The Generation Gap: Postmodernism in the Nineties

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Abstract
An extended review of the journal “Postmodern Culture,” one of the earliest Open Access electronic academic journals.

Reference

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The Generation Gap: Postmodernism in the Nineties
Deborah L. Hadden

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of postmodernism is its protean nature. In the period since the sixties "postmodernism" has provided a single term to describe all the vagaries of Western (though in effect Anglo-American) culture and as a consequence has been the subject of constant debate and continual revision. From the perspective of the nineties, however, a clear break is perceptible between early and later discourses of postmodernism. Concurrent with this break is a corresponding shift away from structuralist theory to a broadly deconstructive methodology. Together, these two currents produce distinct "postmodernisms": each has its own canon or group of "archetexts", each uses a distinct style of description to construct postmodernism as a conceptual object, each has its own forum. It is within this context that I want to consider the significance of the new electronic journal, Postmodern Culture.

Postmodernism in the sixties and seventies took its prime metaphors from structuralism and its controlling perception was a sense that Western civilization had played itself out and so postmodern artists were condemned to replay or rearrange existing aesthetic designs since originality was no longer possible. Influential titles about literary postmodernism tell the story: "The Death of the Author", "The Literature of Exhaustion", "The Literature of Silence". The self-absorbed auto-referentiality of this style of writing is also revealed by titles that have since become standard references: "Fabulation and Metafiction", "The Performing Self", "City of Words".

Since the eighties, postmodernism’s controlling metaphors have been derived from poststructuralist theorists like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, to the extent that it has become difficult, if not pointless, to attempt to separate the two kinds of theory. But this development has had a considerable impact upon the objects of postmodernist discourses, or what we think of as constituting postmodernism. In terms of post-war American fiction, a popular arena for postmodern debate, a new canon has been established at precisely the time that the whole notion of the "canon" has come under intense scrutiny. In the seventies, "postmodernism" described, primarily, the black humor fiction of writers like John Barth, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass, whose reputations it made. Scrolling through the four issues of Postmodern Culture that have appeared to date, you will encounter none of these names. Instead you will find William Gaddis, Paul Bowles, Ishmael Reed, and Thomas Pynchon: Pynchon, darling of "death-of-the-author existentialists" more than twenty years ago, still provides a touchstone for postmodernist theorizing. These writers reflect an intensified interest in the concept of cultural imperialism which has given postmodernist theory a new set of motivations, a new relevance, a new raison d’etre.

In the nineties, postmodernism claims to challenge the status quo by recovering the histories, traditions - cultural alternatives - denied by the self-enclosed artistic and critical practices of the sixties. Contemporary postmodernism builds upon the insights of Benjamin, Derrida and Lyotard, the awareness that provisional and contingent truths are less sinister or intimidating than are "monolithic" cultural institutions and discourses. In contrast to the hermetic, self-referential texts of an earlier "postmodernism", later texts are not only open to extrinsic discourses but actively draw upon areas of knowledge that reside outside the text. Mathematics, cybernetics, film, psychoanalysis, philosophy, music, history are among those spheres of knowledge that form intertextual components of the "decentered" postmodernist text. Paradoxically, rather than make these texts more accessible this intertextuality creates a further difficulty as the text recedes into a labyrinth of assumed knowledge.

This is one of the several important contradictions of postmodernism that form the subtext to the essays published in Postmodern Culture. This particular problem of accessibility has implications for an electronic journal such as Postmodern Culture. Free via electronic mail, the journal should be read by all who have access to a computer. (Details about how to subscribe are given below.) But even within the privileged realm of the academy, computer illiteracy places an enormous constraint upon the size of the audience. Strangely, the medium is the message: what appears to be an open dissemination of knowledge becomes a coterie sharing a very privileged access to knowledge. Though the discourses of postmodernism may change a fundamental impulse remains constant: the desire for popular recognition by those with the means and leisure to pursue it.

The whole concept of "the popular" within postmodernist theory is problematic. John Beverley, in his essay on postmodern music and left
politics, complains of "a certain smugness in postmodernist theory and practice about just how far elite/popular, high culture/main culture distinctions have broken down" (1.1. Sept. 1990). As Beverley argues, the genuine commodification or aestheticisation of everyday life - a realisation of Baudrillard's postmodern world of simulacra - would, or at least could, represent a genuine democratisation of western society. The problem is how little, not how much, our lives are structured by hierarchically organised categories. Elizabeth Wheeler, writing about the effect of postmodernism on the urban landscape (1.3. May 1991), describes a process of "gentrification", as when the Temporary Contemporary museum of art in Los Angeles moves into a renovated factory a block from Skid Row. The Yuppie renovation of working-class and slum districts is seen as the conservative side of postmodernism writ large. But the consequent displacement experienced by particular communities finds no adequate description in postmodernist theory which instead constructs displacement as an abstract and unreal category.

Essays such as these reveal a profound difficulty in the prevailing rhetoric of postmodernist theory. Paradoxically, the postmodernist critique of cultural imperialism is articulated by the voice of a white, upper-middle-class, male academic coterie. The effect of this style of enunciation upon those that it excludes is described with great insight and sensitivity by Bell Hooks in her essay "Postmodern Blackness" (1.1. Sept. 1990).

Postmodernist discourses are often exclusionary even when, having been accused of lacking concrete relevance, they call attention to and appropriate the experience of "difference" and "otherness" in order to provide themselves with oppositional political meaning, legitimacy, and immediacy. ...[R]acism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived either as opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. ... Disturbed not so much by the "sense" of postmodernism but by the conventional language used when it is written or talked about and by those who speak it, I find myself on the outside of the discourse looking in. As a discursive practice it is dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to and about one another with coded familiarity. Reading and studying their writing to understand postmodernism in its multiple manifestations, I appreciate it but feel little inclination to ally myself with the academic hierarchy and exclusivity pervasive in the movement today.

Essays published in Postmodern Culture deal with the discourses of cultural imperialism not only as they affect racial and sexual minorities but also demonstrate a concern for the ways in which rhetoric is used indiscriminately against all of us within the context of the commodification of contemporary life. Cultural icons are deconstructed to reveal the dynamics of postmodernism. So Charles Bernstein analyses World War 2 as a crisis in the project of the Enlightenment that reveals racism as intrinsic to Western logocentrism, not as a "correctable" deviation from the cultural norm (1.2. Jan. 1991). In the same issue, Frederick Dolan considers the rhetoric of the Gulf War within the context of Paul de Man's comments on rhetoric. The split between political signifier and signified is demonstrated by competing explanations of the war which function allegorically to reinterpret the significance of World War 2 and the Vietnam War respectively both for America's contemporary foreign relations and for domestic politics.

The rhetoric of personal imagery is explored by George Yudice who investigates connections between such eating disorders as anorexia and obesity and mystical traditions that associate transcendence with food (1.1. Sept. 1990). The commodification of postmodern culture is presented at its most intense in relation to personal or self imagery. The "postmodern subject" is often found at the intersection of issues of communication, exchange, originality, value, control, and temporality. Allison Fraberg's analysis of the rhetoric of mainstream AIDS coverage as opposed to alternative AIDS writings within the context of cyborg theory is directed towards a redefinition of the notion of discretion and a rethinking of the concept of agency (1.3. May 1991).

Andrew Ross begins his article on the potential of computer hacking as a political activity by considering the rhetoric of viruses and the properties common to AIDS hysteria and the publicity surrounding computer crime - specifically the "virus" known as the "Internet worm" which in 1989 brought to a halt the ARPAnet/information network sponsored by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (funded by the US Department of Defence). Ross points to the repercussions of this redoubled virus scare: the reassertion of personal autonomy as against commodity, private as opposed to shared property, a renewed appeal to legislation as a means of social control, and the like. This kind of investigation is of obvious relevance to the cultural and political motives of Postmodern Culture and several articles have appeared that address the potential role of electronic publishing in the transformation of academic writing and reading generally as a cultural activity.

Many of the contradictions associated with postmodernism, and outlined above, are taken up by Andrew Ross. He discusses the stereotypical image of
the hacker as a white middle-class male "college nerd" who regards hacking as a kind of intellectual joyriding that is completely removed from politics. Against this popular image, promoted by Disneyesque movies and the tabloid press, Ross considers acts of routine sabotage on the part of bureaucratised office workers and VDU operators. And he goes on to uncover a potentially radical political role for hacking. In a world dominated by a technofascist state, he speculates, hackers may be our only recourse, our only effective opposition. Ross describes how, in the wake of Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government dared not purge those technologically literate students upon whom China's future as a modern state relies. What Ross does not make clear is that the first accurate accounts of the aftermath of the pro-democracy uprising were made known in the West via Internet. The potential of electronic media to counter or at least subvert a repressive state is not a matter for speculation - it is an historical reality.

Closely allied to the investigation of the cultural significance of electronic communication is the future of writing itself. Michael Joyce considers the power of "hyperfiction" to transform all the world into textuality and to alter the aesthetics of reading (2 1. Sept. 1991). The political implications of Hypertext are discussed by Stuart Moulthrop within the context of postmodernism's own political ambiguities (1.3. May 1991). But perhaps the most challenging essay on the subject of the future of academic writing is Greg Ulmer's "Grammatology Hypermedia" (1.2. Jan. 1991). Ulmer predicts the liberation of intellectual activity from the artificial constraints imposed by the institution of academic print publishing through such structures as Hypertext. He envisions the academic essay of the future as taking the form of a card "stack", where the argument or theoretical component serves to limit the data included but beyond that readers are free to navigate their own routes through the cards. In this way, reading becomes a self-determining process, writing is freed from false closure, and meaning is liberated into a condition of creative indeterminacy. When such an essay is written, and surely it is inevitable as more academics discover the pedagogical power of "hypertextual" systems, Postmodern Culture will be the place to find it. The journal provides a valuable forum for ideas and speculations about the future of the academic enterprise.

Postmodern Culture does publish more orthodox critical analyses of postmodernist texts and also creative writing - poetry, even a video transcript (by Laura Kipnis, 1.1. Sept. 1990) - and articles that bridge the two, like Jerome McGann's parodic meditation on the dialogic imagination (2.1. Sept. 1991).

To subscribe to Postmodern Culture via electronic mail and to subscribe to PMC-Talk, a discussion group for those interested in postmodernism in general, contact the editors (pmc@nceuvum or pmc@nceuvum.cc.nscu.edu). Instructions about retrieving entire issues and individual files from the filestore at North Carolina State University are contained in the file "Newuser Preface", available from listserv@nceuvum or listserv@nceuvum.cc.nscu.edu. Postmodern Culture is also available on disk and microfiche: $15 per year for individuals and $30 per year for institutions, plus $7 for postage outside North America. Three issues are published per year, in January, May, and September. Postmodern Culture uses ASCII text; this is the standard character code used by all personal computers so any file/article from Postmodern Culture can be imported into almost any word processor and formatted for printing. Submissions are accepted by electronic mail, on disk or in hard copy. Recently, an award was announced for the best article published in Postmodern Culture: a further temptation, if one were needed, for the faint-hearted to launch themselves into the realm of postmodern publication. The real attraction of this new journal is the opportunity it offers to bring the ethos of shareware - of open and democratic access to knowledge - into the domain of academic humanities publishing. Entire issues of Postmodern Culture can be held in an archive for public use provided no fee is charged to the user; individual items can be freely shared among individuals but they must not be republished without express consent from the author/s and editors. Thus, the journal enables free and wide access to information while retaining intellectual copyright or the notion of ideas as private property. Here then is a real chance to transform academic interchange into just that: a genuine exchange of ideas and opinions that is as disinterested as is possible in the postmodern world.
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Introduction

Richard Maltby

Partialism: Received Wisdom: Recent Early Film Histories

Barry Lewis

Recent Early Film Histories

David E. James

Lynn Hersham: The Subject of Autobiography

Ralph Millett

Les Misérables: The FILM NOIR Crowd and Their Critics

Neil Sinyard

The Allusive Mr. Allen: Literary Themes in the Films of Woody Allen

Frank Piekarczyk

Hollywood and the Vietnam War

Paul McDonald

Materiality and Mystery: Fashioning the Fascinations of Film Stardom

Mark Jancovich

Serial Killers and Female Heroes: Re-examining the Slasher Film

Douglas Tallack

Reading Hawthorne Reading History

Sandra Harris

Doing the American West

Hugh Murray

Liberalism and Race

David Seed

Cold War Visions

Deborah L. Madsen

The Generation Gap: Postmodernism in the Nineties

Peter Nesteruk

Sylvia Plath: Fantasy, Identity, Poetry

Reply to Richard King

Short Reviews

Books also Received

List of Contributors

Received Wisdom: Recent Early Film Histories

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Liberalism and Race

Cold War Visions

The Generation Gap: Postmodernism in the Nineties

Sylvia Plath: Fantasy, Identity, Poetry

Reply to Richard King

Books also Received

List of Contributors

1
11
18
29
36
50
58
67
75
86
95
101
113
119
127
130
144
146