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## Postmodernism(TM) <sup>1</sup>

Robert Siegle

### Star Wars

The academic "stars" of criticism and theory cannot agree, it seems, about this term we are already trying to use to name a period, a strategy, a mindset, a paradigm, an ambiance, a style. That very disagreement, and the epic dimensions it assumes in one of the profession's more enduring space operas, is itself the issue. To put it bluntly, we persist in a muddle about "postmodernism" because, at not even so deep a level, we desire this word to preserve a protective confusion. We are, quite predictably, ourselves confused tangles of self-difference, our allegiances and dependencies distributed more widely and contradictorily than our conscious belief systems attest. We are decent, humane, liberal subjects who need the state and its allowances-its webs of permissions, its dole, its infantilization, in a word, the type of individualization it offers. We are also hurt, distracted, intellectual, and oppositional to what menaces our licenses and privileges-that is, both our empowerments and our "private" pleasures: sometimes the state, sometimes the op-ed media, sometimes ourselves. If we *did* play a game in which all the pieces of "The Postmodern" were free to play, we wouldn't *want* to roll the dice, turn the spinner, read the action cards; we sneak from a different game the book of spells by which to cast confusion.

We like "postmodern" in all its confusion because it retains historical progress (*post* as after), it retains periodization (*post* as boundary [End Page 165] marker), it allows us to publish (*post* as postering or notifying) and to retain our positions (*post* as duty station) and power (*post* as military base), to ride out the end of the century and its radical social changes (*post* as the bobbing motion of the equestrian), it allows us to balance our crooked books on cultural history (*post* as in recording a transaction in the account books). We post our letters off into the past, into the present, without having to face what our verbal trickery veils with misdirection. We have our ways of "fixing" the game of Definition. When we want to refurbish Eliot's shoring of cultural fragments against what looked like cultural ruin to him, we cite architectural postmodernism as our data sample-it pastiches quotations from the full history of architecture's collusion with money and power to refurbish classic humanistic values. When we want to critique the commodification of culture and validate limited and local forays of safe "activism," we instead cite 80s graffiti art and performance. When we want to preserve our humanistic selves, we work the purveyors of individual consciousness and formal mastery as our fiction database. When we want only a contained risk in our language theory, we scour the poetry lists for fellow academics who stretch without breaking the rubber band around our word-base.

One might contrast these moves with the persistence of denial. I just returned from a lecture by a Habermasian colleague at our Center for Science and Technology Studies, a lecture called "Postmodernism" to a roomful of faculty and Ph.D. students who chorused their first-timer status with the terms "postmodern" and "poststructuralism," desperately hoping for a good clear working definition for their footnotes and badinage. Colleagues closer to home practice textual studies, archival recovery, biography, and formalist studies unchanged from the practices of thirty years ago. Every two to three years a major review journal proclaims the final expiration of poststructuralism (this fall it was the turn of *The New York Review of Books*, I am told). Attacks from "out there" are even worse, and more telling ("why do they keep writing so that only *they* can understand what they're talking about?"). But, really, no point in contrasting moves of confusion with those of denial: if only in one sense, they are versions of the same attitude. Keep "me" out of it, in both senses. <sup>2</sup>

Postmodern(TM) is the only game in which the *Word* applies both to the Evil Empire (Capital, Normalization, Spectacle, Boredom-some latitude [End Page 166] in specifying one's enemy is permissible; the crucial element is that its form be darthvaderish) and also to the fellowship of the ring itself (the jedi knights valiantly undoing the decaying Empire). Some want to distinguish Ism from Ity, but I'd rather read than wish away the confusion. (The short version is that the simple opposition between social and economic forms on the one hand, and human agents on the other, hasn't been tenable for quite some time; why should anyone be either surprised, disappointed, or elated to find "oppositional" positions "compromised" by the dynamics and tinctures of the very social and economic forms "they" oppose? The expectation that it could be otherwise, that "opposition" would or should take the familiar Form, is a symptom of ptolemaoism, that covert alliance of copernicus-repressors and central planners.)

Postmodern(TM) is also the only game in which players who know better still reach out to move little plastic figures of themselves in a war of identities (what can they say, hate, or try to master that is not already a part of them?). This is not an error, however, but the crucial rule of the game: to become a player, confused or otherwise, you must have perfected the arts of a particular class identity while preserving the rhetorical privilege of your "variance" (inherited or professed) from that identity. We players act like the entities we critique, working in the kinds of institutions and at the nodes of power and knowledge we (an)atomize, reaping rewards produced by the very inequities and asymmetries that spark all along our rhetorical edge.

Does this mean that hypocrisy is the postmodern ethical mode, or that confusion is the postmodern form of thought, or that complicity is the postmodern *ars politica*, or, thinking back to the legerdemain possible through shrewd selection of one's data sample, does it mean that sophistry is the character of postmodern rhetoric? The epic catalog might continue, but the point is that our answer depends upon how we play, doubly so. Our "answer," that is, depends upon what we mean by "answer." According to the age of man [sic], book, and truth, an "answer" is an elaboration upon the choice between "yes" and "no," even if it is "well, yes and no." Even in the latter case, that is, each of the two is itself. In the Post-Aristotelian Age (why not? It's one of many missives in the postal system.), the name of the era hinges precisely upon the sense that a thing *can* be both itself and at the same time *not* itself (though "itself" comes to function as that distinctive form of metaphor [End Page 167] in which a recognizably false myth is used as a shorthanded way to condense a complicated process and get on with things, as in "the text suggests," or "I love you").

But this figurative usage means (another example of the trope) that hypocrisy, complicity, sophistry, not to mention ethics, politics, and rhetoric, all function differently than with our inherited thinking machine. (That is, to rehearse a frequent reading of the latter's logic, hypocrisy refers to authenticity, complicity refers to purity, sophistry refers to Truth.) Is Ethics the Law of

the Good, or the skill of following a Desire for Connection? ("Skill" means finding ways of connection that don't practice hierarchy, violence, rugged individualitis.) Is Politics the Discipline of Rights, or De-individuating, deterritorializing the body? (The former is satisfied to think it possible for everyone to have a shot at being a Rockefeller; the latter disperses the body of privilege, unpacks it as an Organization Man, reaggregates it with its own multiplicities and exteriorities.) Is Rhetoric the Force of Truth, or Experimenting with juxtapositions and remixings in a formal sabotage of Form itself? (The former honors only a certain kind of answer and way of reaching it; the latter, rather than making form individual and discriminate, *incriminates* it and opens its permeabilities, its conjugation with whatever it is supposed *not* to be.)

Those in whom Humanism lives will perhaps dislike my shorthand tropes here, for Law, Discipline, Force are wounded soldiers of the *ancien régime*. If the scandal to the Humanist is the complicity between the Evil Empire and the Jedi Knights (hypocrisy, complicity, sophistry), perhaps the big job is to differentiate the perspectives of Darth and his son (and of course unwritten daughter) as, together, they seek to *dispatch*- the word Post returns-these (imperial) stormtroopers of what Foucault quite outrightly called, in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, "the petty [varieties of fascism] that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives" (Deleuze xiv).

And so we find ourselves having to keep our flow going despite the persistence of law, discipline, and force, while at the same time explaining how hypocrisy, complicity, and sophistry morph into practices connotating connections, conjunctions, and continua. *Hypocrisy* implies that one *could* have managed an "authentic" intention untainted by self-interest and what's usually called "lower" motivations-the connection between the two is paralyzing in one paradigm but in another is instructive, [End Page 168] useful strategically, a razor's edge between unexpected pleasures and destructive excess. *Complicity* implies that one *could* have kept oneself in a free and authentic zone while social and political formations, movements, moments, produced distasteful results. The conjunction of unaligned forces is contemptible in one (purist) paradigm, but in another illustrates the necessary terms of engagement, the strategic possibilities for "turning" or disrupting the distasteful machinery with the very positions and sites and interchanges it facilitates. *Sophistry* implies that one *could* have managed Truth itself, unadulterated by the seductions of (metaphoric) language, uncrippled by self-contradiction, free of the contingencies of local and historical particularities. One paradigm finds sacrilegious the continuum between truth and ideology, between a proposition and its contradiction or self-difference, between an idea and the constitutive force of the languages (in both the literal and discursive senses). In another paradigm, these complications are that problematic position from which we work whether we're pleased to think so or not.

To either *do* postmodernism, or make one's talking about it *productive*, one has at this point no other choice but to think one's way across this paradigmatic divide. It may seem that I have mixed my metaphors when I linked the stormtroopers with the *ancien régime* (they should be linked with the Evil Empire, not the remnants of the Republic, right?)-but to the postmodern that linkage means something (Jean-Luc Nancy's "Our History" is my favored gloss on this continuum from judaeo-greco synthesis to fascism). The metaphysics of the *ancien régime* have *already* been evacuated and resituated by media capitalism through the symptomatic rages and collective neuroses it produces in cultural forms-as when felonious Ollie North becomes the Christian right's paragon of integrity and Values. Can you imagine a more telling illustration of how the classical taxonomy of values finds *its* separation of moral and political values recoded *not* by poststructuralists but by the power relations traversing the sociocultural realm?

And so Darth dispatching his stormtroopers to finish off the remnants of the republic is an allegory, here, of media capitalism evacuating and resituating the ancient virtues. Remember that the Emperor's strategy in *Star Wars* is not to *oppose* the Force, but to turn those with powers to its dark side and to tolerate the anachronisms of the Imperial Senate. Think of the Emperor as the

global multinational empire of capitalization and commodification overreaching the anachronistic nation [End Page 169] state; think of the Rebellion with its princesses, knights, robed Obi Wans, teddy-bear ewoks, and renegade top guns as the evidence that Hieronymo's mad again, gathering nostalgia fragments to shore against ruin: if you can't make Power a nice guy by quoting poetry, then tell a story that will make its personification go away. (The postmodern jedis have yet to be written-perhaps we must wait till Darth's daughter finds *her* voice. We come closest to this chapter when the good guys don stormtrooper uniforms to free those whom the Empire has incarcerated and to detonate its deathstars of destruction; comically bricoleurish in their methods, these jedis concoct rainbow coalitions cutting across species, individual minds, and even death itself.)

Probably the *Star Wars* analogy is more trouble than it's worth, but the point is that in postmodernism culture has finally learned the lessons of capitalism as an avant-garde force reorganizing social life and cultural forms. Namely, that significant change can't take the form of the unconditional surrender of one of two opposing forces-instead, it infects the dominant forms at the genetic level, mutating forms into forces (or lines of flight), strata into flows (or continua), legal separations into startling conjunctions, essentialized concepts into self-different assemblages, and so forth. This can be a puzzling form for a "new paradigm" to take, puzzling to the *ancien régime*, because "paradigm" is *its* kind of word and is shaped by its definition of definitions, its conception of concepts, its expectations of consistency or unity or homogeneity or what have you. It would make sense, that is, to define a "new paradigm" in that new paradigm's own *kinds* of terms. It is precisely in order to avoid shifting paradigms at the level of *defining* paradigms that commentators practice the art of inspired confusion in their stories of postmodernism. Among the strategies of this art are "inferring" definitions from works selected to muddle residual and emergent practices, restricting one's view to a single artform or genre or discipline (so that its residuals can engulf its emergent elements), and operating on the postmodern body with modern analytical tools.

As perplexing as the first case might be (why rely on writing in the forties to explicate a culture contending with postwar conditions?), or as disturbing as the second (why choose, say, the relatively conservative field of architecture-an art wholly owned by its corporate sponsors-as one's sample?), nothing is so insidious as approaching this task with an essentially unaltered thinking machine. Insidious because it makes so [End Page 170] much sense, too much sense, to those wanting a clear line on this hot property. Insidious, because one both can and does regress from the edge of one's best insights at the stress points of difficulty. Insidious, because the racket of publication, review, citation, and "authority" expresses collective wishes about literary history and the insights and assumptions it brings to light (or doesn't). As ambivalent as the tactic makes me feel, then, a case history.

### **What if the Ontological is the myth of the engineer invented by the bricoleur?**

Brian McHale's marketing acumen has made his story about *Postmodernist Fiction* function, for many, as the *de facto* standard. He has chosen Frank Kermode to dislike, namely for the latter's observation that what many call "postmodernism" is more like third- or fourth-generation modernism. Perhaps the extended evidence for Kermode's position is McHale's book. McHale's story of modern to postmodern dramatizes the shift from epistemology (knowledge) to ontology (being). From, in other words, Shreve and Quentin puzzling over Sutpen's story to Sukenick wanting his friends to party in his novel,<sup>3</sup> or from the interpreted world to transworld(s). . . . If these *from . . . to* clauses sound like "from A to A," there's a reason. Insofar as the differentiation between epistemology and ontology can be maintained, it is meaningful only within a modern paradigm.

The slogan can be explained. To explain (away) the work of Sukenick and Katz, McHale quotes

the former's comment that "we were at times using those [autobiographical or confessional] forms as ways of incorporating our experience into fiction at the same level as any other data." McHale pounces upon the last word in a passage worth quoting:

Note Sukenick's emphasis: he does *not* say, "at the same level as any other *fiction*." That would have been demonstrably untrue. Autobiography claims a different ontological status from "pure" fiction, and a *stronger* one.... The relative ontological strength of autobiography is clearly perceived whenever fiction and autobiography are confronted, as they literally are on facing pages of *Exaggerations of Peter Prince*. Fiction is fatally [End Page 171] compromised; it is the autobiographical fiction, not the "straight" autobiography, that seems redundant here. But this relative strength also belongs to other forms of real-world data-facts from almanacs, encyclopedias, science, historical research. Sukenick is correct in locating autobiographical fact "at the same level as any other data." Autobiography functions in texts like Katz's *Exaggerations* as a distinct ontological level, a world to be juxtaposed with the fictional world, and thus as a tool for foregrounding ontological boundaries and tensions. (203)

Isn't it interesting that McHale repeats the syntax three times, that he is looking for "strength," fatality, the moral triumph of finding the foe "compromised"? . . . Isn't it *more* interesting that "boundaries" demarcate two "distinct" worlds we keep separated and hierarchized? . . . Isn't it *most* interesting that McHale thinks that "any other data" raises autobiography above fiction, on a level with almanacs, rather than having this plane pulled down with the "other data" Sukenick is talking about, namely his fictive inventions? If we're going to take Sukenick's comment more seriously than McHale, reading it carefully, we find the Episto-Ontological issues fixed on by McHale eclipsed and displaced, as if the action were already elsewhere.

McHale is fond of the classic phraseology, "I will formulate it as a general thesis about. . . ." So here goes. I will formulate it as a working anti-McHalism that if your fictional sample doesn't include Kathy Acker, you're talking about something else besides postmodernism. <sup>4</sup> Moreover, if you're maintaining the Self in the safe haven provided by the Episto-Ontological Complex, you're doing something else besides postmodernism. Consider, for example, McHale's treatment of Cortázar's "my padres" as "a playful ontological extension of what Roman Jakobson called *shifters*, those elements of language, especially pronouns and other deictics, which have no determinate meaning outside of a particular instance of discourse, their meaning changing (shifting) as the discourse passes from participant to participant." Were McHale himself postmodern, this "padres" would be paradigmatic of how postmodernity relates phenomena associated, in the Episto-Ontological Age, with The Self (as in, for example, "the author's ontological superiority" as McHale shifts bits of Cortázar and Federman around in his own discourse). [End Page 172]

All these old words *do* come back, changed, changed utterly, as the terrible beauty of what the Episto-Ontological Age produced—an awesome chasm between Eliot's *chora* and Deleuze's nomadic flight. The alluvial siltings of cultural history are the ground of the settlement McHale has joined, dense with universities, guildhalls, counting houses, and archives. Out on the plains, twinkling lights mark the encampments of the nomadic types, always moving, a bit out of reach of the settlements, sharing a language with them but using it differently, with different myths, different humor, different mores. The writers, many of them, come and go between the two, perhaps eventually most will "come in," as the nomad-settlement program has strong inducements. But this myth, as Deleuze knows, speaks only in part to these differences; each has its kind of settlement and movement.

McHale goes to the sociological firm of Pavel, Berger, Luckman, Cohen & Taylor, and he hires

there the distinction between "paramount reality" and "excursionary" *worlds*. The weft of his case is the "permeation by secondary realities, especially mass-media fictions, and one of the most typical experiences of members of this culture is that of the transition from one of these fictional worlds to the paramount reality of everyday life, or from paramount reality to fiction" (38). Mostly well and good, except for the slur of "secondary," as if there were a "primary" on entirely different footings. The word "paramount" comes to us from the Norman term for a feudal overlord, and meant "supreme ruler" for a long time; its etymology would bring us near the jutting through or projection of something, perhaps the wish for an "everyday reality" (hereafter, the ER) that sounded reliable, simple, and knowable, as if McHale were regressing to the first solidification of the meaning of "ontology" in the early eighteenth-century.<sup>5</sup> This line of thinking can be interesting, exciting, productive, as in some of McHale's brief glimpses at individual novels, but it is hardly postmodern.

McHale's onto-duel recurs throughout the commentary framing what is often a list of possible devices. "The space of a fictional world is a construct," we read in "How to build a zone," that is "deconstructed by the text" of postmodernist fiction, as if that were the point rather than deconstructing the authority, originary status, or supposed *unconstructedness* of space outside the fiction (45). Postmodern science fiction features "the projection of a world different from our own yet . . . in confrontation with our world" (60), but one which, like McHale's with [End Page 173] postmodernism, leaves ER safe in its episto-ontological superiority. The closest McHale comes to seeing himself in this mirror is at the end of his section on "Chinese-box worlds." On the one hand, responding to Burroughs' characters "using 'film grenades' to break through to unmediated reality," he calls this "breaching the ontological boundary, walking out of the ontological level of film to some higher (or lower) level" (130). The metaphor of hierarchical levels persists, as if it were "unmediated reality" rather than another script one (b)reached.

On the other hand, one of his favorite characters, Borges, is brought in to conclude from *Don Quixote* "that we, too, are fictional characters, and that our reality is as much a fiction as Quixote's is" (130). How does McHale deal with this comment from his leading man? "At the movies-or should that be *in* the movies, we wonder queasily" (130). Leading to a period rather than a question mark, ending both a chapter and a section, only white space follows the line. Is the white space a buffer zone meant to prevent any more words from following out this line (of flight)? Does it acknowledge the deterritorialized space into which McHale has, for a moment, moved? It's a postmodern sort of moment. But a moment.

A bit later, McHale is working with the collapse of "polar opposites" in "tropical worlds":

In all these cases, it looks as though Manichaeic allegory is in fact only another lure, an invitation to the unwary reader to interpret in terms of a univocal allegorical meaning. The trap is sprung the moment the reader recognizes the inconsistencies and incoherences of the allegory: determinate meaning dissolves into indeterminacy, the two-level ontological hierarchy of metaphorical and literal begins to oscillate, to opalesce. (144)

Well, it's a very interesting passage to me, because it seems an allegory of McHale's reading of postmodernity-in hopes of a "univocal allegorical meaning" that preserves some familiar ground in the Episto-Ontological zone, but stumbling from time to time on "the inconsistencies and incoherences" of reading postmodernism this way. I like the metaphor of *opalescence*, because it embeds "essence" in a sensory body, that trickster stone of the opal which is decidedly *not* white or radiant, but simultaneously [End Page 174] white (well, at least usually white, especially here) and fiery, even star-pointed. McHale's metaphor doesn't quite let go this much-he chains it in syntactic equivalence to "oscillate" in order to preserve the duality-but the Manichaeic myth behind his ranking of worlds is of, shall we say, paramount importance to understanding the "deep

structure" (a high-ranking [?!] image of the book's rhetoric).

In addition to this theme of duality, there is a second great point of distillation around which we can understand the peculiarity of this book's definition of postmodernist fiction. At the end of a very interesting and symptomatic chapter on the materiality of writing, McHale tells us that "the workings of *all* postmodernist world-making machines are visible, in one way or another, to one degree or another; this, precisely, is what makes them postmodernist" (196). As someone who has spilt some words on the subject of reflexive fiction, I find the statement a bit startling. To be generous, we should not take it as a serious statement, perhaps, since we find ourselves zinging back through literary history reclaiming quite a few reflexive novels for McHale's world of "postmodernist fiction." In fact, as we complete our double take, *all* fiction "in one way or another" cannot help but make its world-making machine visible. In fact, one might then argue, so does any writing at all, nonfiction and nonliterary (?) included. To claim these visible workings as *distinctive* of postmodernist fiction must then imply not only that they are qualitatively less visible in "earlier" fiction, but that their denaturalizing or demystifying effects do not occur except in the context of (perhaps only postmodernist) fiction.

Which would mean that postmodernist fiction is a "univocal allegory" of postmodernist fiction and nothing else. Charles Newman & Co. is right after all. One might otherwise have read at least some of these works as a polyvocal allegory of the machineries making *every* world on an ontologically (can I use that word?) flat plane. But in all fairness, a few examples to suggest what happens when the machinery *does* become visible. When McHale, thinking of "fantastic" worlds next door, finds them "hesitating" between "the literal and the allegorical," he concludes that "they hesitate between the representation of a world and the anti-representational foregrounding of language *for its own sake*" (82-3). It is a figure of speech, of course, to say that language has a "sake" to own (but be careful; the word comes from the Old English for [End Page 175] *lawsuit*, and ultimately from the root meaning "to seek out"; I think this might warn us that language will seek its revenge upon us all, but that's a later section).

What can it mean, "language for its own sake"? The "verbal extravagance and self-consciousness" noticed in the Gass and Blanchot texts can only be "anti-representational" if "representational" can be linked even casually with the "literal." I suspect the "suit" offered language here is a banker's, namely the Epistemology & Ontology Savings and Loan, one deeply in the red from overspeculation in reterritorializing. When the materiality of language, when its sheer linguistic density, is made the point, surely the effect is not simply the for-its-own-sake "nonsemantic relations" of which *Tender Buttons* is, absurdly, accused provisionally (149), nor just "to throw up obstacles to the reconstruction process, making it more difficult and thus more conspicuous, more perceptible" (151), the position to which McHale comes after unstuffing his straw person. *Tender Buttons* is, among other things, a story of sex, but it insists upon "semantic relations" that Stein attempted to construct along utterly private (rather than public, conventional) lines. Perhaps she felt that if her world appeared within the conventions of Hemingway's world it would inevitably seem like the least kind things Hemingway ever said of Stein herself. With such a motivation, Stein attempted what frustrates contemporary readers, namely leaping almost entirely into a private diacritics. Implicit in this attempt is a thorough critique of ER, a code Hemingway was better positioned to commandeer, and a belief that more than "an ontological flicker" (151) was possible by challenging and rewiring the ER next door.

Hence the maddening quality of the chapter on "Worlds of Discourse," brilliant in its description of "heterotopian" mingling of discursive orders *within* the fiction, a bit breath-taking in the apparent assumption that this is what fiction does, not the ER. How can we talk at one moment about "viewing reality as *constructed* in and through our languages, discourses, and semiotic systems" (164), the very guts of the world-making machine made visible, or about using heteroglossia "as an opening wedge, a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a



polyphony of worlds of discourse" (167), and then, at another moment, restricting the carnival to "the level of its projected world" (174)? "In the absence of a *real* carnival context, it [postmodernist fiction] constructs fictional carnivals." The "real carnival context" is that media *are* [End Page 176] carnival, crowning fool after fool the King of Misrule (and misdirection) for fifteen minutes (or a soundbite) at a time. These "worlds of discourse" McHale contains within a projection have a project in the "real," namely carnivalizing the carnival, training (readers) in semiosis,<sup>6</sup> and taking privilege away from any "world" that passes itself off, even in theory, as reality.

When McHale talks about the "ineluctable *materiality* of the book," then, it should not surprise us that the effect of emphasizing such is that "these fictional worlds, momentarily eclipsed by the real-world object, are forced to flicker in and out of existence" (187). Shape writing, one of his examples of materiality, makes your eye do strange things reading, it makes you donate to the thrift shop any remaining tendency to naturalize linearity, the line "to" or "on" reality, it makes your eye follow physically the weird conceptual convolutions by which we make (any) worlds in the first place, convolutions easy to forget in the impress of habit. Are the lessons remembered as tutorials on how language and worlding works, or are they left flickering in the fictional worlds? It depends, perhaps, on whether you have an ornery postmodern streak.

A last point of distillation, Death. All temptations to banal humor aside, we find McHale ending by explaining postmodernist fiction as a trial version of death: "Gabriel Josipovici said it one way: the shattering of the fictional illusion leaves the reader "outside" the fictional consciousness with which he or she has been identifying, forcing the reader to give up this consciousness and, by analogy, to give up her or his own, in a kind of dress-rehearsal for death" (231). It's interesting to see "identifying" assumed as the reader's relation to a novel, to see a reading consciousness so unitary that to give up a thought is to give up the ghost. But McHale said it another way: "Postmodernist writing models or simulates death; it produces simulacra of death through confrontations between worlds, through transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries, or through vacillation between different kinds and degrees of 'reality'" (232). It seems that McHale's reader (McHale, reading) is a consciousness outside the fictional, superior to the chatter of words going on during reading, exterior to the worlds whammed together, ethical master of the proprieties (property rights) of levels and policer of legal boundaries, an occasionally hesitant but "normally" confident discriminator of "kinds and degrees" of reality. Not postmodern, not if you aren't already past the point of assimilating the assumption that life isn't [End Page 177] a simple thereness, but biology's detour through language. After the sound of the words dies away, it's back to biology, cells in relation without boundaries, law, or consciousness, let alone species or identity. The kind of thereness they have is not McHale's apparent assumption of a human life that *uses* language. These fictions he's been reading, they're taking him toward something very radical, something austere as a Tibetan winter landscape.

Surely it's worth going on a bit longer to see what he doesn't get about the death of the author. The words are said, Barthes and Foucault cited, but the playfulness even in these putatively postmodernist fictions is found to mean that "the penetration of the author into his fictional world is always, as Umberto Eco has put it, *trompe-l'oeil*: this 'author' is as fictional as any other character. The ontological barrier between an author and the interior of his fictional world is absolute, impenetrable" (215). Perhaps all the rest of what we've worked through is unnecessary compared to the spectacle of this conclusion. McHale missed the joke, that we could ever have supposed that representations (even of authors) were anything but fictional, that authors were anything but words, that consciousness was anything but words, that "Man" was more than a representation, a life in words punctuated by bursts of the inhuman.

Out here in the provinces, in the polytechnics far beyond the profession's "civilization" of doctoral programs and name-recognition universities, with the rudeness of nomad humor, I honor this



stranger with the very energy of my insults to his manners, costume, and accent. But when the writers visit the camps, they live in a different conversation than his, and there are many who come this way who weren't invited to his series. To finish revising his history, we would have to hear them out, hear them all out. For the moment, by way of marking the occasion with a piece of oral tradition, let us say that "duality" is Manichaeic hierarchy in Modern, an allegory of the almighty  $x$ , but in Postmodern comprises only two of the possible mythologies (even if myths are not without truth effects). Verse two: the Episto-Ontological is Modern vocabulary for the knowing subject for whom the only issue is how or what is known, knowable; in Postmodern, it feels like a maginot line built against the phantasms of difference without hierarchy (alias the communist threat) and of the national superego (fascism, "our history," the Pétain always already inside the line). Third verse: death is The End(game) for (late) Modern, but for the Postmodern has already happened. In [End Page 178] other words, this *is* the afterlife, and Being was invented by the bricoleurs of onto-theology to engineer the Episto-Ontological Complex. Which despite Eisenhower's warning is still with us. That is, again *id est*, the whole Postmodern muddle is the work of the late modern bricoleurs pastiching a last demesne for their ilk. It is increasingly difficult, but ever salutary, for postmoderns to recall the terms and issues of the debate in this form waged by late moderns.

### **Postmodernism is the resumption of rhetoric in the wake of representation.**

Which is not to say that representation is dead (it's obviously there in the most radical "breaks" with an (implicit) ideology of representation). Reflexive interventions in the Code of Realism revived a persistent anxiety and playfulness about representation (interventions variously exemplified in the work of, say, Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Katz, Sukenick, and many others and which were variously received across the map of readers, reviewers, and critics). To recall the ground shared by such fiction and the adjacent arts, let us visit a 1984 statement by Brian Wallis, a critic whose "literacy" across a number of the arts is an effective antidote against the one-medium parochialism that can cripple such discussions. His introduction to *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* succinctly describes the mode of working at a moment when those in creative arts and criticism shared such assumptions as these:

Our access to reality is mediated by a gauze of representation. What is fragile about this oppressive contract is that the representational model we employ (and which cannot be avoided) is based on a critical selectivity-defining, naming, ordering, classifying, cataloguing, categorizing-that is just as arbitrary as that in Borges' encyclopedia. Two implications immediately arise: first, that the founding act of representation involves an assumption of authority in the process of segregation, accumulation, selection, and confinement; and second, that critical theory might provide a key to understanding and countering certain negative effects of representation. For criticism addresses the fact that while the rational *surface* of representation-the name or image-is always calm and whole, [End Page 179] it covered the *act* of representing which necessarily involves a violent decontextualization. (xv)

I select this comment to represent a moment of consciousness shared by many who were working in places like Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and others. My act of "critical selectivity" is designed to recover a sense of connection felt by dancers, essayists, musicians, performance artists, visual artists, writers, those who habitually crossed such lines, and those who kept the audiences populated. This group talks back not only to the history of representation, but to the History in which we find ourselves in late twentieth-century America-namely, our occupying the fault zone where meet the great tectonic plates of commodity capitalism and the contemporary media. Tremors, upheavals, altered formations, the rumor of a great shake coming, the fear of tsunami, pop-millenarian excrescences.

Less metaphorically: more than the reach of the commodity form into its last frontiers (that isn't news), but also the information form, the image-form, the repertoire of TV and film narratologies and images; the normally invisible "violent decontextualization" of multinational corporate dominion over a hopelessly asymmetrical global market "system"; the latest heterogeneous wave of protest over the destruction of alternative value systems (from the Christian rightwing, from Doonesbury, from the expatriate intellectuals of former colonies, from the persistent ones among the rainbow coalition of marginalized identities, from the poststructural fringe, from New Age mystics, and from most others). I think it's helpful to think of the output of that list as symptomatic of something like a postmodern *period*, but to think also that we don't have *postmodernism* without a critical awareness of two things: first, of the interrelations between representation as discourse and the nature of the "authority" Wallis sees it invoking, and, second, of the complicated workings by which representation carries out "violent decontextualizations" subtextually, subliminally. Which is, my subtitle says, another way of saying that art and criticism shift the nature of their commitment to exploring their work as *rhetoric*.

"Rhetoric" has dual citizenship, is a Tropology, a catalog of tropes and schemas, a magical bricoleur's grab bag of transformations, changes, sleights and feints, but also a Troupology, a paperback art of persuasion for transforming skeptical citizens into a troupe of consenting adults. [End Page 180] Tropology analyzes the constitutive power of language, Troupology constitutes a collective representation of our relations to our multiple modes of economic, intellectual, social, and cultural production(s). If you think of postmodernism=rhetoric as only one of these, you have either its critical deconstructive (to some cynical) attitude to validation claims outside the textual play of rhetor and reader, or else the morality play of the evil corporate empire manufacturing living rooms full of dupes. You get postmodernism when you add critical analysis (that remembers language as a problem) to politics (that remembers History doesn't kill people, other people do, or don't).<sup>7</sup> You have postmodernism when people act with this awareness; you have mainly symptoms when they don't either because their reflexivity doesn't connect with social and cultural politics, or their politics doesn't connect with cultural forms, or the "foe" is anachronistically conceived as evil individuals, or metaphysics looks like the answer rather than the problem. Postmodernism means the multivalence of the question, what are we to make of living in the mode of information, media, and multinational capitalism?

By way of example, a case history of confusing rhetoric with representation. Among the writers I discuss in a book are Kathy Acker and Catherine Texier; in an angry essay the three of us are attacked as pornographers promoting both violence against women and the objectification of women as sex objects. We have represented women in this way, and we have not represented what women can do to sweep away these events. The most recurrent word on our assailant's wish list is Power; the most startling charge against my commentary is that I quote so selectively from Acker and Texier that my readers may not realize just how violent and sexual their fiction may be; the most discomfiting tactic is to quote the worst our assailant can comb from recent novels by Acker and Texier, just to show how raunchy they can be. For The Assailant, the problem is not language or discourse but the referent; the solution is to prohibit history, not recode it; The Assailant thinks almost entirely in terms of representation, not rhetoric.

What if we flip perspectives here? Could I argue that The Assailant is the pornographer, appropriating salacious fragments from the intertext, decontextualizing them as objects, even fetishes? Could I argue that Acker and Texier engage in a rhetorical critique of the discursive means by which violence is normalized in gender relations and object-status is conferred upon women? That reading Acker's contextualizing [End Page 181] of "pornographic" representations is to see them denaturalized, desublimated, and reconnected to their subtextual cousins (of instrumental reason, hierarchical order, Power as it is articulated in a society of normalization)? Acker's characters do not form political parties and vote down Senators Packwood & Specter

(Dickensian names, those); that is not the burden of agency or power or politics current within Acker's postmodernism (though it might obviously be its effect). What Janey and her avatars do attempt is to unlearn the language, to see that politics also takes place at the level of language, that it takes place in/on "my" body, that Huck and Jim were Thelma and Louise with a more favorably gendered chance for the territories (even if such territories as they desired never existed for either pair).

The postmodern trope is to turn language and discourse as pictures of the (real) referent back into language and discourse attempting to persuade, both overtly and subliminally, by invoking a whole naturalized social history of the exercise of power and the effects of economics. That social history is embedded in how tropes work, and until it is read back out into the open, its persuasive force remains intact. The postmodern writer's political practice is (again, in the part of their lives that is writing) to show how persuasion happens, and for whom, and to have equipped readers with a way of seeing interrelations that coordinates rhetoric and daily existence. The Assailant missed all the fun. The Assailant's kin want to consider whether to make exceptions to the first amendment; Acker's kin want to alter how they respond to scripts that include the definitions of activism and power desired by The Assailant and that evidence themselves in the anger and violence of essays attacking the polymorphous perversities of postmodernism. Those perversities perform the social (sub)text and we need to read them, not proscribe them because they represent both the manifest form of cultural fantasy and a destabilizing interventionist enactment of its latent anxieties, contradictions, violences.

My case history evidences a perhaps pathological form of the dissonance between representation and rhetoric. Acker's mix of the two is healthier than The Assailant's, more nurturing, more sustaining; it's not interested in the kind of power that defeats and annihilates opposition, having had quite enough of patriarchy already, having seen how subtly one is coopted by the desire for a politics in the same form as the politics of the patriarchal paradigm. The Assailant commits the ancient error [End Page 182] of desiring in the object of representation an exemplary ideal. The postmodern rhetorician distrusts the ethos of the represented *object*, and prefers the different *kind* of role played by a reader being trained in socio-political semiosis, to recall *my* Eco quotation. That reader is not locked into the (psychotic?) dyad of identification, but into the triadic relation in which watching the watching and reading going on within narrative changes the nature of watching and reading for the reader.<sup>8</sup> The logical or conceptual form of an exemplary ideal comes to seem like a pathological desire for fixation, fetish, arrest, reification. The postmodern rhetorician knows that rhetoric is not just connected with the socio-political, but in the constant dialogic relation of practice it occasions continuous changes. One needs not an Answer but a fluency (that answers back, sassy even, but not with an Answer). One needs not the right representation, but the gift of rhetoric in a postmodern context.

Such rhetoric is the gift which is offered by those fictions in this postmodern age that are in fact postmodernist. Their writers have not, in fact, been reading only the university-sponsored reviews but also the likes of *Redtape*, *Bomb*, *National Poetry Magazine of the Lower East Side*, and others too numerous and perhaps evanescent to catalog; they have also done a share of reading in and around recent theory, not just in anthologies like Brian Wallis's from which I quoted earlier, but in a run of theoretical works on the shelves of St. Marks' Bookshop that shames most university bookstores. The assimilations, appropriations, and creative borrowings vary, obviously, but somehow it still comes as a surprise to some critics that writers outside academia, where most postmodernist fiction happens, actually "know" the theory as well as most academic bluffers. The lessons are important, and they differentiate those who, as the episto-ontologists and ER buffs suppose, write in this age with traditional metaphysics essentially intact and those who are writing the fiction that feels out what it means to live having turned the page of philosophy without philosophizing badly (Derrida 288).

After Lacan, one would anticipate engagement with the internalization of the social symbolic (hereafter, the SS); and, particularly as the dominant vehicle of the SS is the Image (still, moving), this internalization's excitation of the Imaginary with especial (subliminal) intensity. Which means we'd expect some version of a more primal dyadic (marked by demands imposed upon the other, by the requirement of fixity or stasis and wholeness or plenitude, and by borderline psychotic [End Page 183] arrest or fixation masked, perhaps, as Romance or Metaphysics), and that this version would contest the serial movement of (in, through) the triadic. A conflict falling out over what to make of the Image, how to use and be used by the Image, its repertoire. This engagement would certainly not necessarily repeat the Lacanian nostalgia for plenitude (disguised as the theme of the Lack)-Lacan's Endgame that can look and feel like futility. It might; it might also be incommensurably Deleuzian, gapless, shifting the Lacanian thematics from a necessary orientation to an *objét a* to exuberant and strategic engagements with destratification, deterritorialization, desubjectification, lines of flight and connection, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

The orthodoxy of subscribing to someone's completed system is not the point-rather, the postmodern rhetoricity of individuality. Lacan's most enduring contribution is the utter, radical, relationality within which what we call "the individual" is produced. We keep attempting to smuggle back in some form of an entity, some substantive substratum, some "natural" point of reference. The longer I read Lacan, the more struck I am by how continuously he struggles against that return of the metaphysical, by how artfully he conceives the saga of the imperial ego gone native in the polymorphous infantile pleasure tracery it colonizes in becoming sahib of the Symbolic. The inheritor of this history of empire, the late twentieth-century subject, must contend with the inflow of imagery and information tuning fragmentation and multiplicity to consumption and performativity, with the residual rigidities and self-limiting effects of metaphysical assemblages already in place, with the manifold difficulties of living (economically, socially, politically) in the altered state of our history, with the challenges, potentials, and liabilities of living the life of a serial willer.

Contesting (media), unlearning (metaphysics), strategizing (the social), playing (for the personal): these are the activities of the contemporary subject, necessary but not sufficient conditions of fictions that would be postmodern.

We should say more about the Social in which the postmodern subject lives. It is active, alive, power is everywhere as current in every connecting wire. The message we're meant to believe is that the script is locked, we live in a disaster film, reality is lost; but the medium is this vast, diffused, disciplinary grid of normalization in which every particle of ordinary existence is energized with ideological force-but not, finally, [End Page 184] under the control of the demon from the pit. If power relations are micromeshed, normalizing, disciplinary, they are also transubstantial with relations of struggle, contest, reversals or, more promisingly, recoding, rewiring, cross circuiting. Postmodern politics and sociality, postmodern agency(s) and identity (s): no simple affair, but complex, a complex. Postmodern "setting" is not backdrop to the principals, but agents of the principles; its resonance is ethnographic, its utility is for focusing contesting, unlearning, strategizing, and playing upon personnel mines (quarries of a socially constructed life, possessions waiting to be claimed, explosives ready to detonate the unwary), mines that are the points at the periphery where power instantiates itself and at which postmodern agency multiplies on the verge of exponentiating into broader social change.

To misrecognize this argument is to again suppose a prepackaged answer necessarily inherent in this rhetorical context for thinking the social. The context is amenable to conservative uses; in fact, conservatives tend to be more effective players these days at coopting the media machinery, dispensing with the strategically limiting effects of metaphysics (Ollie North and Pat Robertson?), orchestrating power relations, and achieving the critical mass of political consensus. Nor is this

necessary (but not sufficient) constituent of postmodern fiction simply a content to be dutifully represented. It is a context within which point of view or character take place, and it shifts thought from the autonomous interiority of a character to what Foucault might have called its "conditions of exteriority." It is the active matrix of relations within which individuality is an effect (but neither an autonomous imperial master nor a duped and powerless industrial product). If that parenthesis strikes a reader as contradictory, that reader is reading metaphysically.<sup>10</sup>

Another essential context is that offered by such feminist essays as Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa." Replete with Deleuzian lines of flight, it shifts the terms within which anyone hunting for the "anti-logos weapon" might conceive the task. I suspect its translation in *Signs* (1976) may not have had as much impact as its later (1981) inclusion in Elaine Marks's and Isabelle de Courtivron's ubiquitous anthology, *New French Feminisms*. The timing of the latter caught at least the Soho and Lower East Side communities at high crest with its double aims "to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project" (245). *Projecting* has been extraordinarily difficult in this country, I think, [End Page 185] because of how deeply we have naturalized and mythologically charged our notions of individual autonomy. Cixous's shift from a visual to something like a *phatic* epistemology allows the imaginary anatomy (the cultural composition of the body) to become a heuristic device for feeling our way toward what our "mirror of nature" (Rorty's phrase) disables us from observing.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps one telling sample from Cixous's essay will suggest how rich a context she shares with vigorously postmodern fiction:

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (257)

Consider the course of Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*. In Part One the protagonist attempts an untheorized version of this strategy by proclaiming herself a Knight, that is, a "female-male" who is "able to have adventures and save the world" (10, 11). She finds, however, the distance between "fantasy" as "living in your own head" and history, death; in part two she practices the insights on its title page: "being born into and part of a male world, she had no speech of her own. all she could do was read male texts which weren't hers" (39). And read them she does, against the grain, desublimating these texts, biting their tongue, and inventing a language that allows her "to find others who are, like me, pirates journeying from place to place, who knowing only change and the true responsibilities that come from such knowing sing to and with each other" (97).

The third and final part tries to live those lines, breaking up what Irigaray pursues everywhere as the "phallomorphic" character of form, nearly all forms, in the culture. Acker's Don, now fully female, considers the dog's life in western culture (the dogs are "literal"), trying instead to learn what it might mean to "deappropriate unselfishly" and live a kind of individuality that is "a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble (Cixous 259). In the Don's strong moments, she can explain "poetry" to The Dogs (recall poetry's place alongside holiness and madness for Kristeva): [End Page 186]

"I write words to you whom I don't and can't know, to you who will always be other than and alien to me. These words sit on the edges of meanings and aren't properly grammatical. For when there is no country, no community, the speaker's unsure of which language to use, how to speak, if it's possible to speak. Language is

community. Dogs, I'm now inventing a community for you and me." (191)

There are also dark moments when she feels she has failed, but the dog chorus sings revolutionary refusals of the slave life and the Don ultimately "forgets" God and wakens "to the world which lay before me" (207) for the first time.

We *are* that community if we are speaking from the analytically saturated awareness of this pirate don who has attempted the idealist quest, worked through the patriarchal subtext, and encountered its forms in historical reality. The "true responsibilities that come from such knowing" are more complicated than simplistic readings of Acker might suppose (there is more than some tiresome pleasure principle, there is more than simplistic separatism). I stay to this length in pairing Cixous and Acker in order to make inescapably clear a necessary trait of postmodernist fiction—that it understand what Foucault meant by "the type of individualization which is linked to the state" (Foucault 216) and that it be engaged in the attempt to travel between (language) communities, to invent a different "inside" to language and individualization. Which is not to say that one must have studied Cixous and Foucault and write fiction like Acker in order to be postmodernist: but one must be as symptomatic as they each are, in their own ways, of the context of "individualization" at century's end.

I have a favorite quotation from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, a favorite book and as close as one gets to indispensable in postmodern studies. Guattari's strange words and terms are sometimes the roadblock to "getting" what they mean, but this passage tries to answer the difficult question, "How do you make yourself a body without organs?" after warning us of the dangers of "wildly destratifying" oneself into "demented or suicidal collapse." It's a more subtle strategy in three parts. First: "Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience [End Page 187] them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times." (161) This first part accepts the recoded version of the "mixed" postmodern values we talked about earlier (hypocrisy, complicity, sophistry), it practices the experimental seizure of the apparatus to release its mappings and constrictions, its energies and recombinative possibilities.

The second part of the strategy: "It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. . ." (161). This "meticulous relation" requires the results or effects of analyzing history and discourse. Deleuze and Guattari's "strata" are the codifications that map the social and individual territories and that divide continuities and break up consistencies (by which they mean sticky connectedness, not logical homogeneity).

The third part: "We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. It is only there that the BwO reveals itself for what it is: connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities" (161). This passage lists necessary attitudes—thinking the social formation, seeing it prepared *for* us and lodged *within* us and structuring the *place* we occupy; and only then denaturalizing the "assemblage" that holds us until its cathexes, channelings, joykillers are tipped over into that Deleuzian peroration of desires, flows, intensities.

Deleuze and Guattari are taking time off from their relentless analyses to tell us directly *how to*, and it is easy, once again, to suppose this is a unilinear map like a trip guide from AAA. The passage is a triangulation device, the sextant for the postmodern pirate navigating her way in seas far beyond the usual ports. This is not a voyage still taking place inside the modernist or late-modernist skull; it is not one in which the social or cultural is the (separate) backdrop against

which the individual plays; it is not one in which the linkages among Image, imaginary, and policy can stay repressed. It is certainly not one which can be conceived within the epistomological terms of an older paradigm. Nor one in which we can afford to persist in the deliberate confusions of the après-après-garde.<sup>12</sup>

name="authbio" href="#top"> ROBERT SIEGLE is Professor of English at Virginia Tech; his current projects include books on contemporary writing and postcolonial Indian fiction. He is author of *The Politics of Reflexivity* and *Suburban Ambush* (both published by Johns Hopkins University Press).

## Notes

1. It is necessary to use the word "postmodern" in a title in order for it to receive currency, for it to live in bibliographies and citation trains, to work as an irritant in the easy closures upon the world of living and making that goes on around us. The purpose of writing about the postmodern seems to entail less the *doing* of postmodernism than the trademarking of one's take upon it.

2. Cavilers will be hunting the telltale Derrida quotation. Here it is, early, to save time: "anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset" (279). I think he just described discourse, history, and "being." Confusion and denial sit in Bartleby's chair and prefer their brick wall to the world that awaits.

3. That McHale can tell Sukenick's ontological jokes without the postontological punchline may be explained by the list of authors who have long (more than four lines) entries in his index: John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Louis Borges, Richard Brautigan, William Burroughs-the "B" section will do. Though several of these writers are (predictably) mixed, as organized in McHale's script of cameos they never speak their postmodern lines.

4. Care for a gender count of writers who have three or more lines in his index? Thirty men, one woman (Angela Carter). Care for making the issue black and white? Same numbers-Ishmael Reed made it in. The "data" I used in *Suburban Ambush* was minimally multi-ethnic, but women's writing is half the book. What also matters, of course, is *which* figures, and how they're read.

5. The very staid *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* summarizes Christian Wolff (1679-1754) as a pre-Kantian consensus:

[T]he method of ontology was deductive. The fundamental principle applying to all that is, is the principle of noncontradiction, which holds that it is a property of being itself that no being can both have and not have a given characteristic at one and the same time. From this, Wolff believed, follows the principle of sufficient reason, namely, that in all cases there must be some sufficient reason to explain why any being exists rather than does not exist. The universe is a collection of beings each of which has an essence that the intellect is capable of grasping as a clear and distinct idea. The principle of sufficient reason is invoked to explain why some essences have had existence conferred on them and others have not. The truths about beings that are deduced from indubitable first principles are all necessary truths. Thus, ontology has nothing to do with the contingent order of the world" (V, 542).

The "principle of noncontradiction" is replaced for postmoderns, but not for McHale, by the expectation of self-difference. McHale finds himself quite engaged with the "contingent order [sic] of the world," but he maintains "sufficient reason" to assume an Everyday Reality that "the intellect is capable of grasping as a clear and distinct idea." I am not so sure as he in his belief that



we "know" the difference between real reality and the James Bond world he cites to exemplify an imagined world. What is fatally obvious in cases of pathological delusion (the 007 stalker with a working pistol) is perhaps one of the subliminal revolving chambers that can "fire" at any given moment from the "normal" unconscious. If that is true, then McHale's notion of "imagined" (as opposed to real) realities assumes so thoroughly the "sufficient" status of the classic supreme ruler of consciousness, Reason, that the location of McHale's House of Fiction must be on Main Street of the old town.

6. Since McHale likes to cite Umberto Eco's conservative transworld side, let me quote from his unguardedly radical side about the effect of foregrounding codes and forcing readers to reconsider them and their new possibilities:

While [training semiosis], the aesthetic experience challenges the accepted organization of the content and suggests that the semantic system could be differently ordered, had the existing organization been sufficiently frequently and persuasively challenged by some aspect of the text. But to change semantic systems means *to change the way in which culture "sees" the world*. Thus a text of the aesthetic type which was so frequently supposed to be absolutely extraneous to any truth conditions (and to exist at a level on which disbelief is totally "suspended") arouses the suspicion that the correspondence between the present organization of the content and "actual" states of the world is neither the best nor the ultimate. The world could be defined and organized (and therefore perceived and known) through other semantic (that is: conceptual) models. (274)

Eco italicizes for me my favorite line. It's true that he feels comfortable talking about seeing the world and about organizing the content, but he *does* put *actual* in quotation marks, and he sees more clearly than McHale that more than a flicker happens when you teach people ways semiosis can work.

7. Language as problem achieves greatest density in the forms of (always ideologically charged) discourse. "People" are constellations of something like "discourseemes" and their lived relations within History. Politics connects the two and recodes both.

8. The analyst watching the voyeur looks perverse only to the censor. Which is not to say that the analyst cannot become a voyeur, but that the analytical is a refusal of the dyad of identification by means of the triadic's gift of (the awareness of) positionality. It is never the analyst's job to be the one who knows, but the one who keeps (it) in play, the one who forestalls closure (fixation, identification) in relation to what (via projection/introjection) is taken as, made to be, the exemplary ideal. Which is why The Assailant's hunger for an anachronistic form of power and self strike me as both dangerous and pathological. The beauty of the triadic is its cyclical reiteration of reflexive awareness and the mobility and fluidity such awareness sponsors.

9. In the writing of Reese Williams, to recall an example from *Suburban Ambush*, one finds a non-Lacanian version of the inner, essentially visual imagination (figured in *A Pair of Eyes* as Screen) contesting both filmic memories and the image flow coming in from the culture, including those on alternate pages. The pathological fixity or psychic arrest in Lacan is figured in Williams' book as a collective death wish invested in nuclear weaponry, border wars (at the point where superpower hegemony enlarges internal conflicts in postcolonial states), and the serial image stills by which The News freeze-dries and bottles History for shelving in the archive. In his story, "Common Origin," the postwar protagonist does not heal by trying to fill his sense of Lack with another substitute for illusory plenitude, but by *connecting* to the species memory of suffering, his hands stretched into a pool of sensibility through which body and (people's) history recover from the force of the image repertoire and the history of patriarchal violence. Williams' therapeutic practice confronts the internalized violence and the disorientations of body and thought among those with whom he works. But he does not place them in the Lacanian horror

film in which they are forever running through haunted rooms that are cruel parodies of the suddenly lost and (in retrospect) golden reality of their (former) lives, trapped in catacombs whose metaphoric darkness and enclosure are signifiers of the (recurrent) death of their illusions of light and fullness. It is as if, for Williams, Lacan's primal narrative (historicized) and the mass culture that emanates from the same SS is an aberration which he undertakes to recode through (Deleuzian) techniques of unlearning the (psychoanalytic) imaginary anatomy, deterritorializing the siting of mind and of making, and disengaging from the given and usually naturalized structures of communication, the social, and the self.

10. I think one can find no more interesting an example of what this looks like in fiction than by looking at the writing of Lynne Tillman. Her first novel, *Haunted Houses*, mixes the stories of three young women trying to see and contend with the embodiment of power in their daily lives. Teachers, parents, friends, lovers, work, and encounters both chance and otherwise, all function as normalizing relations within which they find themselves. The norms aren't consistent, of course, any more than identifying and contesting their force is in any sense unproblematic. But by *mixing* the stories, rather than following the format, say, of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Tillman makes us all but lose the thread of individual identities and focus instead upon this mesh of micro-power relations that make up the living texture of their culture. In the review essays collected as *The Madame Realism Complex*, Tillman undoes the cool distance of the critical voice and its disciplinary focus upon Art Criticism. Madame Realism makes visible how forms of discursive or institutional or social conventions weave our consciousness out of these constructs and the contradictions, frustrations, and misrecognitions they bring with them. Distractions to "proper" essays become crucial means of her effects, including conversation overheard at exhibitions, pop culture associations between Freud and Coney Island or between "Treasure Houses of Britain" and TV's *Dynasty*, urban realities outside the museum, the psychodynamics of collecting and exhibiting, the sheer materiality of voice and language and the forms we practice.

*Absence Makes the Heart* collects her deft sketches of those prickly moments when unexpected events (memories, things we find ourselves saying) desubliminate the violences Foucault finds pulsing away in the implicit power relations of everyday life. The same volume also contains her filmscript for *Committed*, the not-for-Hollywood study of Frances Farmer which exposes not her body, but the body of discourses in which she is caught (a nexus of sexism, McCarthyism, and the power/knowledge case study of psychiatry). *Motion Sickness* follows the geographical wanderings of a woman containerized by the state culture she carries always with her in the manifold mini-processors of experience internalized from that culture. If you read the novel as a modernist portrait of an individual, you find a decent late modernist fiction--but you miss the point of having done the portrait in the first place, namely that the sickness of motion, even of motion-in-place, is the effect of culture's viral reprogramming even at the neuro-motor-sensory level.

A similar way of misreading her latest novel, *Cast in Doubt*, allows one to repeat the reading error of the modernist narrator (Horace), a mystery writer who expects life to follow his plot form back to primal scenery he can (re)possess. The (postmodernist) Helen is for him unreadable in her own terms (his encounter with her tour-de-force diary is a comedy in incommensurability), uncontainable in *his*. Horace is both endearing in his intensities and comical in never quite understanding how out of place his thinking machines are. His relationships are all but hopelessly complicated by the social (and thus political, etc) analogies of his plot form. Horace is the latest of a series of misrecognitions (some by characters, some by us as readers allowed to be surprised by the sins of our cultural implants). It is quite delicious that modernist readings can thread their way through Tillman's ironies and juxtapositions-particularly since they are the very means by which Tillman's fictions lay out the law of the Father's forms.

11. Kathy Acker's work is perhaps the most extreme form of this doubled purpose: she breaks up the narrative scenario and destroys the whole relationship between reader, writer, and the world.

At the same time, her work sometimes seems strikingly moralistic, almost old-fashioned, in its determined search for authentic interpersonal relations, for simple quality of life, for a viable way to disengage from the conflicted and pain-ridden individuality that comes along with The State and its mechanisms of work, gender, and consumption. The breaking up is necessary, "for economic and political war or control now is taking place at the level of language or myth" (*Don Quixote* 117), an economical minding of the Foucauldian relation between war and normalization. Her characters persist in expectations like this one from the 1978 *Blood and Guts in High School*: "there's going to be a world where the imagination is created by joy not suffering, a man and a woman can love each other again" (100). The equally strong expectation, of course, is that [only] "a woman is going to come along and make this world for me." In the meantime, Acker maintains a nomadic status between worlds since "there is nowhere to flee; so we travel like pirates on shifting mixtures of something and nothing" (187). The somethings are the useful fragments resituated or rewritten from the breakup, the nothings perhaps the post-metaphysical kind of thought she attempts. Such seems to be the case when Acker rewrites girls' school pornography (they've just gone into a white room under the cemetery): "What we do in this room is be happy. With our bodies. Our bodies teach us who've been poisoned. . . . Since these educators train the mind rather than the body, we can start with the physical body, the place of shitting, eating, etc., to break through our opinions or false education" (165-166). Acker reading Bakhtin reading Rabelais? Acker's results are ambiguous, since tracing the body's lines of pleasure discovers also the colonization of those lines by the sadomasochism of Power.

12. And so, to continue the parenthetical revisionist history of postmodern American fiction, one would have to keep choosing wisely which works one associated with simply this period, and which ones one thought were speaking relatively directly back to it. One would have to explore a range of work from High Risk to Avant Pop writing; from graphic novels to exponentiated satires of existing forms (subgenius institutions and their discourses, postsequels to *Mad*-level satires, spindoctored *x*'s for beginners, performance art versions), from text in new places (gallery walls, EBBS archives, public access video, zines) to new spaces in texts (from graphic design gurus, in the interlinear weavings of appropriation and sass, in the persistent sub-commercial *samizdat* publishing or nonpublishing worlds).

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