nothing in them: ‘That’s bombast; that’s Hitler and Mussolini.’ His aim in philosophy, he remarks in the *Investigations*, is to ‘teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense’ (464): to demystify bombast, to return from the slippery ice where we cannot walk to the rough ground. Bertolt Brecht, in conversation with Walter Benjamin, referred to fascism as the ‘new ice age’. The icy language of metaphysics, which includes the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, produces a picture which ‘held us captive’. Who is held captive here? ‘Russell and the parsons have done infinite harm, infinite harm.’ But not only Russell and the parsons. Does Wittgenstein make reparation in the *Investigations* for the metaphysics, including the *Tractatus*, which have helped to hold captive Antonio Gramsci? ‘What is your aim in philosophy? - To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle’ (509). Who is this fly imprisoned in a fly-bottle, and how is he to be let out?

9.

**Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism**

In his article ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (*New Left Review* 146), Fredric Jameson argues that pastiche, rather than parody, is the appropriate mode of postmodernist culture. ‘Pastiche’, he writes, ‘is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.’ This is an excellent point; but I want to suggest here that parody of a sort is not wholly alien to the culture of postmodernism, though it is not one of which it could be said to be particularly conscious. What is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde. It is as though postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary, avant-gardism, one of whose major impulses, as Peter Bürger has convincingly argued in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, was to dismantle the institutional autonomy of art, erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble, unprivileged place within social practices as a whole. In the commodified artefacts of postmodernism, the avant-gardist dream of an integration of art and society returns in monstrously caricatured form; the tragedy of a Mayakovsky is played through once more, but this time as farce. It is as though postmodernism represents the cynical belated revenge wreaked
by bourgeois culture upon its revolutionary antagonists, whose utopian desire for a fusion of art and social praxis is seized, distorted and jeeringly turned back upon them as dystopian reality. Postmodernism, from this perspective, mimics the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant-garde, while remorselessly emptying it of its political content; Mayakovsky’s poetry readings in the factory yard become Warhol’s shoes and soup-cans.

I say it is as though postmodernism effects such a parody, because Jameson is surely right to claim that in reality it is sometimes blankly innocent of any such devious satirical impulse, and is entirely devoid of the kind of historical memory which might make such a disfiguring self-conscious. To place a pile of bricks in the Tate gallery once might be considered ironic; to repeat the gesture endlessly is sheer carelessness of any such ironic intention, as its shock value is inexorably drained away to leave nothing beyond brute fact. The depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, decathedced surfaces of postmodernist culture are not meant to signify an alienation, for the very concept of alienation must secretly posit a dream of authenticity which postmodernism finds quite unintelligible. Those flattened surfaces and hollowed interiors are not ‘alienated’ because there is no longer any subject to be alienated and nothing to be alienated from; ‘authenticity’ having been less rejected than merely forgotten. It is impossible to discern in such forms, as it is in the artefacts of modernist proper, a wry, anguished or derisive awareness of the normative traditional humanism they deface. If depth is metaphysical illusion, then there can be nothing ‘superficial’ about such art-forms, for the very term has ceased to have force. Postmodernism is thus a grisly parody of socialist utopia, having abolished all alienation at a stroke. By raising alienation to the second power, alienating us even from our own alienation, it persuades us to recognize that utopia not as some remote telos but, amazingly, as nothing less than the present itself, replete as it is in its own brute positivity and scarred through with not the slightest trace of lack. Reification, once it has extended its empire across the whole of social reality, effaces the very criteria by which it can be recognized for what it is and so triumphantly abolishes itself, returning everything to normality. The traditional metaphysical mystery was a question of depths, absences, foundations, abyssal explorations; the mystery of some modernist art is just the mind-bending truth that things are what they are, intriguingly self-identical, utterly shorn of cause, motive or ratification; postmodernism preserves this self-identity, but erases its modernist scandalousness. The dilemma of David Hume is surpassed by a simple confession: fact is value. Utopia cannot belong to the future because the future, in the shape of technology, is already here, exactly synchronous with the present. William Morris, in dreaming that art might dissolve into social life, turns out, it would seem, to have been a true prophet of late capitalism: by anticipating such a desire, bringing it about with premature haste, late capitalism deftly inverts its own logic and proclaims that if the artefact is a commodity, the commodity can always be an artefact. ‘Art’ and ‘life’ indeed interbreed – which is to say that art models itself upon a commodity form which is already invested with aesthetic allure, in a sealed circle. The eschaton, it would appear, is already here under our very noses, but so pervasive and immediate as to be invisible to those whose eyes are still turned stubbornly away to the past or the future.

The productivist aesthetics of the early twentieth-century avant-garde spurned the notion of artistic ‘representation’ for an art which would be less ‘reflection’ than material intervention and organizing force. The aesthetics of postmodernism is a dark parody of such anti-representationalism: if art no longer reflects, it is not because it seeks to change the world rather than mimic it, but because there is in truth nothing there to be reflected, no reality which is not itself already image, spectacle, simulacrum, gratuitous fiction. To say that social reality is pervasively commodified is to say that it is always already ‘aesthetic’ – textured, packaged, fetishized, libidinalized; and for art to reflect reality is then for it to do no more than mirror itself, in a cryptic self-referentiality which is indeed one of the innmost structures of the commodity fetish. The commodity is less an image in the sense of a ‘reflection’ than an image of itself, its entire material being devoted to its own self-presentation; and in such a condition the most authentically representational art becomes, paradoxically, the anti-representational artefact whose contingency and facticity figures the fate of all late capitalist objects. If the unreality of the artistic image mirrors the unreality of its society as a whole, then this is to say that it mirrors nothing real and so does not really mirror at all. Beneath this paradox lies the historical truth that the very autonomy and brute self-identity of the postmodernist artefact is the effect of...
against the grain of its thorough integration into an economic system where such autonomy, in the form of the commodity fetish, is the order of the day. To see art in the manner of the revolutionary avant-garde, not as institutionalized object but as practice, strategy, performance, production: all of this, once again, is grotesquely caricatured by late capitalism, for which, as Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out, the 'performativity principle' is really all that counts. In his *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard calls attention to capitalism's 'massive subordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance'; "The games of scientific language", he writes, 'become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right." It is not difficult, then, to see relation between the philosophy of J. L. Austin and IBM, or between the various neo-Nietzscheanisms of a post-structuralist epoch and Standard Oil. It is not surprising that classical models of truth and cognition are increasingly out of favour in a society where what matters is whether you deliver the commercial or rhetorical goods. Whether among discourse theorists or the Institute of Directors, the goal is no longer truth but performativity, not reason but power. The cat are in this sense spontaneous post-structuralists to a man, utterly disenchanted (did they but know it) with epistemological realism and the correspondence theory of truth. That this is so is no reason for pretending that we can relievedly return to John Locke or Georg Lukács; it is simply to recognize that it is not always easy to distinguish politically radical assaults on classical epistemology (among which the early Lukács must himself be numbered, alongside the Soviet avant-garde) from flagrantly reactionary ones. Indeed it is a sign of this difficulty that Lyotard himself, having grimly outlined the most oppressive aspects of the capitalist performativity principle, has really nothing to offer in its place but what amounts in effect to an anarcho version of that very same epistemology, namely the guerrilla skirmishes of a 'paralogism' which might from time to time induce ruptures, instabilities, paradoxes and micro-catastrophic discontinuities into this terroristic techno-scientific system. A 'good' pragmatics, in short, is turned against a 'bad' one; but it will always be a loser from the outset, since it has long since abandoned the Enlightenment's grand narrative of human emancipation, which we all now know to be disreputably metaphysical. Lyotard is in no doubt that '[socialist] struggles and their instruments have been transformed into regulators of the system' in all the reproduction. We are all, simultaneously and inextricably, modernists and traditionalists, terms which for de Man designate neither cultural movements nor aesthetic ideologies but the very structure of that duplicitous phenomenon, always in and out of time simultaneously, named literature, where this common dilemma figures itself with rhetorical self-consciousness. Literary history here, de Man contends, 'could in fact be paradigmatic for history in general'; and what this means, translated from de Manese, is that though we will never abandon our radical political illusions (the fond fantasy of emancipating ourselves from tradition and confronting the real eyeball-to-eyeball being, as it were, a permanent pathological state of human affairs), such actions will always prove self-defeating, will always be incorporated by a history which has foreseen them and seized upon them as ruses for its own self-perpetuation. The daringly 'radical' recourse to Nietzsche, that is to say, turns out to land one in a maturely liberal Democrat position, wryly sceptical but genially tolerant of the radical antics of the young.

What is at stake here, under the guise of a debate about history and modernity, is nothing less than the dialectical relation of theory and practice. For if practice is defined in neo-Nietzschean style as spontaneous error, productive blindness or historical amnesia, then theory can of course be no more than a jaded reflection upon its ultimate impossibility. Literature, that aporetic spot in which truth and error indissolubly entwine, is at once practice and the deconstruction of practice, spontaneous act and theoretical fact, a gesture which in pursuing an unmediated encounter with reality in the same instant interprets that very impulse as metaphysical fiction. Writing is both action and a reflection upon that action, but the two are ontologically disjunct; and literature is the privileged place where practice comes to know and name its eternal difference from theory. It is not surprising, then, that the last sentence of de Man's essay makes a sudden swerve to the political: 'If we extend this notion beyond literature, it merely confirms that the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars and revolutions.' A text which starts out with a problem in literary history ends up as an assault on Marxism. For it is of course Marxism above all which has insisted that actions may be theoretically informed and histories emancipatory, notions capable of scuppering de Man's entire case. It is only by virtue of an initial Nietzschean
dogmatism—practice is necessarily self-blinded, tradition necessarily impeding—that de Man is able to arrive at his politically quietistic aporias. Given these initial definitions, a certain judicious deconstruction of their binary opposition is politically essential, if the Nietzschean belief in affirmative action is not to license a radical politics; but such deconstruction is not permitted to transform the metaphysical truth that there is indeed a single dominant structure of action (blindness, error), and a single form of tradition (obfuscating rather than enabling an encounter with the 'real'). The Marxism of Louis Althusser comes close to this Nietzscheanism: practice is an 'imaginary' affair which thrives upon the repression of truly theoretical understanding, a reflection upon the necessary fictionality of such action. The two, as with Nietzsche and de Man, are ontologically disjunct, necessarily non-synchronous.

De Man, then, is characteristically rather more prudent about the possibilities of modernist experiment than the somewhat rashly celebratory Lyotard. All literature for de Man is a ruined or baffled modernism, and the institutionalization of such impulses is a permanent rather than political affair. Indeed it is part of what brings literature about in the first place, constitutive of its very possibility. It is as though, in an ultimate modernist irony, literature masters and pre-empts its own cultural institutionalization by textually introjecting it, hugging the very chains which bind it, discovering its own negative form of transcendence in its power of rhetorically naming, and thus partially distanciating, its own chronic failure to engage the real. The modernist work—indeed, all cultural artefacts—are such—is the one which knows that modernist (for which read also 'political') experiment is finally impotent. The mutual parasitism of history and modernity is de Man's own version of the post-structuralist deadlock of Law and Desire, in which the revolutionary impulse grows heady and delirious on its meagre prison rations.

De Man's resolute ontologizing and dehistoricizing of modernism, which is of a piece with the steady, silent anti-Marxist polemic running throughout his work, does at least give one pause to reflect upon what the term might actually mean. Perry Anderson, in his illuminating essay 'Modernity and Revolution' (New Left Review 144), concludes by rejecting the very designation 'modernism' as one 'completely lacking in positive content... whose only referent is the blank passage of time itself'. This impatient nominalism is to some degree understandable, given the elasticity of the concept; yet the very nebulousness of the word may be in some sense significant. 'Modernism' as a term at once expresses and mystifies a sense of one's particular historical conjuncture as being somehow peculiarly pregnant with crisis and change. It signifies a portentous, confused yet curiously heightened self-consciousness of one's own historical moment, at once self-doubting and self-congratulatory, anxious and triumphalistic together. It suggests at one and the same time an arresting and denial of history in the violent shock of the immediate present, from which vantage point all previous developments may be placidly consigned to the ashen of 'tradition', and a disorientating sense of history moving with peculiar force and urgency within one's immediate experience, pressing actual yet tantalizingly opaque. All historical epochs are modern to themselves, but not all live their experience in this ideological mode. If modernism lives its history as peculiarly, insistently present, it also experiences a sense that this present moment is somehow of the future, to which the present is nothing more than an orientation; so that the idea of the Now, of the present as full presence eclipsing the past, is itself intermittently eclipsed by an awareness of the present as determinant, as an empty excited openness to a future which is in one sense already here, in another sense yet to come. The 'modern', for most of us, is that which we have always to catch up with: the popular use of the term 'futuristic', to denote modernist experiment, is symptomatic of this fact. Modernism—and here Lyotard's case may be given some qualified credence—is not so much a punctual moment as a rivalry of epochs in the sense of an epochal shift in the very meaning and modality of temporality, a qualitative break in our ideological styles of living history. What seems to be moving in such moments is less 'history' than that which is unleashed by its rupture and suspension; and the typically modernist images of the vortex and the abyss, 'vertical' intrusions into temporality within which forces swirl restlessly in an eclipse of linear time, represent this ambivalent consciousness. So, indeed, does the Benjaminesque spatializing or 'constellating' of history, which at once brings it to a shocking standstill and shimmers with all the uneasiness of crisis or catastrophe.

High modernism, as Fredric Jameson has argued elsewhere, was born at a stroke with mass commodity culture. This is a fact about its internal form, not simply about its external history.
Modernism is among other things a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces which would degrade it to an exchangeable object. To this extent, modernist works are in contradiction with their own material status, self-divided phenomena which deny in their discursive forms their own shabby economic reality. To fend off such reduction to commodity status, the modernist work brackets off the referent or real historical world, thickens its textures and deranges its forms to forestall instant consumability, and draws its own language protectively around it to become a mysteriously autotelic object, free of all contaminating truck with the real. Brooding self-reflexively on its own being, it distances itself through irony from the shame of being no more than a brute, self-identical thing. But the most devastating irony of all is that in doing this the modernist work escapes from one form of commodification only to fall prey to another. If it avoids the humiliation of becoming an abstract, serialized, instantly exchangeable thing, it does so only by virtue of reproducing that other side of the commodity which is its fetishism. The autonomous, self-regarding, impenetrable modernist artefact, in all its isolated splendour, is the commodity as fetish resisting the commodity as exchange, its solution to commodification part of that very problem.

It is on the rock of such contradictions that the whole modernist project will finally founder. In bracketing off the real social world, establishing a critical, negating distance between itself and the ruling social order, modernism must simultaneously bracket off the political forces which seek to transform that order. There is indeed a political modernism – what else is Bertolt Brecht? – but it is hardly characteristic of the movement as a whole. Moreover, by removing itself from society into its own impermeable space, the modernist work paradoxically reproduces – indeed intensifies – the very illusion of aesthetic autonomy which marks the bourgeois humanist order it also protests against. Modernist works are after all 'works', discrete and bounded entities for all the free play within them, which is just what the bourgeois art institution understands. The revolutionary avant garde, alive to this dilemma, were defeated at the hands of political history. Postmodernism, confronted with this situation, will then take the other way out. If the work of art really is a commodity then it might as well admit it, with all the sang froid it can muster. Rather than languish in some intolerable conflict between its material reality and its aesthetic structure, it can always collapse that conflict on one side, becoming aesthetically what it is economically. The modernist refication – the art work as isolated fetish – is therefore exchanged for the refication of everyday life in the capitalist marketplace. The commodity as mechanically reproducible exchange ousts the commodity as magical aura. In a sardonic commentary on the avant-garde work, postmodernist culture will dissolve its own boundaries and become coextensive with ordinary commodified life itself, whose ceaseless exchanges and mutations in any case recognize no formal frontiers which are not constantly transgressed. If all artefacts can be appropriated by the ruling order, then better impudently to pre-empt this fate than suffer it unwillingly; only that which is already a commodity can resist commodification. If the high modernist work has been institutionalized within the superstructure, postmodernist culture will react demotically to such elitism by installing itself within the base. Better, as Brecht remarked, to start from the 'bad new things', rather than from the 'good old ones'.

That, however, is also where postmodernism stops. Brecht's comment alludes to the Marxist habit of extracting the progressive moment from an otherwise unpalatable or ambivalent reality, a habit well exemplified by the early avant-garde's espousal of a technology able both to emancipate and enslave. At a later, less euphoric stage of technological capitalism, the postmodernism which celebrates kitsch and camp caricatures the Brechtian slogan by proclaiming not that the bad contains the good, but that the bad is good – or rather that both of these metaphysical terms have now been decisively outmoded by a social order which is to be neither affirmed nor denounced but simply accepted. From where, in a fully reified world, would we derive the Criteria by which acts of affirmation or denunciation would be possible? Certainly not from history, which postmodernism must at all costs face, or spatialize to a range of possible styles, if it is to persuade us to forget that we have ever known or could know any alternative to itself. Such forgetting, as with the healthy amnesiac animal of Nietzsche and his contemporary acolytes, is value: value lies not in this or that discrimination within contemporary experience but in the very capacity to stop our ears to the Siren calls of history and confront the contemporary for what it is, in all its blank immediacy. Ethical or political discrimination would extinguish the
contemporary simply by mediating it, sever its self-identity, put us prior or posterior to it; value is just that which is, the erasure and overcoming of history, and discourses of value, which cannot fail to be historical, are therefore by definition valueless. It is for this reason that postmodernist theory is hostile to the hermeneutic, and nowhere more virulently than in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus. In post-1968 Paris, an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with the real still seemed on the cards, if only the obfuscatory mediations of Marx and Freud could be abandoned. For Deleuze and Guattari, that ‘real’ is desire, which in a full-blown metaphysical positivism ‘can never be deceived’, needs no interpretation and simply is. In this apodicticism of desire, of which the schizophrenic is hero, there can be no place for political discourse proper, for such discourse is exactly the ceaseless labour of interpretation of desire, a labour of interpretation which does not leave its object untouched. For Deleuze and Guattari, any such move renders desire vulnerable to the metaphysical traps of meaning. But that interpretation of desire which is the political is necessary precisely because desire is not a single, supremely positive entity; and it is Deleuze and Guattari, for all their insistence upon desire’s diffuse and perverse manifestations, who are the true metaphysicians in holding to such a conception of desire. Theory and practice are once more ontologically at odds, since the schizoid hero of the revolutionary drama is by definition unable to reflect upon his own condition, needing Parisian intellectuals to do it for him. The only ‘revolution’ conceivable, given such a protagonist, is disorder; and Deleuze and Guattari significantly use the two terms synonymously, in the most banal anarchist rhetoric.

In some postmodernist theory, the injunction to glimpse the good in the bad has been pursued with a vengeance. Capitalist technology can be viewed as an immense desire machine, an enormous circuit of messages and exchanges in which pluralistic idioms proliferate and random objects, bodies, surfaces come to glow with libidinal intensity. ‘The interesting thing’, writes Lyotard in his Economie libidinale, ‘would be to stay where we are – but to grab without noise all opportunities to function as bodies and good conductors of intensities. No need of declarations, manifestos, organizations; not even for exemplary actions. To let dissimulation play in favour of intensities.’ It is all rather closer to Walter Pater than to Walter Benjamin. Of course capitalism is not uncritically endorsed by such theory, for its libidinal flows are subject to a tyrannical ethical, semiotic and juridical order; what is wrong with late capitalism is not this or that desire, but the fact that desire does not circulate freely enough. But if only we could kick our metaphysical nostalgia for truth, meaning and history, of which Marxism is perhaps the prototype, we might come to recognise that desire is here and now, fragments and surfaces all we ever have, itskts quite as good as the real thing because there is in fact no real thing. What is amiss with old-fashioned modernism, from this perspective, is just the fact that it obstinately refuses to abandon the struggle for meaning. It is still agonizedly caught up in metaphysical depth and wretchedness, still able to experience psychic fragmentation and social alienation as spiritually wounded, and so embarrassingly enmortgaged to the very bourgeois humanism it otherwise seeks to subvert. Postmodernism, confidently post-metaphysical, has outlined all that fantasy of interiority, that pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depths; it embraces instead the mystical positivism of the early Wittgenstein, for which the world – would you believe it? – just is the way it is and not some other way. As with the early Wittgenstein, there cannot be a rational discourse of ethical or political value, for values are not the kind of thing which can be in the world in the first place, any more than the eye can be part of the field of vision. The dispersed, schizoid subject is nothing to be alarmed about after all: nothing could be more normative in late capitalist experience. Modernism appears in this light as a deviation still enthralled to a norm, parastic on what it sets out to deconstruct. But if we are now posterior to such metaphysical humanism there is really nothing left to struggle against, other than those inherited illusions (law, ethics, class struggle, the Oedipus complex) which prevent us from seeing things as they are.

But the fact that modernism continues to struggle for meaning is exactly what makes it so interesting. For this struggle continually drives it towards classical styles of sense-making which are at once unacceptable and inescapable, traditional matrices of meaning which have become progressively empty, but which nevertheless continue to exert their implacable force. It is in just this way that Walter Benjamin reads Franz Kafka, whose fiction inherits the form of a traditional storytelling without its truth contents. A whole traditional ideology of representation is in crisis, yet this does not mean that the search for truth is abandoned. Postmodernism, by contrast, commits the
apocalyptic error of believing that the discrediting of this particular representational epistemology is the death of truth itself, just as it sometimes mistakes the disintegration of certain traditional ideologies of the subject for the subject's final disappearance. In both cases, the obituary notices are greatly exaggerated. Postmodernism persuades us to relinquish our epistemological paranoia and embrace the brute objectivity of random subjectivity; modernism, more productively, is torn by the contradictions between a still ineluctable bourgeois humanism and the pressures of a quite different rationality, which, still newly emergent, is not even able to name itself. If modernism's underminings of a traditional humanism are at once anguished and exhilarated, it is in part because there are few more intractable problems in the modern epoch than of distinguishing between those critiques of classical rationality which are potentially progressive, and those which are irrationalist in the worst sense. It is the choice, so to speak, between feminism and fascism; and in any particular conjuncture the question of what counts as a revolutionary rather than barbarous break with the dominant Western ideologies of reason and humanity is sometimes undecided. There is a difference, for example, between the 'meaninglessness' fostered by some postmodernism, and the 'meaninglessness' deliberately injected by some trends of avant-garde culture into bourgeois normality.

The contradiction of modernism in this respect is that in order valuably to deconstruct the unified subject of bourgeois humanism, it draws upon key negative aspects of the actual experience of such subjects in late bourgeois society, which often enough does not at all correspond to the official ideological version. It thus pits what is increasingly felt to be the phenomenological reality of capitalism against its formal ideologies, and in doing so finds that it can fully embrace neither. The phenomenological reality of the subject throws formal humanist ideology into question, while the persistence of that ideology is precisely what enables the phenomenological reality to be characterized as negative. Modernism thus dramatises in its very internal structures a crucial contradiction in the ideology of the subject, the force of which we can appreciate if we ask ourselves in what sense the bourgeois humanist conception of the subject as free, active, autonomous and self-identical is a workable or appropriate ideology for late capitalist society. The answer would seem to be that in one sense such an ideology is highly appropriate to such social conditions, and in another sense hardly at all. This ambiguity is overlooked by those poststructuralist theorists who appear to stake all on the assumption that the 'unified subject' is indeed an integral part of contemporary bourgeois ideology, and is thus ripe for urgent deconstruction. Against such a view, it is surely arguable that late capitalism has deconstructed such a subject much more efficiently than meditations on écriture. As postmodernist culture attests, the contemporary subject may be less the strenuous monadic agent of an earlier phase of capitalist ideology than a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of which act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion. The 'unified subject' looms up in this light as more and more of a shibboleth or straw target, a hangover from an older liberal epoch of capitalism, before technology and consumerism scattered our bodies to the winds as so many bits and pieces of reified technique, appetite, mechanical operation or reflex of desire.

If this were wholly true, of course, postmodernist culture would be triumphantly vindicated: the unthinkable or the utopian, depending upon one's perspective, would already have happened. But the bourgeois humanist subject is not in fact simply part of a clapped-out history we can all agreeably or reluctantly leave behind: if it is an increasingly inappropriate model at certain levels of subjecthood, it remains a potently relevant one at others. Consider, for example, the condition of being a father and a consumer. The former role, duty, autonomy, authority, responsibility; the latter, while not wholly free of such strictures, puts them into significant question. The two roles are not of course merely disjunct; but though relations between them are practically negotiable, capitalism's current ideal consumer is strictly incompatible with its current ideal parent. The subject of late capitalism, in other words, is neither simply the self-regulating synthetic agent posited by classical humanist ideology, nor merely a decentred network of desire, but a contradictory amalgam of the two. The constitution of such a subject at the ethical, juridical and political levels is not wholly continuous with its constitution as a consuming or 'mass cultural' unit. 'Eclecticism', writes Lyotard, 'is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a
against the grain.

Western, eats MacDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for
dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in
Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter of TV games.** It is not just
that there are millions of other human subjects, less exotic than
Lyotard's jet-setters, who educate their children, vote as repons-
sible citizens, withdraw their labour and clock in for work; it is
also that many subjects live more and more at the points of
contradictory intersection between these two definitions.

This was also, in some sense, the site which modernism occu-
pied, trusting as it still did to an emceland, however, be less and less articulated in traditional ide-
ological terms. It could expose the limits of such terms with styles
of subjective experience they could not encompass; but it also
remembered that language sufficiently to submit the definitively 'modern' condition to implicitly critical treatment. Whatever the
blandishments of postmodernism, this is in my view the site of
contradiction we still inhabit; and the most valuable forms of
post-structuralism are therefore those which, as with much of
Jacques Derrida's writing, refuse to credit the absurdity that we
could ever simply have jettisoned the 'metaphysical' like a cast-
off overcoat. The new post-metaphysical subject proposed by
Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, the Unmensch emptied of
all bourgeois interiority to become the faceless mobile function-
ary of revolutionary struggle, is at once a valuable metaphor for
thinking ourselves beyond Proust, and too uncomfortably close
to the faceless functionaries of advanced capitalism to be
uncritically endorsed. In a similar way, the aesthetics of the
revolutionary avant-garde break with the contemplative monad
of bourgeois culture with their clarion call of 'production', only
to rejoin in some respects the labouring or manufacturing
subject of bourgeois utilitarianism. We are still, perhaps, poised
as precariously as Benjamin's Baufeldarian flaneur between the
rapidly fading aura of the old humanist subject, and the ambiva-
ently energizing and repellent shapes of a city landscape.

Postmodernism takes something from both modernism and
the avant-garde, and in a sense plays one off against the other.
From modernism proper, postmodernism inherits the fragment-
ary or schizoid self, but eradicates all critical distance from it.
Countering this with a pokerfaced presentation of 'bizarre' ex-
periences which resembles certain avant-garde gestures. From
the avant-garde, postmodernism takes the dissolution of art into
social life, the rejection of tradition, an opposition to high

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culture as such, but crosses this with the unpolitical impulses of
modernism. It thus unwittingly exposes the residual formalism
of any radical art form which identifies the de-institutionaliza-
tion of art, and its reintegration with other social practices, as an
intrinsically revolutionary move. For the question, rather, is
under what conditions and with what likely effects such a re-
integration may be attempted. An authentically political art in
our own time might similarly draw upon both modernism and
the avant-garde, but in a different combination from post-
modernism. The contradictions of the modernist work are, as I
have tried to show, implicitly political in character; but since the
'political' seemed to much modernism to belong precisely to the
traditional rationality it was trying to escape, this fact remained
for the most part submerged beneath the mythological and
metaphysical. Moreover, the typical self-reflexiveness of
modernist culture was at once a form in which it could explore
some of the key ideological issues I have outlined, and by the
same stroke rendered its products opaque and unavailable to a
wide public. An art today which, having learnt from the openly
committed character of avant-garde culture, might cast the
contradictions of modernism in a more explicitly political light
could do so effectively only if it had also learnt its lesson from
modernism too — learnt, that is to say, that the 'political' itself is a
question of the emergence of a transformed rationality, and if it
is not presented as such will still seem part of the dead tradition
from which the adventurously modern is striving to free itself.
Against the Grain
Essays 1975-1985

TERRY EAGLETON

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