaction of theory and practice in postmodernism is a complex one of shared responses to common provocations. There are also, of course, many postmodern artists who double as theorists—Eco, Lodge, Bradbury, Barth, Rosler, Burgin—though they have rarely become the major theorists or apologists of their own work, as the *nouveaux romanciers* (from Robbe-Grillet to Ricardou) and surfictionists (Federman and Sukenick especially) have tended to do. What a poetics of postmodernism would articulate is less the theories of Eco in relation to *The Name of the Rose* than the overlappings of concern between, for instance, the contradictory form of the writing of theory in Lyotard’s *Le Différend* (1983) and that of a novel