



Mapping the Postmodern

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*Mapping the Postmodern**

by Andreas Huyssen

A Story

In the summer of 1982 I visited the Seventh Documenta in Kassel, Germany, a periodic exhibition which documents the latest trends in contemporary art every four or five years. My then five-year old son Daniel was with me, and he succeeded, unintentionally, in making the latest in postmodernism quite palpable to me. Approaching the Fridericianum, the museum housing the exhibit, we saw a huge and extended wall of rocks, seemingly heaped haphazardly alongside the museum. It was a work by Joseph Beuys, one of the key figures of the postmodern scene for at least a decade. Coming closer we realized that thousands of huge basalt blocks were arranged in a triangle formation the smallest angle of which pointed at a newly planted tree — all of it part of what Beuys calls a social sculpture and what in a more traditional terminology would have been called a form of applied art. Beuys had issued an appeal to the citizens of Kassel, a dismal provincial city rebuilt in concrete after the heavy bombings of the last great war, to plant a tree with each of his 7000 “planting stones.” The appeal — at least initially — had been enthusiastically received by a populace usually not interested in the latest blessings of the art world. Daniel, for his part, loved the rocks. I watched him climb up and down, across and back again. “Is this art?” he asked matter-of-factly. I talked to him about Beuys’ ecological politics and about the slow death of the German forests (*Waldsterben*) due to acid rain. As he kept moving around on the rocks, listening distractedly, I gave him a few simple concepts about art in the making, sculpture as monument or anti-monument, art for climbing on, and ultimately, art for vanishing — the rocks after all would disappear from the museum site as people would begin to plant the trees.

Later in the museum, however, things turned out quite differently.

*Earlier versions of this article were presented at the XVIIth World Congress of Philosophy in Montreal, August 1983, and at a conference on “The Question of the Postmodern: Criticism / Literature / Culture” organized at Cornell University by Michael Hays, April 1984.

In the first halls we filed past a golden pillar, actually a metal cylinder entirely covered with golden leaves (by James Lee Byars), and an extended golden wall by Kounellis, with a clothes stand including hat and coat placed before it. Had the artist, as a latter day Wu Tao-Tse, vanished into the wall, into his work, leaving only his hat and coat? No matter how suggestive we might find the juxtaposition of the banal clothes stand and the preciousness of the doorless shining wall, one thing seemed clear: "Am Golde hängt, zum Golde drängt die Postmoderne."

Several rooms further on we encountered Mario Merz's spiral table made out of glass, steel, wood and plates of sandstone, with bushlike twigs sticking out of the external parameter of the spiral formation — again, it seemed, an attempt to overlay the typical hard materials of the modernist era, steel and glass, with softer, more "natural" ones, in this case sandstone and wood. There were connotations of Stonehenge and ritual, domesticated and brought down to living-room size, to be sure. I was trying to hold together in my mind the eclecticism of materials used by Merz with the nostalgic eclecticism of postmodern architecture or the pastiche of expressionism in the painting of the *neuen Wilden*, prominently exhibited in another building of this Documenta show. I was trying, in other words, to spin a red thread through the labyrinth of the postmodern. Then, in a flash, the pattern became clear. As Daniel tried to feel the surfaces and crevices of Merz's work, as he ran his fingers alongside the stone plates and over the glass, a guard rushed over shouting: "Nicht berühren! Das ist Kunst!" (Don't touch! This is art!) And a while later, tired from so much art, he sat down on Carl André's solid cedar blocks only to be chased away with the admonition that art was not for sitting on.

Here it was again, that old notion of art: no touching, no trespassing. The museum as temple, the artist as prophet, the work as relic and cult object, the halo restored. Suddenly the privileging of gold in this exhibit made a lot of sense. The guards, of course, only performed what Rudi Fuchs, organizer of this Documenta and in touch with current trends, had in mind all along: "To disentangle art from the diverse pressures and social perversions it has to bear."¹ The debates of the last fifteen to twenty years about ways of seeing and experiencing contemporary art, about imaging and image making, about the entanglements between avantgarde art, media iconography and advertising seemed to have been wiped out, the slate cleaned for a new romanticism. But then it fits in all too well with, say, the celebrations of the prophetic word in the more recent writings of Peter Handke, with the

1. Catalogue, *Documenta 7* (Kassel: Paul Dierichs, n.d. [1982]), p. XV.

aura of the “postmodern” in the New York art scene, with the self-stylization of the film-maker as *auteur* in *Burden of Dreams*, a recent documentary about the making of Werner Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo*. Think of *Fitzcarraldo*’s closing images — opera on a ship on the Amazon. *Bateau Ivre* was briefly considered by the Documenta organizers as the title for the exhibit. But while Herzog’s worn-out steam boat was indeed a *bateau ivre* — opera in the jungle, a ship moved across a mountain — the *bateau ivre* of Kassel was only sobering in its pretentiousness. Consider this, taken from Fuchs’ catalogue introduction: “After all the artist is one of the last practitioners of distinct individuality.” Or, again *Originalton* Fuchs: “Here, then, begins our exhibition; here is the euphoria of Hölderlin, the quiet logic of T.S. Eliot, the unfinished dream of Coleridge. When the French traveller who discovered the Niagara Falls returned to New York, none of his sophisticated friends believed his fantastic story. What is your proof, they asked. My proof, he said, is that I have seen it.”²

Niagara Falls and Documenta 7 — indeed we have seen it all before. Art as nature, nature as art. The halo Baudelaire once lost on a crowded Paris boulevard is back, the aura restored, Baudelaire, Marx and Benjamin forgotten. The gesture in all of this is patently anti-modern and anti-avantgarde. Sure, one could argue that in his recourse to Hölderlin, Coleridge and Eliot, Fuchs tries to revive the modernist dogma itself — yet another postmodern nostalgia, another sentimental return to a time when art was still art. But what distinguishes this nostalgia from the “real thing,” and what ultimately makes it anti-modernist, is its loss of irony, reflexiveness and self-doubt, its cheerful abandonment of a critical consciousness, its ostentatious self-confidence and the *mise en scène* of its conviction (visible even in the spacial arrangements inside the Fridericianum) that there must be a realm of purity for art, a space beyond those unfortunate “diverse pressures and social perversions” art has had to bear.³

This latest trend within the trajectory of postmodernism, embodied for me in the Documenta 7, rests on an all but total confusion of codes: it is anti-modern and highly eclectic, but dresses up as a return to the modernist tradition; it is anti-avantgarde in that it simply chooses to drop the avantgarde’s crucial concern for a new art in an alternative society, but it pretends to be avantgarde in its presentation of current

2. *Ibid.*

3. Of course, this is not meant as a “fair” evaluation of the show or of all the works exhibited in it. It should be clear that what I am concerned with here is the dramaturgy of the show, the way it was conceptualized and presented to the public. For a more comprehensive discussion of Documenta 7, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Received Ideas,” *October*, 22 (Fall 1982), 105-126.

trends; and, in a certain sense, it is even anti-postmodern in that it abandons any reflection of the problems which the exhaustion of high modernism originally brought about, problems which postmodern art, in its better moments, has attempted to address aesthetically and sometimes even politically. Documenta 7 can stand as the perfect aesthetic simulacrum: facile eclecticism combined with aesthetic amnesia and delusions of grandeur. It represents the kind of postmodern restoration of a domesticated modernism which seems to be gaining ground in the age of Kohl-Thatcher-Reagan and it parallels the conservative political attacks on the culture of the 1960s which have increased in volume and viciousness in these past years.

The Problem

If this were all that could be said about postmodernism it would not be worth the trouble of taking up the subject at all. I might just as well stop right here and join the formidable chorus of those who lament the loss of quality and proclaim the decline of the arts since the 1960s. My argument, however, will be a different one. While the recent media hype about postmodernism in architecture and the arts has propelled the phenomenon into the limelight, it has also tended to obscure its long and complex history. Much of my ensuing argument will be based on the premise that what appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch and hollow spectacle is part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'postmodernism' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. The nature and depth of that transformation are debatable, but transformation it is. I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that there is a wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social and economic orders;⁴ any such claim clearly would be overblown. But in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period. What needs further exploration is whether this transformation has generated genuinely new aesthetic forms in the various arts or whether it mainly recycles techniques and strategies of modernism itself, reinscribing them into an altered cultural context.

Of course, there are good reasons why any attempt to take the postmodern seriously on its own terms meets with so much resistance. It is indeed tempting to dismiss many of the current manifestations of

4. On this question see Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (July-August 1984), 53-92, whose attempt to identify postmodernism with a new stage in the developmental logic of capital, I feel, overstates the case.

postmodernism as a fraud perpetrated on a gullible public by the New York art market in which reputations are built and gobbled up faster than painters can paint: witness the frenzied brushwork of the new expressionists. It is also easy to argue that much of the contemporary inter-arts, mixed-media and performance culture, which once seemed so vital, is now spinning its wheels and speaking in tongues, relishing, as it were, the eternal recurrence of the *déjà vu*. With good reason we may remain skeptical toward the revival of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* as postmodern spectacle in Syberberg or Robert Wilson. The current Wagner cult may indeed be a symptom of a happy collusion between the megalomania of the postmodern and that of the premodern on the edge of modernism. The search for the grail, it seems, is on.

But it is almost too easy to ridicule the postmodernism of the current New York art scene or of Documenta 7. Such total rejection will blind us to postmodernism's critical potential which, I believe, also exists, even though it may be difficult to identify.⁵ The notion of the art work as critique actually informs some of the more thoughtful condemnations of postmodernism, which is accused of having abandoned the critical stance that once characterized modernism. However, the familiar ideas of what constitutes a critical art (*Parteilichkeit* and vanguardism, *l'art engagé*, critical realism, or the aesthetic of negativity, the refusal of representation, abstraction, reflexivity) have lost much of their explanatory and normative power in recent decades. This is precisely the dilemma of art in a postmodern age. Nevertheless, I see no reason to jettison the notion of a critical art altogether. The pressures to do so are not new; they have been formidable in capitalist culture ever since romanticism, and if our postmodernity makes it exceedingly difficult to hold on to an older notion of art as critique, then the task is to redefine the possibilities of critique in postmodern terms rather than relegating it to oblivion. If the postmodern is discussed as a historical condition rather than only as style it becomes possible and indeed important to unlock the critical moment in postmodernism itself and to sharpen its cutting edge, however blunt it may seem at first sight. 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. This essay is meant to contribute to that project.

In much of the postmodernism debate, a very conventional thought pattern has asserted itself. Either it is said that postmodernism is con-

5. For a distinction between a critical and an affirmative postmodernism, see Hal Foster's introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1984). Foster's new essay in this issue, however, indicates a change of mind with regard to the critical potential of postmodernism.

tinuous with modernism, in which case the whole debate opposing the two is specious; or, it is claimed that there is a radical rupture, a break with modernism, which is then evaluated in either positive or negative terms. But the question of historical continuity or discontinuity simply cannot be adequately discussed in terms of such an either/or dichotomy. To have questioned the validity of such dichotomous thought patterns is of course one of the major achievements of Derridean deconstruction. But the poststructuralist notion of endless textuality ultimately cripples any meaningful historical reflection on temporal units shorter than, say, the long wave of metaphysics from Plato to Heidegger or the spread of *modernité* from the mid-19th century to the present. The problem with such historical macro-schemes, in relation to postmodernism, is that they prevent the phenomenon from even coming into focus.

I will therefore take a different route. I will not attempt here to define what postmodernism *is*. The term '*postmodernism*' itself should guard us against such an approach as it positions the phenomenon as relational. Modernism as that from which postmodernism is breaking away remains inscribed into the very word with which we describe our distance from modernism. Thus keeping in mind postmodernism's relational nature, I will simply start from the *Selbstverständnis* of the postmodern as it has shaped various discourses since the 1960s. What I hope to provide in this essay is something like a large-scale map of the postmodern which surveys several territories and on which the various postmodern artistic and critical practices could find their aesthetic and political place. Within the trajectory of the postmodern in the United States I will distinguish several phases and directions. My primary aim is to emphasize some of the historical contingencies and pressures that have shaped recent aesthetic and cultural debates but have either been ignored or systematically blocked out in critical theory à l'américaine. While drawing on developments in architecture, literature and the visual arts, my focus will be primarily on the critical discourse about the postmodern: postmodernism in relation to, respectively, modernism, the avantgarde, neo-conservatism and poststructuralism. Each of these constellations represents a somewhat separate layer of the postmodern and will be presented as such. And, finally, central elements of the *Begriffsgeschichte* of the term will be discussed in relation to a broader set of questions that have arisen in recent debates about modernism, modernity and the historical avantgarde.⁶ A crucial ques-

6. For an earlier attempt to give a *Begriffsgeschichte* of postmodernism in literature, see the various essays in *Amerikastudien*, 22:1 (1977), 9-46 (includes a valuable bibliography). Cf. also Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, second edition (Madison:

tion for me concerns the extent to which modernism and the avant-garde as forms of an adversary culture were nevertheless conceptually and practically bound up with capitalist modernization and/or with communist vanguardism, that modernization's twin brother. As I hope this essay will show, postmodernism's critical dimension lies precisely in its radical questioning of those presuppositions which linked modernism and the avantgarde to the mindset of modernization.

The Exhaustion of the Modernist Movement

Let me begin, then, with some brief remarks about the trajectory and migrations of the term 'postmodernism.' In literary criticism it goes back as far as the late 1950s when it was used by Irving Howe and Harry Levin to lament the levelling off of the modernist movement. Howe and Levin were looking back nostalgically to what already seemed like a richer past. 'Postmodernism' was first used emphatically in the 1960s by literary critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan who held widely divergent views of what a postmodern literature was. It was only during the early and mid-1970s that the term gained a much wider currency, encompassing first architecture, then dance, theater, painting, film and music. While the postmodern break with classical modernism was fairly visible in architecture and the visual arts, the notion of a postmodern rupture in literature has been much harder to ascertain. At some point in the late 1970s, 'postmodernism,' not without American prodding, migrated to Europe via Paris and Frankfurt. Kristeva and Lyotard took it up in France, Habermas in Germany. In the United States, meanwhile, critics had begun to discuss the interface of postmodernism with French poststructuralism in its peculiar American adaptation, often simply on the assumption that the avantgarde in theory somehow had to be homologous to the avantgarde in

University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), especially the new "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," pp. 259-271. — The debate about modernity and modernization in history and the social sciences is too broad to document here; for an excellent survey of the pertinent literature, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975). — On the question of modernity and the arts, see Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Eugene Lunnn, *Marxism and Modernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avantgarde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Also important for this debate is the recent work by cultural historians on specific cities and their culture, e.g., Carl Schorske's and Robert Waissenberger's work on fin-de-siècle Vienna, Peter Gay's and John Willett's work on the Weimar Republic, and, for a discussion of American anti-modernism at the turn of the century, T.J. Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

literature and the arts. While skepticism about the feasibility of an artistic avantgarde was on the rise in the 1970s, the vitality of theory, despite its many enemies, never seemed in serious doubt. To some, indeed, it appeared as if the cultural energies that had fueled the art movements of the 1960s were flowing during the 1970s into the body of theory, leaving the artistic enterprise high and dry. While such an observation is at best of impressionistic value and also not quite fair to the arts, it does seem reasonable to say that, with postmodernism's big-bang logic of expansion irreversible, the maze of the postmodern became ever more impenetrable. By the early 1980s the modernism/postmodernism constellation in the arts and the modernity/postmodernity constellation in social theory had become one of the most contested terrains in the intellectual life of Western societies. And the terrain is contested precisely because there is so much more at stake than the existence or non-existence of a new artistic style, so much more also than just the "correct" theoretical line.

Nowhere does the break with modernism seem more obvious than in recent American architecture. Nothing could be further from Mies van der Rohe's functionalist glass curtain walls than the gesture of random historical citation which prevails on so many postmodern façades. Take, for example, Philip Johnson's AT&T highrise, which is appropriately broken up into a neoclassical mid-section, Roman colonnades at the street level and a Chippendale pediment at the top. Indeed, a growing nostalgia for various life forms of the past seems to be a strong undercurrent in the culture of the 1970s and 1980s. And it is tempting to dismiss this historical eclecticism, found not only in architecture, but in the arts, in film, in literature and in the mass culture of recent years, as the cultural equivalent of the neoconservative nostalgia for the good old days and as a manifest sign of the declining rate of creativity in late capitalism. But is this nostalgia for the past, the often frenzied and exploitative search for usable traditions, and the growing fascination with pre-modern and primitive cultures — is all of this rooted only in the cultural institutions' perpetual need for spectacle and frill, and thus perfectly compatible with the status quo? Or does it perhaps also express some genuine and legitimate dissatisfaction with modernity and the unquestioned belief in the perpetual modernization of art? If the latter is the case, which I believe it is, then how can the search for alternative traditions, whether emergent or residual, be made culturally productive without yielding to the pressures of conservatism which, with a vise-like grip, lays claim to the very concept of tradition? I am not arguing here that all manifestations of the postmodern recuperation of the past are to be welcomed because somehow they are in tune with the *Zeitgeist*. I also don't want to

be misunderstood as arguing that postmodernism's fashionable repudiation of the high modernist aesthetic and its boredom with the propositions of Marx and Freud, Picasso and Brecht, Kafka and Joyce, Schönberg and Stravinsky are somehow marks of a major cultural advance. Where postmodernism simply jettisons modernism it just yields to the cultural apparatus' demands that it legitimize itself as radically new, and it revives the philistine prejudices modernism faced in its own time.

But even if postmodernism's own propositions don't seem convincing — as embodied, for example, in the buildings by Philip Johnson, Michael Graves and others — that does not mean that continued adherence to an older set of modernist propositions would guarantee the emergence of more convincing buildings or works of art. The recent neoconservative attempt to reinstate a domesticated version of modernism as the only worthwhile truth of 20th-century culture — manifest for instance in the 1984 Beckmann exhibit in Berlin and in many articles in Hilton Kramer's *New Criterion* — is a strategy aimed at burying the political and aesthetic critiques of certain forms of modernism which have gained ground since the 1960s. But the problem with modernism is not just the fact that it can be integrated into a conservative ideology of art. After all, that already happened once on a major scale in the 1950s.⁷ The larger problem we recognize today, it seems to me, is the closeness of various forms of modernism in its own time to the mindset of modernization, whether in its capitalist or communist version. Of course, modernism was never a monolithic phenomenon, and it contained *both* the modernization euphoria of futurism, constructivism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* and some of the starkest critiques of modernization in the various modern forms of "romantic anti-capitalism."⁸ The problem I address in this essay is not what modernism *really was*, but rather how it was perceived retrospectively, what dominant values and knowledge it carried, and how it functioned ideologically and culturally after World War II. It is a specific image of modernism that has become the bone of contention for the post-moderns, and that image has to be reconstructed if we want to understand postmodernism's problematic relationship to the modernist tradition and its claims to difference.

Architecture gives us the most palpable example of the issues at

7. On the ideological and political function of modernism in the 1950s cf. Jost Hermand, "Modernism Restored: West German Painting in the 1950s," *NGC*, 32 (Spring/Summer 1984); and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).

8. For a thorough discussion of this concept see Robert Sayre and Michel Löwy, "Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism," *NGC*, 32 (Spring/Summer 1984).

stake. The modernist utopia embodied in the building programs of the Bauhaus, of Mies, Gropius and Le Corbusier, was part of a heroic attempt after the Great War and the Russian Revolution to rebuild a war-ravaged Europe in the image of the new, and to make building a vital part of the envisioned renewal of society. A new Enlightenment demanded rational design for a rational society, but the new rationality was overlaid with a utopian fervor which ultimately made it veer back into myth — the myth of modernization. Ruthless denial of the past was as much an essential component of the modern movement as its call for modernization through standardization and rationalization. It is well-known how the modernist utopia shipwrecked on its own internal contradictions and, more importantly, on politics and history.⁹ Gropius, Mies and others were forced into exile, Albert Speer took their place in Germany. After 1945, modernist architecture was largely deprived of its social vision and became increasingly an architecture of power and representation. Rather than standing as harbingers and promises of the new life, modernist housing projects became symbols of alienation and dehumanization, a fate they shared with the assembly line, that other agent of the new which had been greeted with exuberant enthusiasm in the 1920s by Leninists and Fordists alike.

Charles Jencks, one of the most well-known popularizing chroniclers of the agony of the modern movement and spokesman for a postmodern architecture, dates modern architecture's symbolic demise July 15, 1972, at 3:32 p.m. At that time several slab blocks of St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe Housing (built by Minoru Yamasaki in the 1950s) were dynamited, and the collapse was dramatically displayed on the evening news. The modern machine for living, as Le Corbusier had called it with the technological euphoria so typical of the 1920s, had become unlivable, the modernist experiment, so it seemed, obsolete. Jencks takes pains to distinguish the initial vision of the modern movement from the sins committed in its name later on. And yet, on balance he agrees with those who, since the 1960s, have argued against modernism's hidden dependence on the machine metaphor and the production paradigm, and against its taking the factory as the primary model for all buildings. It has become commonplace in postmodernist circles to favor a reintroduction of multivalent symbolic dimensions into architecture, a mixing of codes, an appropriation of local vernaculars

9. For an excellent discussion of the politics of architecture in the Weimar Republic see the exhibition catalogue *Wem gehört die Welt: Kunst und Gesellschaft in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, 1977), pp. 38-157. Cf. also Robert Hughes, "Trouble in Utopia," in *The Shock of the New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 164-211.

and regional traditions.¹⁰ Thus Jencks suggests that architects look two ways simultaneously, "towards the traditional slow-changing codes and particular ethnic meanings of a neighborhood, and towards the fast-changing codes of architectural fashion and professionalism."¹¹ Such schizophrenia, Jencks holds, is symptomatic of the postmodern moment in architecture; and one might well ask whether it does not apply to contemporary culture at large, which increasingly seems to privilege what Bloch called *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* (non-synchronisms),¹² rather than favoring only what Adorno, the theorist of modernism par excellence, described as *der fortgeschrittenste Materialstand der Kunst* (the most advanced state of artistic material). Where such postmodern schizophrenia is creative tension resulting in ambitious and successful buildings, and where conversely, it veers off into an incoherent and arbitrary shuffling of styles, will remain a matter of debate. We should also not forget that the mixing of codes, the appropriation of regional traditions and the uses of symbolic dimensions other than the machine were never entirely unknown to the architects of the International Style. In order to arrive at his postmodernism, Jencks ironically had to exacerbate the very view of modernist architecture which he persistently attacks.

One of the most telling documents of the break of postmodernism with the modernist dogma is a book coauthored by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour and entitled *Learning from Las Vegas*. Rereading this book and earlier writings by Venturi from the 1960s today,¹³ one is struck by the proximity of Venturi's strategies and solutions to the pop sensibility of those years. Time and again the authors use pop art's break with the austere canon of high modernist painting and pop's uncritical espousal of the commercial vernacular of consumer culture as an inspiration for their work. What Madison Avenue was for Andy Warhol, what the comics and the Western were for Leslie Fiedler, the landscape of Las Vegas was for Venturi and his group. The rhetoric of *Learning from Las Vegas* is predicated on the glorification of the billboard strip and of the ruthless shlock of casino

10. The fact that such strategies can cut different ways politically is shown by Kenneth Frampton in his essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 23-38.

11. Charles A. Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), p. 97.

12. For Bloch's concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, see Ernst Bloch, "Non-Synchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics," and Anson Rabinbach's "Ernst Bloch's *Heritage of our Times* and Fascism," in *NGC*, 11 (Spring 1977), 5-38.

13. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972). Cf. also the earlier study by Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

culture. In Kenneth Frampton's ironic words, it offers a reading of Las Vegas as "an authentic outburst of popular phantasy."¹⁴ I think it would be gratuitous to ridicule such odd notions of cultural populism today. While there is something patently absurd about such propositions, we have to acknowledge the power they mustered to explode the reified dogmas of modernism and to reopen a set of questions which the modernism gospel of the 1940s and 1950s had largely blocked from view: questions of ornament and metaphor in architecture, of figuration and realism in painting, of story and representation in literature, of the body in music and theater. Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape, and from the beginning until today, the most significant trends within postmodernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture.

Postmodernism in the 1960s: An American Avantgarde?

I will now suggest a historical distinction between the postmodernism of the 1960s and that of the 1970s and early 1980s. My argument will roughly be this: 1960s' and 1970s' postmodernism both rejected or criticized a certain version of modernism. Against the codified high modernism of the preceding decades, the postmodernism of the 1960s tried to revitalize the heritage of the European avantgarde and to give it an American form along what one could call in short-hand the Duchamp-Cage-Warhol axis. By the 1970s, this avantgardist postmodernism of the 1960s had in turn exhausted its potential, even though some of its manifestations continued well into the new decade. What was new in the 1970s was, on the one hand, the emergence of a culture of eclecticism, a largely affirmative postmodernism which had abandoned any claim to critique, transgression or negation; and, on the other hand, an alternative postmodernism in which resistance, critique and negation of the status quo were redefined in non-modernist and non-avantgardist terms, terms which match the political developments in contemporary culture more effectively than the older theories of modernism. Let me elaborate.

What were the connotations of the term postmodernism in the 1960s? Roughly since the mid-1950s literature and the arts witnessed a rebellion of a new generation of artists such as Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Kerouac, Ginsberg and the Beats, Burroughs and Barthelme against the dominance of abstract expressionism, serial music and

14. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 290.

classical literary modernism.¹⁵ The rebellion of the artists was soon joined by critics such as Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan who all vigorously, though in very different ways and to a different degree, argued for the postmodern. Sontag advocated camp and a new sensibility, Fiedler sang the praise of popular literature and genital enlightenment, and Hassan — closer than the others to the moderns — advocated a literature of silence, trying to mediate between the “tradition of the new” and post-war literary developments. By that time, modernism had of course been safely established as the canon in the academy, the museums and the gallery network. In that canon the New York School of abstract expressionism represented the epitome of that long trajectory of the modern which had begun in Paris in the 1850s and 1860s and which had inexorably led to New York — the American victory in culture following on the heels of the victory on the battlefields of World War II. By the 1960s artists and critics alike shared a sense of a fundamentally new situation. The assumed postmodern rupture with the past was felt as a loss: art and literature’s claims to truth and human value seemed exhausted, the belief in the constitutive power of the modern imagination just another delusion. Or it was felt as a breakthrough toward an ultimate liberation of instinct and consciousness, into the global village of McLuhanacy, the new Eden of polymorphous perversity, *Paradise Now*, as the Living Theater proclaimed it on stage. Thus critics of postmodernism such as Gerald Graff have correctly identified two strains of the postmodern culture of the 1960s: the apocalyptic desperate strain and the visionary celebratory strain, both of which, Graff claims, already existed within modernism.¹⁶ While this is certainly true, it misses an important point. The ire of the postmodernists was directed not so much against modernism as such, but rather against a certain austere image of ‘high modernism,’ as advanced by the New Critics and other custodians of modernist culture. Such a view, which avoids the false dichotomy of choosing either continuity or discontinuity, is supported by a retrospective essay by John Barth. In a 1980 piece in *The Atlantic*, entitled “The Literature of Replenishment,” Barth criticizes his own 1968 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which seemed at the time to offer an adequate summary of the apocalyptic strain. Barth now suggests that what his earlier piece was really about “was the effective ‘exhaustion’ not of

15. I am mainly concerned here with the *Selbstverständnis* of the artists, and not with the question of whether their work really went beyond modernism or whether it was in all cases politically “progressive.” On the politics of the Beat rebellion see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), esp. pp. 52-67.

16. Gerald Graff, “The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough,” in *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), pp. 31-62.

language or of literature but of the aesthetic of high modernism.”¹⁷ And he goes on to describe Beckett’s *Stories and Texts for Nothing* and Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* as late modernist marvels, distinct from such postmodernist writers as Italo Calvino and Gabriel Marquez. Cultural critics like Daniel Bell, on the other hand, would simply claim that the postmodernism of the 1960s was the “logical culmination of modernist intentions,”¹⁸ a view which rephrases Lionel Trilling’s despairing observation that the demonstrators of the 1960s were practicing modernism in the streets. But my point here is precisely that high modernism had never seen fit to be in the streets in the first place, that its earlier undeniably adversary role was superseded in the 1960s by a very different culture of confrontation in the streets *and* in art works, and that this culture of confrontation transformed inherited ideological notions of style, form and creativity, artistic autonomy and the imagination to which modernism had by then succumbed. Critics like Bell and Graff saw the rebellion of the late 1950s and the 1960s as continuous with modernism’s earlier nihilistic and anarchic strain; rather than seeing it as a postmodernist revolt against classical modernism, they interpreted it as a profusion of modernist impulses into everyday life. And in some sense they were absolutely right, except that this “success” of modernism fundamentally altered the terms of how modernist culture was to be perceived. Again, my argument here is that the revolt of the 1960s was never a rejection of modernism *per se*, but rather a revolt against that version of modernism which had been domesticated in the 1950s, become part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times, and which had even been turned into a propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anti-communism. The modernism against which artists rebelled was no longer felt to be an adversary culture. It no longer opposed a dominant class and its world view, nor had it maintained its programmatic purity from contamination by the culture industry. In other words, the revolt sprang precisely from the success of modernism, from the fact that in the United States, as in West Germany and France, for that matter, modernism had been perverted into a form of affirmative culture.

I would go on to argue that the global view which sees the 1960s as part of the modern movement extending from Manet and Baudelaire, if not from romanticism, to the present is not able to account for the specifically American character of postmodernism. After all, the term accrued its emphatic connotations in the United States, not in Europe.

17. John Barth, “The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 245:1 (January 1980), 65-71.

18. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 51.

I would even claim that it could not have been invented in Europe at the time. For a variety of reasons, it would not have made any sense there. West Germany was still busy rediscovering its own moderns who had been burnt and banned during the Third Reich. If anything, the 1960s in West Germany produced a major shift in evaluation and interest from one set of moderns to another: from Benn, Kafka and Thomas Mann to Brecht, the left expressionists and the political writers of the 1920s, from Heidegger and Jaspers to Adorno and Benjamin, from Schönberg and Webern to Eisler, from Kirchner and Beckmann to Grosz and Heartfield. It was a search for alternative cultural traditions within modernity and as such directed against the politics of a depoliticized version of modernism, which had come to provide much needed cultural legitimation for the Adenauer restoration. During the 1950s, the myths of "the golden twenties," the "conservative revolution," and universal existentialist *Angst*, all helped block out and suppress the realities of the fascist past. From the depths of barbarism and the rubble of its cities, West Germany was trying to reclaim a civilized modernity and to find a cultural identity tuned to international modernism which would make others forget Germany's past as predator and pariah of the modern world. Given this context, neither the variations on modernism of the 1950s nor the struggle of the 1960s for alternative democratic and socialist cultural traditions could have possibly been construed as *post-modern*. The very notion of postmodernism has emerged in Germany only since the late 1970s and then not in relation to the culture of the 1960s, but narrowly in relation to recent architectural developments and, perhaps more importantly, in the context of the new social movements and their radical critique of modernity.¹⁹

In France, too, the 1960s witnessed a return to modernism rather than a step beyond it, even though for different reasons than in Germany, some of which I will discuss in the later section on poststructuralism. In the context of French intellectual life, the term 'post-modernism' was simply not around in the 1960s, and even today it

19. The specific connotations the notion of postmodernity has taken on in the German peace and anti-nuke movements as well as within the Green Party will not be discussed here, as this article is primarily concerned with the American debate. — In German intellectual life, the work of Peter Sloterdijk is eminently relevant for these issues, although Sloterdijk does not use the word "postmodern"; Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983). Equally pertinent is the peculiar German reception of French theory, especially of Foucault, Baudrillard, and Lyotard; see for example *Der Tod der Moderne. Eine Diskussion* (Tübingen: Konkursbuchverlag, 1983). On the apocalyptic shading of the postmodern in Germany see Ulrich Horstmann, *Das Untier. Konturen einer Philosophie der Menschenflucht* (Wien-Berlin: Medusa, 1983).

does not seem to imply a major break with modernism as it does in the U.S.

I would now like to sketch four major characteristics of the early phase of postmodernism which all point to postmodernism's continuity with the international tradition of the modern, yes, but which — and this is my point — also establish American postmodernism as a movement *sui generis*.²⁰

First, the postmodernism of the 1960s was characterized by a temporal imagination which displayed a powerful sense of the future and of new frontiers, of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict, an imagination reminiscent of earlier continental avantgarde movements such as Dada and surrealism rather than of high modernism. Thus the revival of Marcel Duchamp as godfather of 1960s postmodernism is no historical accident. And yet, the historical constellation in which the postmodernism of the 1960s played itself out (from the Bay of Pigs and the civil rights movement to the campus revolts, the anti-war movement and the counter-culture) makes this avantgarde specifically American, even where its vocabulary of aesthetic forms and techniques was not radically new.

Secondly, the early phase of postmodernism included an iconoclastic attack on what Peter Bürger has tried to capture theoretically as the "institution art." By that term Bürger refers first and foremost to the ways in which art's role in society is perceived and defined, and, secondly, to ways in which art is produced, marketed, distributed and consumed. In his book *Theory of the Avantgarde* Bürger has argued that the major goal of the historical European avantgarde (Dada, early surrealism, the postrevolutionary Russian avantgarde²¹) was to undermine, attack and transform the bourgeois institution art and its ideology of autonomy rather than only changing artistic and literary modes of representation. Bürger's approach to the question of art as institution in bourgeois society goes a long way toward suggesting useful distinctions between modernism and the avantgarde, distinctions which in turn can help us place the American avantgarde of the 1960s. In Bürger's account the European avantgarde was primarily an attack on the highness of high art and on art's separateness from everyday life

20. The following section will draw on arguments developed less fully in my earlier article entitled "The Search for Tradition: Avantgarde and Postmodernism in the 1970s," *NGC*, 22 (Winter 1981), 23-40.

21. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avantgarde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). The fact that Bürger reserves the term avantgarde for mainly these three movements may strike the American reader as idiosyncratic or as unnecessarily limited unless the place of the argument within the tradition of 20th-century German aesthetic thought from Brecht and Benjamin to Adorno is understood.

as it had evolved in 19th-century aestheticism and its repudiation of realism. Bürger argues that the avantgarde attempted to reintegrate art and life or, to use his Hegelian-Marxist formula, to sublimate art into life, and he sees this reintegration attempt, I think correctly, as a major break with the aestheticist tradition of the later 19th century. The value of Bürger's account for contemporary American debates is that it permits us to distinguish different stages and different projects within the trajectory of the modern. The usual equation of the avantgarde with modernism can indeed no longer be maintained. Contrary to the avantgarde's intention to merge art and life, modernism always remained bound up with the more traditional notion of the autonomous art work, with the construction of form and meaning (however estranged or ambiguous, displaced or undecidable such meaning might be), and with the specialized status of the aesthetic.²² The politically important point of Bürger's account for my argument about the 1960s is this: The historical avantgarde's iconoclastic attack on cultural institutions and on traditional modes of representation presupposed a society in which high art played an essential role in legitimizing hegemony, or, to put it in more neutral terms, to support a cultural establishment and its claims to aesthetic knowledge. It had been the achievement of the historical avantgarde to demystify and to undermine the legitimizing discourse of high art in European society. The various modernisms of this century, on the other hand, have either maintained or restored versions of high culture, a task which was certainly facilitated by the ultimate and perhaps unavoidable failure of the historical avantgarde to reintegrate art and life. And yet, I would suggest that it was this specific radicalism of the avantgarde, directed against the institutionalization of high art as a discourse of hegemony, that recommended itself as a source of energy and inspiration to the American postmodernists of the 1960s. Perhaps for the first time in American culture an avantgardist revolt against a tradition of high art and what was perceived as its hegemonic role made political sense. High art had indeed become institutionalized in the burgeoning museum, gallery, concert, record and paperback culture of the 1950s.

22. This difference between modernism and the avantgarde was one of the pivotal points of disagreement between Benjamin and Adorno in the 1930s, a debate to which Bürger owes a lot. Confronted with the successful fusion of aesthetics, politics and everyday life in fascist Germany, Adorno condemned the avantgarde's intention to merge art with life and continued to insist, in best modernist fashion, on the autonomy of art; Benjamin on the other hand, looking backward to the radical experiments in Paris, Moscow and Berlin in the 1920s, found a messianic promise in the avantgarde, especially in surrealism, a fact which may help explain Benjamin's strange (and, I think, mistaken) appropriation in the U.S. as a postmodern critic *avant la lettre*.

Modernism itself had entered the mainstream via mass reproduction and the culture industry. And, during the Kennedy years, high culture even began to take on functions of political representation with Robert Frost and Pablo Casals, Malraux and Stravinsky at the White House. The irony in all of this is that the first time the U.S. had something resembling an “institution art” in the emphatic European sense, it was modernism itself, the kind of art whose purpose had always been to resist institutionalization. In the form of happenings, pop vernacular, psychedelic art, acid rock, alternative and street theater, the postmodernism of the 1960s was groping to recapture the adversary ethos which had nourished modern art in its earlier stages, but which it seemed no longer able to sustain. Of course, the “success” of the pop avantgarde, which itself had sprung full-blown from advertising in the first place, immediately made it profitable and thus sucked it into a more highly developed culture industry than the earlier European avantgarde ever had to contend with. But despite such cooption through commodification the pop avantgarde retained a certain cutting edge in its proximity to the 1960s culture of confrontation.²³ No matter how deluded about its potential effectiveness, the attack on the institution art was always also an attack on hegemonic social institutions, and the raging battles of the 1960s over whether or not pop was legitimate art prove the point.

Thirdly, many of the early advocates of postmodernism shared the technological optimism of segments of the 1920s avantgarde. What photography and film had been to Vertov and Tretyakov, Brecht, Heartfield and Benjamin in that period, television, video and the computer were for the prophets of a technological aesthetic in the 1960s. McLuhan’s cybernetic and technocratic media eschatology and Hassan’s praise for “runaway technology,” the “boundless dispersal by media,” “the computer as substitute consciousness” — all of this combined easily with euphoric visions of a postindustrial society. Even if compared to the equally exuberant technological optimism of the 1920s, it is striking to see in retrospect how uncritically media technology and the cybernetic paradigm were espoused in the 1960s by conservatives, liberals and leftists alike.²⁴

23. Cf. my essay “The Cultural Politics of Pop,” *New German Critique*, 4 (Winter 1975), 77-97. From a different perspective, Dick Hebdige developed a similar argument about British pop culture at a talk he gave last year at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

24. The Left’s fascination with the media was perhaps more pronounced in Germany than it was in the U.S. Those were the years when Brecht’s radio theory and Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” almost became cult texts. See, for example, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien,” *Kursbuch*, 20 (March 1970), 159-186. Reprinted in H.M.E., *Palaver* (Frankfurt

The enthusiasm for the new media leads me to the fourth trend within early postmodernism. There emerged a vigorous, though again largely uncritical attempt to validate popular culture as a challenge to the canon of high art, modernist or traditional. This "populist" trend of the 1960s with its celebration of rock 'n roll and folk music, of the imagery of everyday life and of the multiple forms of popular literature gained much of its energy in the context of the counter-culture and by a next to total abandonment of an earlier American tradition of a critique of modern mass culture. Leslie Fiedler's incantation of the prefix "post" in his essay "The New Mutants" had an exhilarating effect at the time.²⁵ The postmodern harbored the promise of a "post-white," "post-male," "post-humanist," "post-Puritan" world. It is easy to see how all of Fiedler's adjectives aim at the modernist dogma and at the cultural establishment's notion of what Western Civilization was all about. Susan Sontag's camp aesthetic did much the same. Even though it was less populist, it certainly was as hostile to high modernism. There is a curious contradiction in all this. Fiedler's populism reiterates precisely that adversarial relationship between high art and mass culture which, in the accounts of Clement Greenberg and Theodor W. Adorno, was one of the pillars of the modernist dogma Fiedler had set out to undermine. Fiedler just takes his position on the other shore, opposite Greenberg and Adorno, as it were, validating the popular and pounding away at "elitism." And yet, Fiedler's call to cross the border and close the gap between high art and mass culture as well as his implied political critique of what later came to be called "eurocentrism" and "logocentrism" can serve as an important marker for subsequent developments within postmodernism. A new creative relationship between high art and certain forms of mass culture is, to my mind, indeed one of the major marks of difference between high modernism and the art and literature which followed it in the 1970s and 1980s both in Europe and the United States. And it is precisely the recent self-assertion of minority cultures and their emergence into public consciousness which has undermined the modernist belief that high and low culture have to be categorically kept apart; such rigorous segregation simply does not make much sense *within* a given minority culture which has always existed outside in the shadow of the dominant high culture.

In conclusion, I would say that from an American perspective the

am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974). The old belief in the democratizing potential of the media is also intimated on the last pages of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, not in relation to radio, film or television, but in relation to computers.

25. Leslie Fiedler, "The New Mutants" (1965), *A Fiedler Reader* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), pp. 189-210.

postmodernism of the 1960s had some of the makings of a genuine avantgarde movement, even if the overall political situation of 1960s' America was in no way comparable to that of Berlin or Moscow in the early 1920s when the tenuous and short-lived alliance between avantgardism and vanguard politics was forged. For a number of historical reasons the ethos of artistic avantgardism as iconoclasm, as probing reflection upon the ontological status of art in modern society, as an attempt to forge another life was culturally not yet as exhausted in the U.S. of the 1960s as it was in Europe at the same time. From a European perspective, therefore, it all looked like the endgame of the historical avantgarde rather than like the breakthrough to new frontiers it claimed to be. My point here is that American postmodernism of the 1960s was both: an American avantgarde *and* the endgame of international avantgardism. And I would go on to argue that it is indeed important for the cultural historian to analyze such *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* within modernity and to relate them to the very specific constellations and contexts of national and regional cultures and histories. The view that the culture of modernity is essentially internationalist — with its cutting edge moving in space and time from Paris in the later 19th and early 20th centuries to Moscow and Berlin in the 1920s and to New York in the 1940s — is a view tied to a teleology of modern art whose unspoken subtext is the ideology of modernization. It is precisely this teleology and ideology of modernization which has become increasingly problematic in our postmodern age, problematic not so much perhaps in its descriptive powers relating to past events, but certainly in its normative claims.

Postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s

In some sense, I might argue that what I have mapped so far is really the prehistory of the postmodern. After all, the term postmodernism only gained wide currency in the 1970s while much of the language used to describe the art, architecture and literature of the 1960s was still derived — and plausibly so — from the rhetoric of avantgardism and from what I have called the ideology of modernization. The cultural developments of the 1970s, however, are sufficiently different to warrant a separate description. One of the major differences, indeed, seems to be that the rhetoric of avantgardism has faded fast in the 1970s so that one can speak perhaps only now of a genuinely postmodern and post-avantgarde culture. Even if, with the benefit of hindsight, future historians of culture were to opt for such a usage of the term, I would still argue that the adversary and critical element in the notion of postmodernism can only be fully grasped if one takes the late 1950s as the starting point of a mapping of the postmodern. If we

were to focus only on the 1970s, the adversary moment of the post-modern would be much harder to work out precisely because of the shift within the trajectory of postmodernism that lies somewhere in the fault lines between "the '60s" and "the '70s."

By the mid-1970s, certain basic assumptions of the preceding decade had either vanished or been transformed. The sense of a "futurist revolt" (Fiedler) was gone. The iconoclastic gestures of the pop, rock and sex avantgardes seemed exhausted since their increasingly commercialized circulation had deprived them of their avantgardist status. The earlier optimism about technology, media and popular culture had given way to more sober and critical assessments: television as pollution rather than panacea. In the years of Watergate and the drawn-out agony of the Vietnam war, of the oil-shock and the dire predictions of the Club of Rome, it was indeed difficult to maintain the confidence and exuberance of the 1960s. Counter-culture, New Left and anti-war movement were ever more frequently denounced as infantile aberrations of American history. It was easy to see that the 1960s were over. But it is more difficult to describe the emerging cultural scene which seemed much more amorphous and scattered than that of the 1960s. One might begin by saying that the battle against the normative pressures of high modernism waged during the 1960s had been successful — too successful, some would argue. While the 1960s could still be discussed in terms of a logical sequence of styles (Pop, Op, Kinetic, Minimal, Concept) or in equally modernist terms of art versus anti-art and non-art, such distinctions have increasingly lost ground in the 1970s.

The situation in the 1970s seems to be characterized rather by an ever wider dispersal and dissemination of artistic practices all working out of the ruins of the modernist edifice, raiding it for ideas, plundering its vocabulary and supplementing it with randomly chosen images and motifs from pre-modern and non-modern cultures as well as from contemporary mass culture. Modernist styles have actually not been abolished, but, as one art critic recently observed, continue "to enjoy a kind of half-life in mass culture,"²⁶ for instance in advertising, record cover design, furniture and household items, science fiction illustration, window displays, etc. Yet another way of putting it would be to say that all modernist and avantgardist techniques, forms and images are now stored for instant recall in the computerized memory banks of our culture. But the same memory also stores all of pre-modernist art as well as the genres, codes and image worlds of popular cultures and modern mass culture. How precisely these enormously expanded

26. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art in the Seventies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 11.

capacities for information storage, processing and recall have affected artists and their work remains to be analyzed. But one thing seems clear: the great divide that separated high modernism from mass culture and that was codified in the various classical accounts of modernism no longer seems relevant to postmodern artistic or critical sensibilities.

Since the categorical demand for the uncompromising segregation of high and low has lost much of its persuasive power, we may be in a better position now to understand the political pressures and historical contingencies which shaped such accounts in the first place. I would suggest that the primary place of what I am calling the great divide was the age of Stalin and Hitler when the threat of totalitarian control over all culture forged a variety of defensive strategies meant to protect high culture in general, not just modernism. Thus conservative culture critics such as Ortega y Gasset argued that high culture needed to be protected from the "revolt of the masses." Left critics like Adorno insisted that genuine art resist its incorporation into the capitalist culture industry which he defined as the total administration of culture from above. And even Lukács, the left critic of modernism *par excellence*, developed his theory of high bourgeois realism not in unison with but in antagonism to the Zhdanovist dogma of socialist realism and its deadly practice of censorship.

It is surely no coincidence that the Western codification of modernism as canon of the 20th century took place during the 1940s and 1950s, preceding and during the Cold War. I am not reducing the great modernist works, by way of a simple ideology critique of their function, to a ploy in the cultural strategies of the Cold War. What I am suggesting, however, is that the age of Hitler, Stalin and the Cold War produced specific accounts of modernism, such as those of Clement Greenberg and Adorno,²⁷ whose aesthetic categories cannot be totally divorced from the pressures of that era. And it is in this sense, I would argue, that the logic of modernism advocated by those critics has

27. For a lucid discussion of Greenberg's theory of modern art in its historical context see T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry*, 9:1 (September 1982), 139-156. For a different view of Greenberg see Ingeborg Hoesterey, "Die Moderne am Ende? Zu den ästhetischen Positionen von Jürgen Habermas und Clement Greenberg," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 29:2 (1984). On Adorno's theory of modernism see Eugene Lunz, *Marxism and Modernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Peter Bürger, *Vermittlung — Rezeption — Funktion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), esp. pp. 79-92; Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdke, eds., *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie: Th.W. Adornos Konstruktion der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). Cf. also my essay "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner," *NGC*, 29 (Spring-Summer 1983), 8-38.

become an aesthetic dead end to the extent that it has been upheld as rigid guideline for further artistic production and critical evaluation. As against such dogma, the postmodern has indeed opened up new directions and new visions. As the confrontation between "bad" socialist realism and the "good" art of the free world began to lose its ideological momentum in an age of *détente*, the whole relationship between modernism and mass culture as well as the problem of realism could be reassessed in less reified terms. While the issue was already raised in the 1960s, e.g., in pop art and various forms of documentary literature, it was only in the 1970s that artists increasingly drew on popular or mass cultural forms and genres, overlaying them with modernist and/or avantgardist strategies. A major body of work representing this tendency is the New German Cinema, and here especially the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose success in the United States can be explained precisely in those terms. It is also no coincidence that the diversity of mass culture was now recognized and analyzed by critics who increasingly began to work themselves out from under the modernist dogma that all mass culture is monolithic Kitsch, psychologically regressive and mind-destroying. The possibilities for experimental meshing and mixing of mass culture and modernism seemed promising and produced some of the most successful and ambitious art and literature of the 1970s. Needless to say, it also produced aesthetic failures and fiascos, but then modernism itself did not only produce masterworks.

It was especially the art, writing, film making and criticism of women and minority artists with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture. Thus, we have come to see modernism's imaginary relationship to African and Oriental art as deeply problematic, and will approach, say, contemporary Latin American writers other than by praising them for being good modernists, who, naturally, learned their craft in Paris. Women's criticism has shed some new light on the modernist canon itself from a variety of different feminist perspectives. Without succumbing to the kind of feminine essentialism which is one of the more problematic sides of the feminist enterprise, it just seems obvious that were it not for the critical gaze of feminist criticism, the male determinations and obsessions of Italian futurism, Vorticism, Russian constructivism, Neue Sachlichkeit or surrealism would probably still be blocked from our view; and the writings of Marie Luise Fleisser and Ingeborg Bachmann, the

paintings of Frida Kahlo would still be known only to a handful of specialists. Of course such new insights can be interpreted in multiple ways, and the debate about gender and sexuality, male and female authorship and reader/spectatorship in literature and the arts is far from over, its implications for a new image of modernism not yet fully elaborated.

In light of these developments it is somewhat baffling that feminist criticism has so far largely stayed away from the postmodernism debate which is considered not to be pertinent to feminist concerns. The fact that to date only male critics have addressed the problem of modernity/postmodernity, however, does not mean that it does not concern women. I would argue — and here I am in full agreement with Craig Owens²⁸ — that women's art, literature and criticism are an important part of the postmodern culture of the 1970s and 1980s and indeed a measure of the vitality and energy of that culture. Actually, the suspicion is in order that the conservative turn of these past years has indeed something to do with the sociologically significant emergence of various forms of "otherness" in the cultural sphere, all of which are perceived as a threat to the stability and sanctity of canon and tradition. Current attempts to restore a 1950s version of high modernism for the 1980s certainly point in that direction. And it is in this context that the question of neo-conservatism becomes politically central to the debate about the postmodern.

Habermas and the Question of Neo-Conservatism

Both in Europe and the U.S., the waning of the 1960s was accompanied by the rise of neo-conservatism, and soon enough there emerged a new constellation characterized by the terms postmodernism and neo-conservatism. Even though their relationship was never fully elaborated, the Left took them to be compatible with each other or even identical, arguing that postmodernism was the kind of affirmative art that could happily coexist with political and cultural neo-conservatism. Until very recently, the question of the postmodern was simply not taken seriously on the Left,²⁹ not to speak of those traditionalists in the academy or the museum for whom there is still nothing new and worthwhile under the sun since the advent of modernism. The Left's ridiculing of postmodernism was of a piece with its often haughty and dogmatic critique of the counter-cultural impulses of the 1960s. Dur-

28. See Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 65-90.

29. It is with the recent publications by Fred Jameson and Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic* that things have begun to change.

ing much of the 1970s, after all, the thrashing of the 1960s was as much a pastime of the Left as it was the gospel according to Daniel Bell.

Now, there is no doubt that much of what went under the label of postmodernism in the 1970s is indeed affirmative, not critical, in nature, and often, especially in literature, remarkably similar to tendencies of modernism which it so vocally repudiates. But not all of it is simply affirmative, and the wholesale writing off of postmodernism as a symptom of capitalist culture in decline is reductive, unhistorical and all too reminiscent of Lukács' attacks on modernism in the 1930s. Can one really make such clear-cut distinctions as to uphold modernism, today, as the only valid form of 20th-century "realism,"³⁰ an art that is adequate to the *condition moderne*, while simultaneously reserving all the old epitheta — inferior, decadent, pathological — to postmodernism? And isn't it ironic that many of the same critics who will insist on this distinction are the first ones to declare emphatically that modernism already had it all and that there is really nothing new in postmodernism . . .

I would instead argue that in order not to become the Lukács of the postmodern by opposing, today, a "good" modernism to a "bad" postmodernism, we try to salvage the postmodern from its assumed total collusion with neo-conservatism wherever possible; and that we explore the question whether postmodernism might not harbor productive contradictions, perhaps even a critical and oppositional potential. If the postmodern is indeed a historical and cultural condition (however transitional or incipient), then oppositional cultural practices and strategies must be located *within* postmodernism, not necessarily in its gleaming façades, to be sure, but neither in some outside ghetto of a properly 'progressive' or a correctly 'aesthetic' art. Just as Marx analyzed the culture of modernity dialectically as bringing both progress and destruction,³¹ the culture of postmodernity, too, must be grasped in its gains as well as in its losses, in its promises as well as in its deprivations; and yet, it may be precisely one of the characteristics of the postmodern that the relationship between progress and destruction of cultural forms, between tradition and modernity can no longer be

30. Of course, those who hold this view will not utter the word "realism" as it is tarnished by its traditionally close association with the notions of "reflection," "representation," and a transparent reality; but the persuasive power of the modernist doctrine owes much to the underlying idea that only modernist art and literature are somehow adequate to our time.

31. For a work that remains very much in the orbit of Marx's notion of modernity and tied to the political and cultural impulses of the American 1960s see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). For a critique of Berman see David Bathrick's review essay in this issue.

understood today the same way Marx understood it at the dawn of modernist culture.

It was, of course, Jürgen Habermas' intervention which, for the first time, raised the question of postmodernism's relationship to neo-conservatism in a theoretically and historically complex way. Ironically, however, the effect of Habermas' argument, which identified the postmodern with various forms of conservatism, was to reinforce leftist cultural stereotypes rather than challenge them. In his 1980 Adorno-prize lecture,³² which has become a focal point for the debate, Habermas criticized both conservatism (old, neo and young) and postmodernism for not coming to terms either with the exigencies of culture in late capitalism or with the successes and failures of modernism itself. Significantly, Habermas' notion of modernity — the modernity he wishes to see continued and completed — is purged of modernism's nihilistic and anarchic strain just as his opponents', e.g., Lyotard's,³³ notion of an aesthetic (post)modernism is determined to liquidate any trace of the enlightened modernity inherited from the 18th century which provides the basis for Habermas' notion of modern culture. Rather than rehearsing the theoretical differences between Habermas and Lyotard one more time — a task which Martin Jay has performed admirably in a recent article on "Habermas and Modernism"³⁴ — I want to point to the German context of Habermas' reflections which is too readily forgotten in American debates, since Habermas himself refers to it only marginally.

Habermas' attack on postmodern conservatisms took place on the heels of the political *Tendenzwende* of the mid-1970s, the conservative backlash which has affected several Western countries. He could cite an analysis of American neo-conservatism without even having to belabor the point that the neo-conservative strategies to regain cultural hegemony and to wipe out the effect of the 1960s in political and cultural life are very similar in the FRG. But the national contingencies of Habermas' argument are at least as important. He was writing at the tail end of a major thrust of modernization of German cultural and political life which seemed to have gone awry sometime during the 1970s, producing high levels of disillusionment both with the utopian hopes and the pragmatic promises of 1968/69. Against the growing

32. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *NGC*, 22 (Winter 1981), 3-14. (Reprinted in Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*.)

33. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?," in *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 71-82.

34. Martin Jay, "Habermas and Modernism," *Praxis International*, 4:1 (April 1984), 1-14. Cf. in the same issue Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," 32-44.

cynicism, which has since then been brilliantly diagnosed and criticized in Peter Sloterdijk's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* as a form of "enlightened false consciousness,"³⁵ Habermas tries to salvage the emancipatory potential of enlightened reason which to him is the *sine qua non* of political democracy. Habermas defends a substantive notion of communicative rationality, especially against those who will collapse reason with domination, believing that by abandoning reason they free themselves from domination. Of course Habermas' whole project of a critical social theory revolves around a defense of enlightened modernity, which is *not* identical with the aesthetic modernism of literary critics and art historians. It is directed simultaneously against political conservatism (neo or old) and against what he perceives, not unlike Adorno, as the cultural irrationality of a post-Nietzschean aestheticism embodied in surrealism and subsequently in much of contemporary French theory. The defense of enlightenment in Germany is and remains an attempt to fend off the reaction from the Right.

During the 1970s, Habermas could observe how German art and literature abandoned the explicit political commitments of the 1960s, a decade often described in Germany as a "second enlightenment"; how autobiography and *Erfahrungstexte* replaced the documentary experiments in prose and drama of the preceding decade; how political poetry and art made way for a new subjectivity, a new romanticism, a new mythology; how a new generation of students and young intellectuals became increasingly weary of theory, left politics and social science, preferring instead to flock toward the revelations of ethnology and myth. Even though Habermas does not address the art and literature of the 1970s directly — with the exception of the late work of Peter Weiss, which is itself an exception — it seems not too much to assume that he interpreted this cultural shift in light of the political *Tendenzwende*. Perhaps his labelling of Foucault and Derrida as young conservatives is as much a response to German cultural developments as it is to the French theorists themselves. Such a speculation may draw plausibility from the fact that since the late 1970s certain forms of French theory have been quite influential, especially in the subcultures of Berlin and Frankfurt, among those of the younger generation who have turned away from critical theory made in Germany.

35. Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*. The first two chapters of Sloterdijk's essay appear in English in this issue. Sloterdijk himself tries to salvage the emancipatory potential of reason in ways fundamentally different from Habermas', ways which could indeed be called postmodern. For a brief, but incisive discussion in English of Sloterdijk's work see Leslie A. Adelson, "Against the Enlightenment: A Theory with Teeth for the 1980s," *German Quarterly*, 57:4 (Fall 1984), 625-631.

It would be only a small step, then, for Habermas to conclude that a post-modern, post-avantgarde art indeed fits in all too smoothly with various forms of conservatism, and is predicated on abandoning the emancipatory project of modernity. But to me, there remains the question of whether these aspects of the 1970s — despite their occasionally high levels of self-indulgence, narcissism and false immediacy — do not also represent a deepening and a constructive displacement of the emancipatory impulses of the 1960s. But one does not have to share Habermas' positions on modernity and modernism to see that he did indeed raise the most important issues at stake in a form that avoided the usual apologies and facile polemics about modernity and post-modernity.

His questions were these: How does postmodernism relate to modernism? How are political conservatism, cultural eclecticism or pluralism, tradition, modernity and anti-modernity interrelated in contemporary Western culture? To what extent can the cultural and social formation of the 1970s be characterized as postmodern? And, further, to what extent is postmodernism a revolt against reason and enlightenment, and at what point do such revolts become reactionary — a question heavily loaded with the weight of recent German history? In comparison, the standard American accounts of postmodernism too often remain entirely tied to questions of aesthetic style or poetics; the occasional nod toward theories of a postindustrial society is usually intended as a reminder that any form of Marxist or neo-Marxist thought is simply obsolete. In the American debate, three positions can be schematically outlined. Postmodernism is dismissed outright as a fraud and modernism held up as the universal truth, a view which reflects the thinking of the 1950s. Or modernism is condemned as elitist and postmodernism praised as populist, a view which reflects the thinking of the 1960s. Or there is the truly 1970s proposition that "anything goes," which is consumer capitalism's cynical version of "nothing works," but which at least recognizes that the older dichotomies no longer work. Needless to say, none of these positions ever reached the level of Habermas' interrogation.

However, there were problems not so much with the questions Habermas raised, as with some of the answers he suggested. Thus his attack on Foucault and Derrida as young conservatives drew immediate fire from poststructuralist quarters, where the reproach was turned around and Habermas himself was labelled a conservative. At this point, the debate was quickly reduced to the silly question: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the least conservative of us all?" And yet, the battle between "Frankfurters and French fries," as Rainer Nägele once referred to it, is instructive because it highlights two fundamentally dif-

ferent visions of modernity. The French vision of modernity begins with Nietzsche and Mallarmé and is thus quite close to what literary criticism describes as modernism. Modernity for the French is primarily — though by no means exclusively — an aesthetic question relating to the energies released by the deliberate destruction of language and other forms of representation. For Habermas, on the other hand, modernity goes back to the best traditions of the Enlightenment, which he tries to salvage and to reinscribe into the present philosophical discourse in a new form. In this, Habermas differs radically from an earlier generation of Frankfurt School critics, Adorno and Horkheimer who, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, developed a view of modernity which seems to be much closer in sensibility to current French theory than to Habermas. But even though Adorno and Horkheimer's assessment of the enlightenment was so much more pessimistic than Habermas',³⁶ they also held on to a substantive notion of reason and subjectivity which much of French theory has abandoned. It seems that in the context of the French discourse, enlightenment is simply identified with a history of terror and incarceration that reaches from the Jacobins via the *métarécits* of Hegel and Marx to the Soviet Gulag. I think Habermas is right in rejecting that view as too limited and as politically dangerous. Auschwitz, after all, did *not* result from too much enlightened reason — even though it was organized as a perfectly rationalized death factory — but from a violent anti-enlightenment and anti-modernity affect, which exploited modernity ruthlessly for its own purposes. At the same time, Habermas' turn against the French post-Nietzschean vision of *modernité* as simply anti-modern or, as it were, postmodern, itself implies too limited an account of modernity, at least as far as aesthetic modernity is concerned.

In the uproar over Habermas' attack on the French poststructuralists, the American and European neo-conservatives were all but forgotten, but I think we should at least take cognizance of what cultural neo-conservatives actually say about postmodernism. The answer is fairly simple and straightforward: they reject it and they think it is dangerous. Two examples: Daniel Bell, whose book on the postindustrial society has been quoted time and again as supporting sociological evidence by advocates of postmodernism, actually rejects postmodernism as a dangerous popularization of the modernist aesthetic. Bell's modernism only aims at aesthetic pleasure, immediate gratification and intensity of experience, all of which, to him, promote hedonism and anarchy. It is easy to see how such a jaundiced view of

36. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment' Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *NGC*, 26 (Spring-Summer 1982), 13-30.

modernism is quite under the spell of those “terrible” 1960s and cannot at all be reconciled with the austere high modernism of a Kafka, a Schönberg or a T.S. Eliot. At any rate, Bell sees modernism as something like an earlier society’s chemical waste deposits which, during the 1960s, began to spill over, not unlike Love Canal, into the mainstream of culture, polluting it to the core. Ultimately, Bell argues in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, modernism and postmodernism together are responsible for the crisis of contemporary capitalism.³⁷ Bell — a postmodernist? Certainly not in the aesthetic sense, for Bell actually shares Habermas’ rejection of the nihilistic and aestheticist trend within modernist/postmodernist culture. But Habermas may have been right in the broader political sense. For Bell’s critique of contemporary capitalist culture is energized by a vision of a society in which the values and norms of everyday life would no longer be infected by aesthetic modernism, a society which, within Bell’s framework, one might have to call post-modern. But any such reflection on neo-conservatism as a form of anti-liberal, anti-progressive postmodernity remains beside the point. Given the aesthetic force-field of the term postmodernism, no neo-conservative today would dream of identifying the neo-conservative project as postmodern.

On the contrary, cultural neo-conservatives often appear as the last-ditch defenders and champions of modernism. Thus in the editorial to the first issue of *The New Criterion* and in an accompanying essay entitled “Postmodern: Art and Culture in the 1980s,”³⁸ Hilton Kramer rejects the postmodern and counters it with a nostalgic call for the restoration of modernist standards of quality. Differences between Bell’s and Kramer’s accounts of modernism notwithstanding, their assessment of postmodernism is identical. In the culture of the 1970s, they will only see loss of quality, dissolution of the imagination, decline of standards and values, and the triumph of nihilism. But their agenda is not art history. Their agenda is political. Bell argues that postmodernism “undermines the social structure itself by striking at the motivational and psychic-reward system which has sustained it.”³⁹ Kramer attacks the politicization of culture which, in his view, the 1970s have inherited from the 1960s, that “insidious assault on the mind.” And like Rudi Fuchs and the 1982 Documenta, he goes on to shove art back into

37. Of course there is another line of argument in the book which *does* link the crisis of capitalist culture to economic developments. But I think that as a rendering of Bell’s polemical stance the above description is valid.

38. The Editors, “A Note on *The New Criterion*,” *The New Criterion*, 1:1 (September 1982), 1-5. Hilton Kramer, “Postmodern: Art and Culture in the 1980s,” *ibid.*, 36-42.

39. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 54.

the closet of autonomy and high seriousness where it is supposed to uphold the new criterion of truth. Hilton Kramer — a postmodernist? No, Habermas was simply wrong, it seems, in his linkage of the post-modern with neo-conservatism. But again the situation is more complex than it seems. For Habermas, modernity means critique, enlightenment and human emancipation, and he is not willing to jettison this political impulse because doing so would terminate left politics once and for all. Contrary to Habermas, the neo-conservative resorts to an established tradition of standards and values which are immune to criticism and change. To Habermas, even Hilton Kramer's neo-conservative defense of a modernism deprived of its adversary cutting edge would have to appear as post-modern, post-modern in the sense of anti-modern. The question in all of this is absolutely not whether the classics of modernism are or are not great works of art. Only a fool could deny that they are. But a problem does surface when their greatness is used as unsurpassable model and appealed to in order to stifle contemporary artistic production. Where that happens, modernism itself is pressed into the service of anti-modern resentment, a figure of discourse which has a long history in the multiple *querelles des anciens et des modernes*.

The only place where Habermas could rest assured of neo-conservative applause is in his attack on Foucault and Derrida. Any such applause, however, would carry the proviso that neither Foucault nor Derrida be associated with conservatism. And yet, Habermas was right, in a sense, to connect the postmodernism problematic with poststructuralism. Roughly since the late 1970s, debates about aesthetic postmodernism and poststructuralist criticism have intersected in the U.S. The relentless hostility of neo-conservatives to both post-structuralism and postmodernism may not prove the point, but it is certainly suggestive. Thus the February 1984 issue of *The New Criterion* contains a report by Hilton Kramer on the Modern Language Association's centennial convention last December in New York, and the report is polemically entitled "The MLA Centennial Follies." The major target of the polemic is precisely French poststructuralism and its American appropriation. But the point is not the quality or the lack thereof in certain presentations at the convention. Again, the real issue is a political one. Deconstruction, feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, all lumped together as undesirable aliens, are said to have subverted American intellectual life via the academy. Reading Kramer, the cultural apocalypse seems near, and there would be no reason for surprise if *The New Criterion* were soon to call for an import quota on foreign theory.

What, then, can one conclude from these ideological skirmishes for

a mapping of postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s? First, Habermas was both right and wrong about the collusion of conservatism and postmodernism, depending on whether the issue is the neo-conservative political vision of a post-modern society freed from all aesthetic, i.e., hedonistic, modernist and postmodernist subversions, or whether the issue is aesthetic postmodernism. Secondly, Habermas and the neo-conservatives are right in insisting that postmodernism is not so much a question of style as it is a question of politics and culture at large. The neo-conservative lament about the politicization of culture since the 1960s is only ironic in this context since they themselves have a thoroughly political notion of culture. Thirdly, the neo-conservatives are also right in suggesting that there are continuities between the oppositional culture of the 1960s and that of the 1970s. But their obsessive fixation on the 1960s, which they try to purge from the history books, blinds them to what is different and new in the cultural developments of the 1970s. And, fourthly, the attack on poststructuralism by Habermas and the American neo-conservatives raises the question of what to make of that fascinating interweaving and intersecting of poststructuralism with postmodernism, a phenomenon that is much more relevant in the U.S. than in France. It is to this question that I will now turn in my discussion of the critical discourse of American postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Poststructuralism: Modern or Postmodern?

The neo-conservative hostility toward both is not really enough to establish a substantive link between postmodernism and poststructuralism; and it may indeed be more difficult to establish such a link than it would seem at first. Certainly, since the late 1970s we have seen a consensus emerge in the U.S. that if postmodernism represents the contemporary "avantgarde" in the arts, poststructuralism must be its equivalent in "critical theory."⁴⁰ Such a parallelization is itself favored by theories and practices of textuality and intertextuality which blur the boundaries between the literary and the critical text, and thus it is not surprising that the names of the French *maîtres penseurs* of our time occur with striking regularity in the discourse on the postmodern.⁴¹

40. I follow the current usage in which the term "critical theory" refers to a multitude of recent theoretical and interdisciplinary endeavors in the humanities. Originally, Critical Theory was a much more focused term that referred to the theory developed by the Frankfurt School since the 1930s. Today, however, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School is itself only a part of an expanded field of critical theories, and this may ultimately benefit its reinscription in contemporary critical discourse.

41. The same is not always true the other way round, however. Thus American practitioners of deconstruction usually are not very eager to address the problem of the

On a superficial level, the parallels seem indeed obvious. Just as postmodern art and literature have taken the place of an earlier modernism as the major trend of our times, poststructuralist criticism has decisively passed beyond the tenets of its major predecessor, the New Criticism. And just as the New Critics championed modernism, so the story goes, poststructuralism — as one of the most vital forces of the intellectual life of the 1970s — must somehow be allied with the art and literature of its own time, i.e., with postmodernism.⁴² Actually, such thinking, which is quite prevalent if not always made explicit, gives us a first indication of how American postmodernism still lives in the shadow of the moderns. For there is no theoretical or historical reason to elevate the synchronism of the New Criticism with high modernism into norm or dogma. Mere simultaneity of critical and artistic discourse formations does not *per se* mean that they have to overlap, unless, of course, the boundaries between them are intentionally dismantled, as they are in modernist and postmodernist literature as well as in poststructuralist discourse.

And yet, however much postmodernism and poststructuralism in the U.S. may overlap and mesh, they are far from identical or even homologous. I do not question that the theoretical discourse of the 1970s has had a profound impact on the work of a considerable number of artists both in Europe and in the U.S. What I do question, however, is the way in which this impact is automatically evaluated in the U.S. as postmodern and thus sucked into the orbit of the kind of critical discourse that emphasizes radical rupture and discontinuity. Actually, both in France and in the U.S. poststructuralism is much closer to modernism than is usually assumed by the advocates of postmodernism. The distance that does exist between the critical discourses of the New Criticism and poststructuralism (a constellation which is only pertinent in the U.S., not in France) is not identical with the differences between modernism and postmodernism. I will argue that poststructuralism is primarily a discourse of and about modern-

postmodern. Actually, American deconstruction, such as practiced by the late Paul de Man, seems altogether unwilling to grant a distinction between the modern and the postmodern at all. Where de Man addresses the problem of modernity directly, as in his seminal essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity" in *Blindness and Insight*, he projects characteristics and insights of modernism back into the past so that ultimately all literature becomes, in a sense, essentially modernist.

42. A cautionary note may be in order here. The term poststructuralism is by now about as amorphous as 'postmodernism,' and it encompasses a variety of quite different theoretical endeavors. For the purposes of my discussion, however, the differences can be bracketed temporarily in order to approach certain similarities between different poststructuralist projects.

ism,⁴³ and that if we are to locate the postmodern in poststructuralism it will have to be found in the ways various forms of poststructuralism have opened up new problematics in modernism and have reinscribed modernism into the discourse formations of our own time.

Let me elaborate my view that poststructuralism can be perceived, to a significant degree, as a theory of modernism. I will limit myself here to certain points that relate back to my discussion of the modernism/postmodernism constellation in the 1960s and 1970s: the questions of aestheticism and mass culture, subjectivity and gender.

If it is true that postmodernity is a historical condition making it sufficiently unique and different from modernity, then it is striking to see how deeply the poststructuralist critical discourse — in its obsession with *écriture* and writing, allegory and rhetoric, and in its displacement of revolution and politics to the aesthetic — is embedded in that very modernist tradition which, at least in American eyes, it presumably transcends. What we find time and again is that American poststructuralist writers and critics emphatically privilege aesthetic innovation and experiment; that they call for self-reflexiveness, not, to be sure, of the author-subject, but of the text; that they purge life, reality, history, society from the work of art and its reception, and construct a new autonomy, based on a pristine notion of textuality, a new art for art's sake which is presumably the only kind possible after the failure of all and any commitment. The insight that the subject is constituted in language and the notion that there is nothing outside the text have led to the privileging of the aesthetic and the linguistic which aestheticism has always promoted to justify its imperial claims. The list of 'no longer possibles' (realism, representation, subjectivity, history, etc., etc.) is as long in poststructuralism as it used to be in modernism, and it is very similar indeed.

Much recent writing has challenged the American domestication of French poststructuralism.⁴⁴ But it is not enough to claim that in the transfer to the U.S. French theory lost the political edge it has in France. The fact is that even in France the political implications of certain forms of poststructuralism are hotly debated and in doubt.⁴⁵ It is not just the institutional pressures of American literary criticism which have depoliticized French theory; the aestheticist trend *within* post-

43. This part of the argument draws on the work about Foucault by John Rajchman, "Foucault, or the Ends of Modernism," *October*, 24 (Spring 1983), 37-62, and on the discussion of Derrida as a theorist of modernism in Jochen Schulte-Sasse's introduction to Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avantgarde*.

44. Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, Wallace Martin, eds., *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

45. See Nancy Fraser's article in this issue.

structuralism itself has facilitated the peculiar American reception. Thus it is no coincidence that the politically weakest body of French writing (Derrida and the late Barthes) has been privileged in American literature departments over the more politically intended projects of Foucault and Baudrillard, Kristeva and Lyotard. But even in the more politically conscious and self-conscious theoretical writing in France, the tradition of modernist aestheticism — mediated through an extremely selective reading of Nietzsche — is so powerful a presence that the notion of a radical rupture between the modern and the postmodern cannot possibly make much sense. It is furthermore striking that despite the considerable differences between the various poststructuralist projects, none of them seems informed in any substantial way by postmodernist works of art. Rarely, if ever, do they even address postmodernist works. In itself, this does not vitiate the power of the theory. But it does make for a kind of dubbing where the poststructuralist language is not in sync with the lips and movements of the postmodern body. There is no doubt that center stage in critical theory is held by the classical modernists: Flaubert, Proust and Bataille in Barthes; Nietzsche and Heidegger, Mallarmé and Artaud in Derrida; Nietzsche, Magritte and Bataille in Foucault; Mallarmé and Lautréamont, Joyce and Artaud in Kristeva; Freud in Lacan; Brecht in Althusser and Macherey, and so on *ad infinitum*. The enemies still are realism and representation, mass culture and standardization, grammar, communication and the presumably all-powerful homogenizing pressures of the modern State.

I think we must begin to entertain the notion that rather than offering a *theory of postmodernity* and developing an analysis of contemporary culture, French theory provides us primarily with an *archeology of modernity*, a theory of modernism at the stage of its exhaustion. It is as if the creative powers of modernism had migrated into theory and come to full self-consciousness in the poststructuralist text — the owl of Minerva spreading its wings at the fall of dusk. Poststructuralism offers a theory of modernism characterized by *Nachträglichkeit*, both in the psychoanalytic and the historical sense. Despite its ties to the tradition of modernist aestheticism, it offers a reading of modernism which differs substantially from those offered by the New Critics, by Adorno or by Greenberg. It is no longer the modernism of “the age of anxiety,” the ascetic and tortured modernism of a Kafka, a modernism of negativity and alienation, ambiguity and abstraction, the modernism of the closed and finished work of art. Rather, it is a modernism of playful transgression, of an unlimited weaving of textuality, a modernism all confident in its rejection of representation and reality, in its denial of the subject, of history, and of the subject of history; a modernism quite

dogmatic in its rejection of presence and in its unending praise of lacks and absences, deferrals and traces which produce, presumably, not anxiety but, in Roland Barthes' terms, *jouissance*, bliss.⁴⁶

But if poststructuralism can be seen as the *revenant* of modernism in the guise of theory, then that would also be precisely what makes it postmodern. It is a postmodernism that works itself out not as a rejection of modernism, but rather as a retrospective reading which, in some cases, is fully aware of modernism's limitations and failed political ambitions. The dilemma of modernism had been its inability, despite the best intentions, to mount an effective critique of bourgeois modernity and modernization. The fate of the historical avantgarde especially had proven how modern art, even where it ventured beyond art for art's sake, was ultimately forced back into the aesthetic realm. Thus the gesture of poststructuralism, to the extent that it abandons all pretense to a critique that would go beyond language games, beyond epistemology and the aesthetic, seems at least plausible and logical. It certainly frees art and literature from that overload of responsibilities — to change life, change society, change the world — on which the historical avantgarde shipwrecked, and which lived on in France through the 1950s and 1960s embodied in the figure of Jean Paul Sartre. Seen in this light, poststructuralism seems to seal the fate of the modernist project which, even where it limited itself to the aesthetic sphere, always upheld a vision of a redemption of modern life through culture. That such visions are no longer possible to sustain may be at the heart of the postmodern condition, and it may ultimately vitiate the poststructuralist attempt to salvage aesthetic modernism for the late 20th century. At any rate, it all begins to ring false when poststructuralism presents itself, as it frequently does in American writings, as the latest "avantgarde" in criticism, thus ironically assuming, in its institutional *Selbstverständnis*, the kind of teleological posturing which poststructuralism itself has done so much to criticize.

But even where such pretense to academic avantgardism is not the issue, one may well ask whether the theoretically sustained self-limitation to language and textuality has not been too high a price to pay; and whether it is not this self-limitation (with all it entails) which makes this poststructuralist modernism look like the atrophy of an earlier aestheticism rather than its innovative transformation. I say atrophy because the turn-of-the-century European aestheticism could still hope to establish a realm of beauty in opposition to what it perceived as the vulgarities of everyday bourgeois life, an artificial para-

46. 'Bliss' is an inadequate rendering of *jouissance* as the English term lacks the crucial bodily and hedonistic connotations of the French word.

dise thoroughly hostile to official politics and the kind of jingoism known in Germany as *Hurrapatriotismus*. Such an adversary function of aestheticism, however, can hardly be maintained at a time when capital itself has taken the aesthetic straight into the commodity in the form of styling, advertising and packaging. In an age of commodity aesthetics, aestheticism itself has become questionable either as an adversary or as a hibernating strategy. To insist on the adversary function of *écriture* and of breaking linguistic codes when every second ad bristles with domesticated avantgardist and modernist strategies strikes me as caught precisely in that very overestimation of art's transformative function for society which is the signature of an earlier, modernist, age. Unless, of course, *écriture* is merely practiced as a glass bead game in happy, resigned, or cynical isolation from the realm the uninitiated keep calling reality.

Take the later Roland Barthes.⁴⁷ His *The Pleasure of the Text* has become a major, almost canonical formulation of the postmodern for many American literary critics who may not want to remember that already twenty years ago Susan Sontag had called for an erotics of art intended to replace the stuffy and stifling project of academic interpretation. Whatever the differences between Barthes' *jouissance* and Sontag's erotics (the rigors of New Criticism and structuralism being the respective *Feindbilder*), Sontag's gesture, at the time, was a relatively radical one precisely in that it insisted on presence, on a sensual experience of cultural artifacts; in that it attacked rather than legitimized a socially sanctioned canon whose prime values were objectivity and distance, coolness and irony; and in that it licensed the flight from the lofty horizons of high culture into the netherlands of pop and camp.

Barthes, on the other hand, positions himself safely within high culture and the modernist canon, maintaining equal distance from the reactionary Right which champions anti-intellectual pleasures and the pleasure of anti-intellectualism, and the boring Left which favors knowledge, commitment, combat, and disdains hedonism. The Left may indeed have forgotten, as Barthes claims, the cigars of Marx and Brecht.⁴⁸ But however convincing cigars may or may not be as signifiers of hedonism, Barthes himself certainly forgets Brecht's constant and purposeful immersion in popular and mass culture. Barthes' very un-Brechtian distinction between *plaisir* and *jouissance* — which he

47. My intention is not to reduce Barthes to the positions taken in his later work. The American success of this work, however, makes it permissible to treat it as a symptom, or, if you will, as a "mythologie."

48. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 22.

simultaneously makes and unmakes⁴⁹ — reiterates one of the most tired topoi of the modernist aesthetic and of bourgeois culture at large: there are the lower pleasures for the rabble, i.e., mass culture, and then there is the *nouvelle cuisine* of the pleasure of the text, of *jouissance*. Barthes himself describes *jouissance* as a “mandarin praxis,”⁵⁰ as a conscious retreat, and he describes modern mass culture in the most simplistic terms as petit-bourgeois. Thus his appraisal of *jouissance* depends on the adoption of that traditional view of mass culture that the Right and the Left, both of which he so emphatically rejects, have shared over the decades.

This becomes even more explicit in *The Pleasure of the Text* where we read: “The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition: content, ideological schema, the blurring of contradictions — these are repeated, but the superficial forms are varied: always new books, new programs, new films, news items, but always the same meaning.”⁵¹ Word for word, such sentences could have been written by Adorno in the 1940s. But, then, everybody knows that Adorno’s was a theory of modernism, not of postmodernism. Or was it? Given the ravenous eclecticism of postmodernism, it has recently become fashionable to include even Adorno and Benjamin into the canon of postmodernists *avant la lettre* — truly a case of the critical text writing itself without the interference of any historical consciousness whatsoever. Yet the closeness of some of Barthes’ basic propositions to the modernist aesthetic could make such a rapprochement plausible. But then one might want to stop talking of postmodernism altogether, and take Barthes’ writing for what it is: a theory of modernism which manages to turn the dung of post-68 political disillusionment into the gold of aesthetic bliss. The melancholy science of Critical Theory has been transformed miraculously into a new “gay science,” but it still is, essentially, a theory of modernist literature.

Barthes and his American fans ostensibly reject the modernist notion of negativity replacing it with play, bliss, *jouissance*, i.e., with a critical form of affirmation. But the very distinction between the *jouissance* provided by the modernist, “writerly” text and the mere pleasure (*plaisir*) provided by “the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria,”⁵² reintroduces, through the back door, the same high culture/low cul-

49. See Tania Modleski, “The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory,” paper given at a conference on mass culture, Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, April 1984.

50. Barthes, p. 38.

51. Barthes, p. 41 f.

52. Barthes, p. 14.

ture divide and the same type of evaluations which were constitutive of classical modernism. The negativity of Adorno's aesthetic was predicated on the consciousness of the mental and sensual depravations of modern mass culture and on his relentless hostility to a society which needs such depravation to reproduce itself. The euphoric American appropriation of Barthes' *jouissance* is predicated on ignoring such problems and on enjoying, not unlike the 1984 yuppies, the pleasures of writerly connoisseurism and textual gentrification. That, indeed, may be a reason why Barthes has hit a nerve in the American academy of the Reagan years, making him the favorite son who has finally abandoned his earlier radicalism and come to embrace the finer pleasures of life, pardon, the text.⁵³ But the problems with the older theories of a modernism of negativity are not solved by somersaulting from anxiety and alienation into the bliss of *jouissance*. Such a leap diminishes the wrenching experiences of modernity articulated in modernist art and literature; it remains bound to the modernist paradigm by way of simple reversal; and it does very little to elucidate the problem of the postmodern.

Just as Barthes' theoretical distinctions between *plaisir* and *jouissance*, the readerly and the writerly text, remain within the orbit of modernist aesthetics, so the predominant poststructuralist notions about authorship and subjectivity reiterate propositions known from modernism itself. A few brief comments will have to suffice.

In a discussion of Flaubert and the writerly, i.e., modernist, text Barthes writes: "He [Flaubert] does not stop the play of codes (or stops it only partially), so that (and this is indubitably the proof of writing) *one never knows if he is responsible for what he writes* (if there is a subject *behind* his language); for the very being of writing (the meaning of the labor that constitutes it) is to keep the question *Who is speaking?* from ever being answered."⁵⁴ A similarly prescriptive denial of authorial subjectivity underlies Foucault's discourse analysis. Thus Foucault ends his influential essay "What Is an Author?" by asking rhetorically "What matter who's speaking?" Foucault's "murmur of indifference"⁵⁵ affects both the writing and the speaking subject, and the argument assumes its full polemical force with the much broader anti-humanist proposition,

53. Thus the fate of pleasure according to Barthes was extensively discussed at a forum of last year's MLA while an hour later, in a session on the future of literary criticism, various speakers extolled the emergence of a new historical criticism. This, it seems to me, marks an important line of conflict and tension in the current litcrit scene in the U.S.

54. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 140.

55. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *language, counter-memory, practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 138.

inherited from structuralism, of the “death of the subject.” But none of this is more than a further elaboration of the modernist critique of traditional idealist and romantic notions of authorship and authenticity, originality and intentionality, self-centered subjectivity and personal identity. More importantly, it seems to me that as a postmodern, having gone through the modernist purgatory, I would ask different questions. Isn’t the “death of the subject/author” position tied by mere reversal to the very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius, whether for marketing purposes or out of conviction and habit? Hasn’t capitalist modernization itself fragmented and dissolved bourgeois subjectivity and authorship, thus making attacks on such notions somewhat quixotic? And, finally, doesn’t poststructuralism, where it simply denies the subject altogether, jettison the chance of challenging the *ideology of the subject* (as male, white, and middle-class) by developing alternative and different notions of subjectivity?

To reject the validity of the question Who is writing? or Who is speaking? is simply no longer a radical position in 1984. It merely duplicates on the level of aesthetics and theory what capitalism as a system of exchange relations produces tendentially in everyday life: the denial of subjectivity in the very process of its construction. Poststructuralism thus attacks the appearance of capitalist culture — individualism writ large — but misses its essence; like modernism, it is always also in sync with rather than opposed to the real processes of modernization.

The postmoderns have recognized this dilemma. They counter the modernist litany of the death of the subject by working toward new theories and practices of speaking, writing and acting subjects.⁵⁶ The question of how codes, texts, images and other cultural artifacts constitute subjectivity is increasingly being raised as an always already historical question. And to raise the question of subjectivity at all no longer carries the stigma of being caught in the trap of bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideology; the discourse of subjectivity has been cut loose from its moorings in bourgeois individualism. It is certainly no accident that questions of subjectivity and authorship have resurfaced with a vengeance in the postmodern text. After all, it *does* matter who is

56. This shift in interest back to questions of subjectivity is actually also present in some of the later poststructuralist writings, for instance in Kristeva’s work on the symbolic and the semiotic and in Foucault’s work on sexuality. On Foucault see Biddy Martin, “Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault,” *NGC*, 27 (Fall 1982), 3-30. On the relevance of Kristeva’s work for the American context see Alice Jardine, “Theories of the Feminine,” *Enclitic*, 4:2 (Fall 1980), 5-15; and “Pre-Texts for the Transatlantic Feminist,” *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), 220-236. Cf. also Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), especially ch. 6 “Semiotics and Experience.”

speaking or writing.

Summing up, then, we face the paradox that a body of theories of modernism and modernity, developed in France since the 1960s, has come to be viewed, in the U.S., as the embodiment of the postmodern in theory. In a certain sense, this development is perfectly logical. Poststructuralism's readings of modernism are new and exciting enough to be considered somehow beyond modernism as it has been perceived before; in this way poststructuralist criticism in the U.S. yields to the very real pressures of the postmodern. But against any facile conflation of poststructuralism with the postmodern, we must insist on the fundamental non-identity of the two phenomena. In America, too, poststructuralism offers a theory of modernism, not a theory of the postmodern.

As to the French theorists themselves, they rarely speak of the postmodern. Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne*, we must remember, is the exception, not the rule.⁵⁷ What the French explicitly analyze and reflect upon is *le texte moderne* and *la modernité*. Where they talk about the postmodern at all, as in the cases of Lyotard and Kristeva,⁵⁸ the question seems to have been prompted by American friends, and the discussion almost immediately and invariably turns back to problems of the modernist aesthetic. For Kristeva, the question of postmodernism is the question of how anything can be written in the 20th century and how we can talk about this writing. She goes on to say that postmodernism is "that literature which writes itself with the more or less conscious intention of expanding the signifiable and thus the human realm."⁵⁹ With the Bataillean formulation of writing-as-experience of limits, she sees the major writing since Mallarmé and Joyce, Artaud and Burroughs as the "exploration of the typical imaginary relationship, that to the mother, through the most radical and problematic aspect of this relationship, language."⁶⁰ Kristeva's is a fascinating and novel approach to the question of modernist literature, and one that understands itself as a political intervention. But it does not yield much for an exploration of the differences between modernity and postmodernity. Thus it cannot surprise that Kristeva still shares with Barthes and the classical theorists of modernism an aversion to the media whose func-

57. Jean François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). English translation *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

58. The English translation of *La Condition Postmoderne* includes the essay, important for the aesthetic debate, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" For Kristeva's statement on the postmodern see "Postmodernism?" *Bucknell Review*, 25:11 (1980), 136-141.

59. Kristeva, "Postmodernism?" 137.

60. *Ibid.*, 139 f.

tion, she claims, is to collectivize all systems of signs thus enforcing contemporary society's general tendency toward uniformity.

Lyotard, who like Kristeva and unlike the deconstructionists is a political thinker, defines the postmodern, in his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," as a recurring stage within the modern itself. He turns to the Kantian sublime for a theory of the non-representable essential to modern art and literature. Paramount are his interest in rejecting representation, which is linked to terror and totalitarianism, and his demand for radical experimentation in the arts. At first sight, the turn to Kant seems plausible in the sense that Kant's autonomy aesthetic and notion of "disinterested pleasure" stands at the threshold of a modernist aesthetic, at a crucial juncture of that differentiation of spheres which has been so important in social thought from Weber to Habermas. And yet, the turn to Kant's sublime forgets that the 18th-century fascination with the sublime of the universe, the cosmos, expresses precisely that very desire of totality and representation which Lyotard so abhors and persistently criticizes in Habermas' work.⁶¹ Perhaps Lyotard's text says more here than it means to. If historically the notion of the sublime harbors a secret desire for totality, then perhaps Lyotard's sublime can be read as an attempt to totalize the aesthetic realm by fusing it with all other spheres of life, thus wiping out the differentiations between the aesthetic realm and the life-world on which Kant did after all insist. At any rate, it is no coincidence that the first moderns in Germany, the Jena romantics, built their aesthetic strategies of the fragment precisely on a rejection of the sublime which to them had become a sign of the falseness of bourgeois accommodation to absolutist culture. Even today the sublime has not lost its link to terror which, in Lyotard's reading, it opposes. For what would be more sublime and unrepresentable than the nuclear holocaust, the bomb being the signifier of an ultimate sublime. But apart from the question whether or not the sublime is an adequate aesthetic category to theorize contemporary art and literature, it is clear that in Lyotard's essay the postmodern as aesthetic phenomenon is not seen as distinct from modernism. The crucial historical distinction which Lyotard offers in *La Condition Postmoderne* is that between the *métarécits* of liberation (the French tradition of enlightened modernity) and of totality (the German Hegelian/Marxist tradition) on the one hand, and the modernist experimental discourse of language games on the other. Enlightened modernity and its presumable conse-

61. In fact, *The Postmodern Condition* is a sustained attack on the intellectual and political traditions of the Enlightenment embodied for Lyotard in the work of Jürgen Habermas.

quences are pitted against aesthetic modernism. The irony in all of this, as Fred Jameson has remarked,⁶² is that Lyotard's commitment to radical experimentation is politically "very closely related to the conception of the revolutionary nature of high modernism that Habermas faithfully inherited from the Frankfurt School."

No doubt, there are historically and intellectually specific reasons for the French resistance to acknowledging the problem of the postmodern as a historical problem of the late 20th century. At the same time, the force of the French rereading of modernism proper is itself shaped by the pressures of the 1960s and 1970s, and it has thus raised many of the key questions pertinent to the culture of our own time. But it still has done very little toward illuminating an emerging postmodern culture, and it has largely remained blind to or uninterested in many of the most promising artistic endeavors today. French theory of the 1960s and 1970s has offered us exhilarating fireworks which illuminate a crucial segment of the trajectory of modernism, but, as appropriate with fireworks, after dusk has fallen. This view is borne out by none less than Michel Foucault who, in the late 1970s, criticized his own earlier fascination with language and epistemology as a limited project of an earlier decade: "The whole relentless theorization of writing which we saw in the 1960s was doubtless only a swansong."⁶³ Swansong of modernism, indeed; but as such already a moment of the postmodern. Foucault's view of the intellectual movement of the 1960s as a swansong, it seems to me, is closer to the truth than its American rewriting, during the 1970s, as the latest avantgarde.

Whither Postmodernism?

The cultural history of the 1970s still has to be written, and the various postmodernisms in art, literature, dance, theater, architecture, film, video, and music will have to be discussed separately and in detail. All I want to do now is to offer a framework for relating some recent cultural and political changes to postmodernism, changes which already lie outside the conceptual network of "modernism/avantgardism" and have so far rarely been included in the postmodernism debate.⁶⁴

I would argue that the contemporary arts — in the widest possible sense, whether they call themselves postmodernist or reject that label — can no longer be regarded as just another phase in the sequence of modernist and avantgardist movements which began in Paris in the

62. Fredric Jameson, "Foreword" to Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. XVI.

63. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 127.

64. The major exception is Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 65-98.

1850s and 1860s and which maintained an ethos of cultural progress and vanguardism through the 1960s. On this level, postmodernism cannot be regarded simply as a sequel to modernism, as the latest step in the never-ending revolt of modernism against itself. The postmodern sensibility of our time is different from both modernism *and* avantgardism precisely in that it raises the question of cultural tradition and conservation in the most fundamental way as an aesthetic and a political issue. It doesn't always do it successfully, and often does it exploitatively. And yet, my main point about contemporary postmodernism is that it operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of tension which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress vs. reaction, Left vs. Right, present vs. past, modernism vs. realism, abstraction vs. representation, avantgarde vs. Kitsch. The fact that such dichotomies, which after all are central to the classical accounts of modernism, have broken down is part of the shift I have been trying to describe. I could also state the shift in the following terms: Modernism and the avantgarde were always closely related to social and industrial modernization. They were related to it as an adversary culture, yes, but they drew their energies, not unlike Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, from their proximity to the crises brought about by modernization and progress. Modernization — such was the widely held belief, even when the word was not around — had to be traversed. There was a vision of emerging on the other side. The modern was a world-scale drama played out on the European and American stage, with mythic modern man as its hero and with modern art as a driving force, just as Saint-Simon had envisioned it already in 1825. Such heroic visions of modernity and of art as a force of social change (or, for that matter, resistance to undesired change) are a thing of the past, admirable for sure, but no longer in tune with current sensibilities, except perhaps with an emerging apocalyptic sensibility as the flip side of modernist heroism.

Seen in this light, postmodernism at its deepest level represents not just another crisis within the perpetual cycle of boom and bust, exhaustion and renewal, which has characterized the trajectory of modernist culture. It rather represents a new type of crisis *of* that modernist culture itself. Of course, this claim has been made before, and fascism indeed was a formidable crisis *of* modernist culture. But fascism was never the alternative to modernity it pretended to be, and our situation today is very different from that of the Weimar Republic in its agony. It was only in the 1970s that the historical limits of modernism, modernity and modernization came into sharp focus. The growing sense that

we are not bound to *complete* the project of modernity (Habermas' phrase) and still do not necessarily have to lapse into irrationality or into apocalyptic frenzy, the sense that art is not exclusively pursuing some telos of abstraction, non-representation and sublimity — all of this has opened up a host of possibilities for creative endeavors today. And in certain ways it has altered our views of modernism itself. Rather than being bound to a one-way history of modernism which interprets it as a logical unfolding toward some imaginary goal, and which thus is based on a whole series of exclusions, we are beginning to explore its contradictions and contingencies, its tensions and internal resistances to its own "forward" movement. Postmodernism is far from making modernism obsolete. On the contrary, it casts a new light on it and appropriates many of its aesthetic strategies and techniques inserting them and making them work in new constellations. What has become obsolete, however, are those codifications of modernism in critical discourse which, however subliminally, are based on a teleological view of progress and modernization. Ironically, these normative and often reductive codifications have actually prepared the ground for that repudiation of modernism which goes by the name of the postmodern. Confronted with the critic who argues that this or that novel is not up to the latest in narrative technique, that it is regressive, behind the times and thus uninteresting, the postmodernist is right in rejecting modernism. But such rejection affects only that trend within modernism which has been codified into a narrow dogma, not modernism as such. In some ways, the story of modernism and postmodernism is like the story of the hedgehog and the hare: the hare could not win because there always was more than just one hedgehog. But the hare was still the better runner . . .

The crisis of modernism is more than just a crisis of those trends within it which tie it to the ideology of modernization. In the age of late capitalism, it is also a new crisis of art's relationship to society. At their most emphatic, modernism and avantgardism attributed to art a privileged status in the processes of social change. Even the aestheticist withdrawal from the concern of social change is still bound to it by virtue of its denial of the status quo and the construction of an artificial paradise of exquisite beauty. When social change seemed beyond grasp or took an undesired turn, art was still privileged as the only authentic voice of critique and protest, even when it seemed to withdraw into itself. The classical accounts of high modernism attest to that fact. To admit that these were heroic illusions — perhaps even necessary illusions in art's struggle to survive in dignity in a capitalist society — is not to deny the importance of art in social life.

But modernism's running feud with mass society and mass culture

as well as the avantgarde's attack on high art as a support system of cultural hegemony always took place on the pedestal of high art itself. And certainly that is where the avantgarde has been installed after its failure, in the 1920s, to create a more encompassing space for art in social life. To continue to demand today that high art leave the pedestal and relocate elsewhere (wherever that might be) is to pose the problem in obsolete terms. The pedestal of high art and high culture no longer occupies the privileged space it used to, just as the cohesion of the class which erected its monuments on that pedestal is a thing of the past; recent conservative attempts in a number of Western countries to restore the dignity of the classics of Western Civilization, from Plato via Adam Smith to the high modernists, and to send students back to the basics, prove the point. I am not saying here that the pedestal of high art does not exist any more. Of course it does, but it is not what it used to be. Since the 1960s, artistic activities have become much more diffuse and harder to contain in safe categories or stable institutions such as the academy, the museum or even the established gallery network. To some, this dispersal of cultural and artistic practices and activities will involve a sense of loss and disorientation; others will experience it as a new freedom, a cultural liberation. Neither may be entirely wrong, but we should recognize that it was not only recent theory or criticism that deprived the univalent, exclusive and totalizing accounts of modernism of their hegemonic role. It was the activities of artists, writers, film makers, architects, and performers that have propelled us beyond a narrow vision of modernism and given us a new lease on modernism itself.

In political terms, the erosion of the triple dogma modernism/modernity/avantgardism can be contextually related to the emergence of the problematic of "otherness," which has asserted itself in the socio-political sphere as much as in the cultural sphere. I cannot discuss here the various and multiple forms of otherness as they emerge from differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race and class, temporal *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* and spatial geographic locations and dislocations. But I want to mention at least four recent phenomena which, in my mind, are and will remain constitutive of postmodern culture for some time to come.

Despite all its noble aspirations and achievements, we have come to recognize that the culture of enlightened modernity has also always (though by no means exclusively) been a culture of inner and outer imperialism, a reading already offered by Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s and an insight not unfamiliar to those of our ancestors involved in the multitude of struggles against rampant modernization. Such imperialism, which works inside and outside, on the micro and

macro levels, no longer goes unchallenged either politically, economically or culturally. Whether these challenges will usher in a more habitable, less violent and more democratic world remains to be seen, and it is easy to be skeptical. But enlightened cynicism is as insufficient an answer as blue-eyed enthusiasm for peace and nature.

The women's movement has led to some significant changes in social structure and cultural attitudes which must be sustained even in the face of the recent grotesque revival of American machismo. Directly and indirectly, the women's movement has nourished the emergence of women as a self-confident and creative force in the arts, in literature, film and criticism. The ways in which we now raise questions of gender and sexuality, reading and writing, subjectivity and enunciation, voice and performance are unthinkable without the impact of feminism, even though many of these activities may take place on the margin or even outside the movement proper. Feminist critics have also contributed substantially to revisions of the history of modernism, not just by unearthing forgotten artists, but also by approaching the male modernists in novel ways. This is true also of the "new French feminists" and their theorization of the feminine in modernist writing, even though they often insist on maintaining a polemical distance from an American-type feminism.⁶⁵

During the 1970s, questions of ecology and environment have deepened from single-issue politics to a broad critique of modernity and modernization, a trend which is politically and culturally much stronger in West Germany than in the U.S. A new ecological sensibility manifests itself not only in political and regional subcultures, in alternative life-styles and the new social movements in Europe, but it also affects art and literature in a variety of ways: the work of Joseph Beuys, certain land art projects, Christo's California running fence, the new nature poetry, the return to local traditions, dialects, and so on. It was especially due to the growing ecological sensibility that the link between certain forms of modernism and technological modernization has come under critical scrutiny.

There is a growing awareness that other cultures, non-European, non-Western cultures must be met by means other than conquest or domination, as Paul Ricoeur put it more than twenty years ago, and that the erotic and aesthetic fascination with "the Orient" — so prominent in Western culture, including modernism — is deeply problematic. This awareness will have to translate into a type of intellectual

65. Cf. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). For a critical view of French theories of the feminine cf. the work by Alice Jardine cited in Footnote 56 and her essay "Gynesis," *diacritics*, 12:2 (Summer 1982), 54-65.

work different from that of the modernist intellectual who typically spoke with the confidence of standing at the cutting edge of time and of being able to speak for others. Foucault's notion of the local and specific intellectual as opposed to the "universal" intellectual of modernity may provide a way out of the dilemma of being locked into our own culture and traditions while simultaneously recognizing their limitations.

In conclusion, it is easy to see that a postmodernist culture emerging from these political, social and cultural constellations will have to be a postmodernism of resistance, including resistance to that easy postmodernism of the "anything goes" variety. Resistance will always have to be specific and contingent upon the cultural field within which it operates. It cannot be defined simply in terms of negativity or non-identity à la Adorno, nor will the litanies of a totalizing, collective project suffice. At the same time, the very notion of resistance may itself be problematic in its simple opposition to affirmation. After all, there are affirmative forms of resistance and resisting forms of affirmation. But this may be more a semantic problem than a problem of practice. And it should not keep us from making judgments. How such resistance can be articulated in art works in ways that would satisfy the needs of the political *and* those of the aesthetic, of the producers and of the recipients, cannot be prescribed, and it will remain open to trial, error and debate. But it is time to abandon that dead-end dichotomy of politics and aesthetics which for too long has dominated accounts of modernism, including the aestheticist trend within poststructuralism. The point is not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text, between engagement and the mission of art. The point is to heighten that tension, even to rediscover it and to bring it back into focus in the arts as well as in criticism. No matter how troubling it may be, the landscape of the postmodern surrounds us. It simultaneously delimits and opens our horizons. It's our problem and our hope.