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[Introduction to] After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places

Gary Shapiro
University of Richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

After the Future

Postmodern Times and Places

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Gary Shapiro

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Introduction

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For better or for worse, the term "postmodernism" has entered the general language of our culture. A generation or so ago, newspapers and popular magazines gestured toward the intellectual movement of the day by speaking of "existentialism" and a raft of associated concepts. One might suspect that every new tendency in thought or the arts must suffer the fate of degradation through journalism in a world where mass media provide the most fundamental social bond. But this time is different for several reasons. At least within the anglophone world, the elapsed time between the theoretical elaboration of an idea or the flowering of a cultural movement and its popularization and dissemination has been dramatically compressed. And the popular extension of postmodernism has rapidly gone beyond the arts and literary pages and into the advertising that supports them. The ads speak of "postmodern fashions"; while there may have once been an existential style—black slacks and turtle neck—there were no obvious efforts to market it as such. The plays of Beckett and Sartre were taken to be the latest word on freedom, anxiety, or the absurd, but they were also seen implicitly as high culture, demanding at least as awed and respectful an audience in the theater as Shakespeare or Ibsen. "Postmodern MTV" has effortlessly established itself as one of the many alternatives available to a mass audience that can happily co-exist with meals, love-making or financial discussions. And while other television programs—one thinks of the defunct "Max Headroom" or the fabulously popular "Moonlighting"—may not title themselves postmodern, the adjective has been frequently deployed in discussing them, not only by critics of popular culture, writing in their esoteric journals, but by the media's own analysts.

Because it is generally agreed that one of the principal tendencies of the postmodern is to relax the rigid separations that modernism insisted upon between high and popular culture (think of T. S.

Eliot's criticism or the priestcraft of the New Critics, for example), it is not surprising that it may be difficult to disentangle or even distinguish the theory and practice of postmodernism from its reception and popularization. One mark of this situation is the fact that it is with regard to architecture, an art that compels attention both by its structuring of the environment and its requirement of massive investment of resources, that postmodernism forced itself upon the public attention. Yet just as one could argue that postmodernism's straddling of the elite and popular lanes of the cultural highway is in keeping with its deepest tendencies, so one could add that these same tendencies will necessarily lead to postmodernism's becoming a kind of schizophrenic interchange, like the hyperreal traffic spaces of southern California, in which anything (and nothing) goes.

The 1987 conference on postmodernism held by the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at the University of Kansas was intended to serve not so much as a vehicle for mastering this actual and possible snarl but as a preliminary effort to chart the patterns of movement. Included in this collection are nineteen essays that explore various aspects of the postmodern situation and the discourses that it generated. In terms of subject matter the papers presented at the conference ranged diachronically from new views of the Greeks to the most recent films; in terms of topics they touched, among other things, on feminist ethics, deconstructive architecture, body art, and the question of narrativity. The essays assembled here may perhaps serve as a way of delineating some of the main directions in the traffic flow.

Certainly one of the major questions that a discourse on postmodernism must address is that of periodization. Is postmodernism to be construed as the name of an era or epoch, the successor of modernism in a lineage that goes back to the ancient and the medieval? This is perhaps the most general way of understanding the concept, and it may function both as pop *Geistesgeschichte,* as in ads for postmodern clothes, and in a very subtle neo-Marxist attempt at periodization, as in the powerful and influential analyses of Fredric Jameson. But one might also suspect that the very project of periodization itself is a distinctively modern enterprise, one that finds its paradigms in the enlightenment's story of the progress of reason and freedom, in Hegel's dialectical and spiritual version of that narrative, or in Marx's materialistic retelling of Hegel. In Jean-François Lyotard's account of *The Postmodern Condition,* the definitive characteristic of the postmodern is taken to be the rejection of such all-encompassing metanarratives. Even if a periodizing metanarrative should remain open in some respects by leaving room for epochs that

would follow the postmodern, it is ineluctably modern in style. Postmodernism is engaged in a difficult and ambitious struggle with the project of periodization. It might be more aptly if barbarously named postperiodization. Such a term, a deliberate oxymoron, would have the virtue of suggesting that what is at issue are alternatives to the sequential, developmental, and unitary emplotments of modern consciousness. In various ways the essays in this collection examine some of these alternatives, exploring the possibilities of a genealogical or archeological perspective (as in Michel Foucault) or articulating the critique of teleological thought implicit in the "always already" of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.

Searching questions concerning the attempt to restore anything like a Hegelian unity of history and reason are raised in Anthony J. Cascardi's essay, which looks at Hans Blumenberg's attempt to defend the legitimacy of the modern. Cascardi considers the sort of objections that Foucault would make to even such a subtle and nuanced defense of the moral and epistemological claims of modernity in its attempt to establish itself as a normative position from which to assess all history. While not endorsing Foucault—in fact he finds that program more indebted to the modernist project than Foucault could acknowledge—Cascardi also finds Blumenberg's narrative not fully adequate to the conflicts within the presumed founding era of modernity. Mary Bittner Wiseman investigates the conflicts that arise when critics, cultural institutions, and all of us for that matter, construct narratives that will demonstrate our place with respect to the primitive. She elaborates Roland Barthes's suggestion that photography can open up a sense of an absolute past and a nondialectical sense of history. At the same time she demonstrates how such a postmodern substitution of the index for the continuous growth of meaning posited by the modern can lead to our rethinking the nature of representation, ultimately allowing us to be invaded and wounded by the past. These are not (as Hegel said) the wounds of the spirit that heal without leaving a scar, but those marks of experience without which we cannot really be said to have encountered the other.

What place will there be for the subject in the stories that might be told after renouncing the privileges of the omniscient narrator who recounts the story of history as freedom or who guides us effortlessly through the museum without walls? Carol Bernstein and Antony Easthope ask such a question in rereading some of the canonical moments of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry in English. In Keats's *Hyperion*, Bernstein finds that Apollo, the god of poetry, is already situated at the uncanny intersection of the modern and the postmodern. Easthope traces the decline of the transcendental sub-

ject of poetry from John Donne's *Elegies* to T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and finally to Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. Like Bernstein he gives us a way of seeing poems claimed by the modernist canon that frees them from the unitary, lyrical voice of the tradition, and can accordingly construe dispersal, fragmentation, and conflict in terms other than those of the pathology that modernism all too facilely invokes when it senses the faltering or failure of the transcendental subject. John Johnston offers a guide to the theory of the postmodern subject that enables such readings. Like Bernstein and Easthope he rejects the view of "vulgar postmodernism" (easily ridiculed by its critics) that there are no more subjects. But subjects are situated and contextualized; they may also be seen, as in the analysis of Deleuze and Guattari, as "desiring machines," schizophrenically living out the manifold pulses of desire, inscribing themselves in jagged territories rather than constrained by an ideological assignment to patriarchal social space.

Will traditional humanistic disciplines such as philosophy still have something to say in a context where the transcendental subject has been dislodged? The problem for philosophy would seem to be particularly acute, for it has always sought the absolute, the certain, and the universal. Alan Schrift explores the paradoxes that would be involved in philosophy now declaring itself to *be* postmodern—that is, to have attained a new set of postmodern categories of understanding and methods of analysis. The alternative, he suggests, is that, implicit in Nietzsche and explicit in Derrida, philosophy can be seen as the process or activity of challenging the figure of authority (and not merely a particular series of traditional authorities) and the deconstruction of binary oppositions. By volatilizing itself, philosophy would seem to escape the fate of prematurely declaring itself to be the final step in transcendental reflection. But the problem of philosophy living on after the surrender of its absolutistic aspirations is not limited to thought within the continental tradition. Richard Shusterman claims that Ludwig Wittgenstein became the greatest postmodern philosopher in his later work after having formulated the principle that "ethics and aesthetics are one." Richard Rorty is a contemporary heir of Wittgenstein who has attempted to think through the consequences of the collapse of foundationalism (what the continental tradition would see as a transcendental ground) and therefore has surrendered the assurance that an unassailable foundation would offer to ethics. Shusterman explores the possibility that Rorty has retained a modernist conception of organic unity in his amalgamation of the aesthetic and the ethical; and he offers some reasons for thinking that such a norm cannot be attained as easily in a

world of fragmented quasi-selves "constituted by alternative, constantly changing, and often incommensurable narratives and vocabularies."

Timothy Gould further pursues the difficulties besetting the proposed marriage of philosophy and postmodernism by explicitly comparing some continental and analytical forms of this uncertain union. Gould's subject is precisely philosophy's traditional quest for purity, a quest that requires it to practice a logic of exclusion, banning otherness and difference from its privileged realm. He finds that while Richard Rorty describes the exclusionary tactics of philosophy in terms that might apply to any political or personal practice, Stanley Cavell and Jacques Derrida have attempted to articulate a more specific sense of what it is that philosophy excludes or represses; for Cavell this is "reading" and for Derrida it is "writing." These terms each convey something that Gould characterizes variously as the passive, or the feminine, which traditional philosophy would exclude in favor of a presumptive, masculine form of activity. Perhaps the becoming postmodern of philosophy is to be construed as a constant interrogation of these temptations toward exclusionary claims.

If postmodern philosophy's questioning of the division between inside and outside depends on a metaphorical sense of these prepositions, it is in contemporary architectural theory and practice that this interrogation has its most obvious, material, and public manifestations. As Edward Casey suggests, there is a far-reaching convergence between the architectonic metaphors of a foundationalist (for example, Kantian) philosophy and modernism's aim at a self-enclosed and self-sufficient structure; the rigorous interrogation of the barrier between inside and outside, foundation and ground, associated with a philosopher like Derrida finds its architectural analogue in postmodern architecture in which the relation between edifice and environing terrain is destabilized. The very construction of a Derridean text, Casey shows, with its parallel columns and insertions can be read in a way not unlike our "reading" of a postmodern architectural structure with its refusal of a centered space and a dominant style to which all details would be subordinated.

Roger Bell offers an account of one exemplary postmodern architect, Frank Gehry, who produces structures that vary the assumed interconnections of home, neighborhood, and city, which have—at least since Aristotle's *Economics* and *Politics*—formed the horizon of Western thinking about building, dwelling, and thinking. As an architectural critic and historian, Diane Ghirardo takes issue with what she sees as the inflationary claims of postmodernism. As the title of her essay, "The Deceit of Postmodern Architecture," suggests, she is

attempting to renew the spirit of the modernist theory and practice that values above all authenticity and honesty in the constructions by which we shape our environments. Ghirardo's critique (like Shusterman's of Rorty) asks in effect whether anyone could really live in a postmodern construction, and she points to the fact that much "deconstructive architecture" exists only in plans and drawings, not in concrete. The answer may take some time to emerge, although it is important to note that works like those of Frank Gehry and Charles Moore (commented on by Bell and Casey) continue to have an impact.

In any case, some version of the language of postmodernism seems inevitable in accounting for contemporary art. Ever since Hegel announced that art on its highest side is a thing of the past, art has struggled to come to terms with its own history and its historicity. Postmodernism in art, Stephen Melville suggests, is to be understood as the acceptance of its own belatedness, and the rejection of any nostalgia for restoring the cultural supremacy it seemed to have in fifth-century Athens or fifteenth-century Florence. Such an art will explore the modes of rejecting or countering the assumptions of originality and creativity that dominate modern aesthetics; it will be unashamedly repetitive of the past, assimilating and appropriating the art of modernism.

If grandeur and heroism are possible in postmodern art, they may perhaps be found in a confrontation with the very power that has colonized art through the mass media or has apparently rendered it irrelevant: technology. This is the possibility that John Gilmour articulates in his attempt to situate the art of Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer, in his juxtaposition of contemporary industrial wasteland with archaic myth and of the enframing universal powers of technology with alchemy and magic, is not so much nostalgic for an earlier age as questioning the periodization that would fix art within the narrow confines of a present, in the latest room of the last wing of the museum without walls.

Vito Acconci is an artist who has often made use of technology (especially video) in order to question representation and traditional representation's most constant subject, the human body. Philip Auslander shows how Acconci's performance art in which the transformations and representations of his own body become the subject helps to expose the ideological constructions of gender and of the allegedly whole or integral body which, as critics like John Berger have shown, govern the traditions of painting as well as the general circulation of images (by advertising, journalism, and propaganda) in society.

All the artists and artistic movements just discussed are political insofar as they are postmodern and postmodern insofar as they are political; they are all engaged in questioning authorities, traditions, ideologies, and representations that are not limited to the art world. Their interrogations, however, suggest that whatever the claims of that world to be grounded in universal values, it has always been a site of strategic and political contestation. Similarly, it is possible to regard the entire postmodern intervention as a series of political gestures (so long as we do not qualify those gestures as "merely" political). Stephen David Ross, developing some thoughts of Heidegger and Foucault, presents the case that these gestures find an exemplary field in technology. This is because technology as we know it now is disruptive of the temporal continuity of past, present, and future implicitly supposed in political praxis that aims at furthering or constructing the totalistic subject of a metanarrative (this would include political thought within the Hegelian tradition, such as that of Marx and Sartre).

While asserting a claim to order and regularity unlike any previous claim, technology in practice propels us into disjoint, unpredictable futures. Jean-François Lyotard has argued that the appropriate response is to surrender the totalistic ambitions of modern politics for an indefinitely pluralistic agonistics in which partial, regional activities take the place of the absolutist aspirations of the revolutionary subject. In his critical essay Steve Fuller responds to such a position—with respect to the politics of knowledge and research—with a question, "Does it Pay to Go Postmodern If Your Neighbors do Not?" He gathers together some reasons for thinking that we have not yet fully worked out the logic of such a pluralistic model of knowledge; what is called for is a study of the deep structure of various models of pluralism analogous to those reconstructions of convergent scientific inquiry offered by philosophers like Charles Peirce and Jürgen Habermas. But how far can such pluralism go? Richard Rorty has argued that just because we can find no foundation for common values any deeper than tradition and pragmatic efficacy, that is no reason to surrender such values and the communities they serve.

Some of the most acute analysts of postmodernism, as John O'Neill points out in his essay on Daniel Bell and Fredric Jameson, have suggested that a renewal of the religious bond, or something very much like it, is necessary to halt our dangerous slide into a fragmented and incoherent social condition. In these and a number of other theorists O'Neill detects a Durkheimian nostalgia for a lost sense of community, which cuts across their more obvious and explicit identification of the conventional left and right poles of the

political spectrum. Yet just as the "post" in postmodern art means that art must live on after its classical consummations without nostalgia, it would seem that postmodern culture would be generally defined as living in the long shadow of God's death without attempting to revive God.

Nietzsche not only announced the death of God; he also detected analogues of the transcendental powers and central place that God occupies in religious thought in the quest for many forms of certainty. He anticipated a poststructuralist view of language with the remark "I fear that we have not gotten rid of God, because we still believe in grammar." Language can come to play the same foundational role that the ontotheological tradition assigns to the Platonic ideas, God, the Cartesian cogito, or absolute spirit. Philosophical and artistic modernism are alike in concentrating much of their efforts on the project of articulating a pure language whose constructions would have an unquestionable force and coherence. At the same time, whether in Wittgenstein, Hofmannsthal, or Mallarmé, this quest has confronted the motivated silence or void that must be the context out of which such privileged speech or inscriptions emerge. The postmodern linguistic turn consists in challenging and interrogating this duality of the articulate and the inarticulate. Gerald Bruns details Heidegger's move in this direction by tracing his attempts to show just how uncanny—that is, how ungrammatical and unformalizable—language can be. If there were to be a final or ultimate Heideggerian word, Bruns suggests, it would not be a foundation, but a provocation to perpetual risk, like "an endless pun whose changes could never be terminated."

Focusing not on the ultimacy of language, but on the very attempt to articulate the distinction between the articulate and the inarticulate, Virgil Lokke investigates the many ways in which postmodern thinkers have understood the hinge, virgule, or slash that both links separates and marks language and its other. What Lokke's analysis does is to clarify the very multiplicity of postmodern discourses on language, risking the pun (virgule/Virgil) while exemplifying the power of naming.

Language has turned on us. It is no longer assumed to be the instrument by which we construct representations and correspondences; rather it places us in question. Postmodernism, as I suggested above, ought not to be construed as the name of the latest period of history or culture in which we could situate ourselves and confirm an achieved (if novel) identity. As in these meditations on language, it is precisely the tendency to unsettle such facile identifications by excavating the deepest structures of narrative, art, and utterance.