

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# The Catastrophe of Postmodernism

John Zerzan

John Zerzan  
The Catastrophe of Postmodernism  
1991

Retrieved on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [www.primitivism.com](http://www.primitivism.com)

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

1991

“everything is culture,” the culture of the commodity, that is offensive; it is also the pm affirmation of what is by its refusal to make qualitative distinctions and judgments. If the postmodern at least does us the favor, unwittingly, of registering the decomposition and even depravity of a cultural world that accompanies and abets the current frightening impoverishment of life, that may be its only ‘contribution’.

We are all aware of the possibility that we may have to endure, until its self-destruction and ours, a world fatally out of focus. “Obviously, culture does not dissolve merely because persons are alienated,” wrote John Murphy, adding, “A strange type of society has to be invented, nonetheless, in order for alienation to be considered normative.”

Meanwhile, where are vitality, refusal, the possibility of creating a non-mutilated world? Barthes proclaimed a Nietzschean “hedonism of discourse;” Lyotard counselled, “Let us be pagans.” Such wild barbarians! Of course, their real stuff is blank and dispirited, a thoroughly relativized academic sterility. Postmodernism leaves us hopeless in an unending mall; without a living critique; nowhere.

in that this vacuous, unabashedly consumerist novel, awash with brand names (a bit like Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 American Psycho), dominated the decade. But it is cynicism, even more than superficiality, that seems to mark that full dawning of postmodernism which Japan seems to be: how else does one explain that the most incisive analyses of pm there — Now is the Meta-Mass Age, for example — are published by the Parco Corporation, the country's trendiest marketing and retailing outlet. Shigesatu Itoi is a top media star, with his own television program, numerous publications, and constant appearances in magazines. The basis of this idol's fame? Simply that he wrote a series of state-of-the-art (flashy, fragmented, etc.) ads for Seibu, Japan's largest and most innovative department store chain. Where capitalism exists in its most advanced, post-modern form, knowledge is consumed in exactly the way that one buys clothes. 'Meaning' is pass,, irrelevant; style and appearance are all.

We are fast arriving at a sad and empty place, which the spirit of postmodernism embodies all too well. "Never in any previous civilization have the great metaphysical preoccupations, the fundamental questions of being and the meaning of life, seemed so utterly remote and pointless," in Frederic Jameson's judgment. Peter Sloterdijk finds that "the discontent in culture has assumed a new quality: it appears as universal, diffuse cynicism." The erosion of meaning, pushed forward by intensified reification and fragmentation, causes the cynic to appear everywhere. Psychologically "a borderline melancholic," he is now "a mass figure."

The postmodern capitulation to perspectivism and decadence does not tend to view the present as alienated — surely an old-fashioned concept — but rather as normal and even pleasant. Robert Rauschenberg: "I really feel sorry for people who think things like soap dishes or mirrors or Coke bottles are ugly, because they're surrounded by things like that all day long, and it must make them miserable." It isn't just that

## Contents

The primacy of language & the end of the subject . . . . .	6
The celebration of impotence . . . . .	11
Derrida, deconstruction & différance . . . . .	13
The crisis of representation . . . . .	18
Barthes, Foucault & Lyotard . . . . .	22
Deleuze, Guattari & Baudrillard . . . . .	30

should we think that people want to disavow their daily lives in order to search for an alternative? On the contrary, they want to make a destiny of it...to ratify monotony by a grander monotony." If there should be any 'resistance', his prescription for that is similar to that of Deleuze, who would prompt society to become more schizophrenic. That is, it consists wholly in what is granted by the system: "You want us to consume — O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose." This is the radical strategy he names 'hyperconformity'.

At many points, one can only guess as to which phenomena, if any, Baudrillard's hyperbole refers. The movement of consumer society toward both uniformity and dispersal is perhaps glimpsed in one passage...but why bother when the assertions seem all too often cosmically inflated and ludicrous. This most extreme of the postmodern theorists, now himself a top-selling cultural object, has referred to the "ominous emptiness of all discourse," apparently unaware of the phrase as an apt reference to his own vacuities.

Japan may not qualify as 'hyperreality', but it is worth mentioning that its culture seems to be even more estranged and postmodern than that of the U.S. In the judgment of Masao Miyoshi, "the dispersal and demise of modern subjectivity, as talked about by Barthes, Foucault, and many others, have long been evident in Japan, where intellectuals have chronically complained about the absence of selfhood." A flood of largely specialized information, provided by experts of all kinds, highlights the Japanese high-tech consumer ethos, in which the indeterminacy of meaning and a high valuation of perpetual novelty work hand in hand. Yoshimoto Takai is perhaps the most prolific national cultural critic; somehow it does not seem bizarre to many that he is also a male fashion model, who extols the virtues and values of shopping.

Yasuo Tanaka's hugely popular *Somehow, Crystal* (1980) was arguably the Japanese cultural phenomenon of the '80s,

because the alternative would be that nostalgia for the natural, for origins, so adamantly ruled out by postmodernism.

“The real is that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction.” Nature has been so far left behind that culture determines materiality; more specifically, media simulation shapes reality. “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth — it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” Debord’s “society of the spectacle” — but at a stage of implosion of self, agency, and history into the void of simulations such that the spectacle is in service to itself alone.

It is obvious that in our “Information Age,” the electronic media technologies have become increasingly dominant, but the overreach of Baudrillard’s dark vision is equally obvious. To stress the power of images should not obscure underlying material determinants and objectives, namely profit and expansion. The assertion that the power of the media now means that the real no longer exists is related to his claim that power “can no longer be found anywhere”; and both claims are false. Intoxicating rhetoric cannot erase the fact that the essential information of the Information Age deals with the hard realities of efficiency, accounting, productivity and the like. Production has not been supplanted by simulation, unless one can say that the planet is being ravaged by mere images, which is not to say that a progressive acceptance of the artificial does not greatly assist the erosion of what is left of the natural.

Baudrillard contends that the difference between reality and representation has collapsed, leaving us in a ‘hyperreality’ that is always and only a simulacrum. Curiously, he seems not only to acknowledge the inevitability of this development, but to celebrate it. The cultural, in its widest sense, has reached a qualitatively new stage in which the very realm of meaning and signification has disappeared. We live in “the age of events without consequences” in which the ‘real’ only survives as formal category, and this, he imagines, is welcomed. “Why

Madonna, “Are We Having Fun Yet?,” supermarket tabloids, Milli Vanilli, virtual reality, “shop ‘till you drop,” PeeWee’s Big Adventure, New Age/computer ‘empowerment’, mega-malls, Talking Heads, comic-strip movies, ‘green’ consumption. A build-up of the resolutely superficial and cynical. Toyota commercial: “New values: saving, caring — all that stuff;” Details magazine: “Style Matters;” “Why Ask Why? Try Bud Dry;” watching television endlessly while mocking it. Incoherence, fragmentation, relativism — up to and including the dismantling of the very notion of meaning (because the record of rationality has been so poor?); embrace of the marginal, while ignoring how easily margins are made fashionable. “The death of the subject” and “the crisis of representation.”

Postmodernism. Originally a theme within aesthetics, it has colonized “ever wider areas,” according to Ernesto Laclau, “until it has become the new horizon of our cultural, philosophical, and political experience.” “The growing conviction,” as Richard Kearney has it, “that human culture as we have known it...is now reaching its end.” It is, especially in the U.S., the intersection of poststructuralist philosophy and a vastly wider condition of society: both specialized ethos and, far more importantly, the arrival of what modern industrial society has portended. Postmodernism is contemporaneity, a morass of deferred solutions on every level, featuring ambiguity, the refusal to ponder either origins or ends, as well as the denial of oppositional approaches, “the new realism.” Signifying nothing and going nowhere, pm [postmodernism] is an inverted millenarianism, a gathering fruition of the technological ‘life’-system of universal capital. It is not accidental that Carnegie-Mellon University, which in the ’80s was the first to require that all students be equipped with computers, is establishing “the nation’s first poststructuralist undergraduate curriculum.”

Consumer narcissism and a cosmic “what’s the difference?” mark the end of philosophy as such and the etching of a landscape, according to Kroker and Cook, of “disintegration and

decay against the background radiation of parody, kitsch and burnout.” Henry Kariel concludes that “for postmodernists, it is simply too late to oppose the momentum of industrial society.” Surface, novelty, contingency — there are no grounds available for criticizing our crisis. If the representative postmodernist resists summarizable conclusions, in favor of an alleged pluralism and openness of perspective, it is also reasonable (if one is allowed to use such a word) to predict that if and when we live in a completely pm culture, we would no longer know how to say so.

## **The primacy of language & the end of the subject**

In terms of systematic thought, the growing preoccupation with language is a key factor accounting for the pm climate of narrowed focus and retreat. The so-called “descent into language,” or the “linguistic turn” has levied the postmodernist—poststructuralist assumption that language constitutes the human world and the human world constitutes the whole world. For most of this century language has been moving to center stage in philosophy, among figures as diverse as Wittgenstein, Quine, Heidegger, and Gadamer, while growing attention to communication theory, linguistics, cybernetics, and computer languages demonstrates a similar emphasis over several decades in science and technology. This very pronounced turn toward language itself was embraced by Foucault as a “decisive leap towards a wholly new form of thought.” Less positively, it can be at least partially explained in terms of pessimism following the ebbing of the oppositional moment of the '60s. The '70s witnessed an alarming withdrawal into what Edward Said called the “labyrinth of textuality,” as contrasted with the sometimes more insurrectionary intellectual activity of the preceding period.

of Deleuze’s approach. Schizo-politics celebrates surfaces and discontinuities; nomadology is the opposite of history.

Deleuze also embodies the postmodern “death of the subject” theme, in his and Guattari’s best-known work, *Anti-Oedipus*, and subsequently. ‘Desiringmachines’, formed by the coupling of parts, human and nonhuman, with no distinction between them, seek to replace humans as the focus of his social theory. In opposition to the illusion of an individual subject in society, Deleuze portrays a subject no longer even recognizably anthropocentric. One cannot escape the feeling, despite his supposedly radical intention, of an embrace of alienation, even a wallowing in estrangement and decadence.

In the early '70s Jean Baudrillard exposed the bourgeois foundations of marxism, mainly its veneration of production and work, in his *Mirror of Production* (1972). This contribution hastened the decline of marxism and the Communist Party in France, already in disarray after the reactionary role played by the Left against the upheavals of May '68. Since that time, however, Baudrillard has come to represent the darkest tendencies of postmodernism and has emerged, especially in America, as a pop star to the ultra-jaded, famous for his fully disenchanting views of the contemporary world. In addition to the unfortunate resonance between the almost hallucinatory morbidity of Baudrillard and a culture in decomposition, it is also true that he (along with Lyotard) has been magnified by the space he was expected to fill following the passing, in the '80s, of relatively deeper thinkers like Barthes and Foucault.

Derrida’s deconstructive description of the impossibility of a referent outside of representation becomes, for Baudrillard, a negative metaphysics in which reality is transformed by capitalism into simulations that have no backing. The culture of capital is seen as having gone beyond its fissures and contradictions to a place of self-sufficiency that reads like a rather science-fiction rendering of Adorno’s totally administered society. And there can be no resistance, no “going back,” in part

acutely aware of the dangers inherent in master narratives nonetheless remains completely committed to the authority of generalized abstraction." Pm announces an anti-generalist bias, but its practitioners, Lyotard perhaps especially, retain a very high level of abstraction in discussing culture, modernity and other such topics which are of course already vast generalizations.

"A liberated humanity," wrote Adorno, "would by no means be a totality." Nonetheless, we are currently stuck with a social world that is one and which totalizes with a vengeance. Postmodernism, with its celebrated fragmentation and heterogeneity, may choose to forget about the totality, but the totality will not forget about us.

## **Deleuze, Guattari & Baudrillard**

Gilles Deleuze's 'schizo-politics' flow, at least in part, from the prevailing pm refusal of overview, of a point of departure. Also called 'nomadology', employing "rhizomatic writing," Deleuze's method champions the deterritorialization and decoding of structures of domination, by which capitalism will supersede itself through its own dynamic. With his sometime partner, Felix Guattari, with whom he shares a specialization in psychoanalysis, he hopes to see the system's schizophrenic tendency intensified to the point of shattering. Deleuze seems to share, or at least comes very close to, the absurdist conviction of Yoshimoto Takai that consumption constitutes a new form of resistance.

This brand of denying the totality by the radical strategy of urging it to dispose of itself also recalls the impotent pm style of opposing representation: meanings do not penetrate to a center, they do not represent something beyond their reach. "Thinking without representing," is Charles Scott's description

Perhaps it isn't paradoxical that "the fetish of the textual," as Ben Agger judged, "beckons in an age when intellectuals are dispossessed of their words." Language is more and more debased; drained of meaning, especially in its public usage. No longer can even words be counted on, and this is part of a larger anti-theory current, behind which stands a much larger defeat than the '60s: that of the whole train of Enlightenment rationality. We have depended on language as the supposedly sound and transparent handmaiden of reason and where has it gotten us? Auschwitz, Hiroshima, mass psychic misery, impending destruction of the planet, to name a few. Enter postmodernism, with its seemingly bizarre and fragmented turns and twists. Edith Wyschograd's *Saints and Postmodernism* (1990) not only testifies to the ubiquity of the pm 'approach' — there are apparently no fields outside its ken — but also comments cogently on the new direction: "postmodernism as a 'philosophical' and 'literary' discursive style cannot straightforwardly appeal to the techniques of reason, themselves the instruments of theory, but must forge new and necessarily arcane means for undermining the pieties of reason."

The immediate antecedent of postmodernism/poststructuralism, reigning in the '50s and much of the '60s, was organized around the centrality it accorded the linguistic model. Structuralism provided the premise that language constitutes our only means of access to the world of objects and experience and its extension, that meaning arises wholly from the play of differences within cultural sign systems. Levi-Strauss, for example, argued that the key to anthropology lies in the uncovering of unconscious social laws (e.g. those that regulate marriage ties and kinship), which are structured like language. It was the Swiss linguist Saussure who stressed, in a move very influential to postmodernism, that meaning resides not in a relationship between an utterance and that to which it refers, but in the relationship of signs to one another. This Saussurian belief in the enclosed, self-referential nature

of language implies that everything is determined within language, leading to the scrapping of such quaint notions as alienation, ideology, repression, etc. and concluding that language and consciousness are virtually the same.

On this trajectory, which rejects the view of language as an external means deployed by consciousness, appears the also very influential neo-Freudian, Jacques Lacan. For Lacan, not only is consciousness thoroughly permeated by language and without existence for itself apart from language, even the “unconscious is structured like a language.”

Earlier thinkers, most notably Nietzsche and Heidegger, had already suggested that a different language or a changed relationship to language might somehow bring new and important insights. With the linguistic turn of more recent times, even the concept of an individual who thinks as the basis of knowledge becomes shaky. Saussure discovered that “language is not a function of the speaking subject,” the primacy of language displacing who it is that gives voice to it. Roland Barthes, whose career joins the structuralist and poststructuralist periods, decided “It is language that speaks, not the author,” paralleled by Althusser’s observation that history is “a process without a subject.”

If the subject is felt to be essentially a function of language, its stifling mediation and that of the symbolic order in general ascends toward the top of the agenda. Thus does postmodernism flail about trying to communicate what lies beyond language, “to present the unrepresentable.” Meanwhile, given the radical doubt introduced as to the availability to us of a referent in the world outside of language, the real fades from consideration. Jacques Derrida, the pivotal figure of the postmodernism ethos, proceeds as if the connection between words and the world were arbitrary. The object world plays no role for him. The exhaustion of modernism & the rise of postmodernism ut before turning to Derrida, a few more comments on precursors and the wider change in culture. Postmodernism raises

is deeply wedded to the hegemonic values of present-day industrial society.

In 1985 Lyotard put together a spectacular high-tech exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris, featuring the artificial realities and microcomputer work of such artists as Myron Krueger. At the opening, its planner declared, “We wanted...to indicate that the world is not evolving toward greater clarity and simplicity, but rather toward a new degree of complexity in which the individual may feel very lost but in which he can in fact become more free.” Apparently overviews are permitted if they coincide with the plans of our masters for us and for nature. But the more specific point lies with ‘immateriality’, the title of the exhibit and a Lyotardian term which he associates with the erosion of identity, the breaking down of stable barriers between the self and a world produced by our involvement in labyrinthine technological and social systems. Needless to say, he approves of this condition, celebrating, for instance, the ‘pluralizing’ potential of new communications technology — of the sort that de-sensualizes life, flattens experience and eradicates the natural world. Lyotard writes: “All peoples have a right to science,” as if he has the very slightest understanding of what science means. He prescribes “public free access to the memory and data banks.” A horrific view of liberation, somewhat captured by: “Data banks are the encyclopedia of tomorrow; they are ‘nature’ for postmodern men and women.”

Frank Lentricchia termed Derrida’s deconstructionist project “an elegant, commanding overview matched in philosophical history only by Hegel.” It is an obvious irony that the postmodernists require a general theory to support their assertion as to why there cannot and should not be general theories or metanarratives. Sartre, gestalt theorists and common sense tell us that what pm dismisses as “totalizing reason” is in fact inherent in perception itself: one sees a whole, as a rule, not discrete fragments. Another irony is provided by Charles Altieri’s observation of Lyotard,” that this thinker so



of language-games, with their freely contracted agreement as to meaning, tends to hold that everything is of equal validity. As Gerard Raulet concluded, the resultant refusal of overview actually obeys the existing logic of homogeneity rather than somehow providing a haven for heterogeneity.

To find progress suspect is, of course, prerequisite to any critical approach, but the quest for heterogeneity must include awareness of its disappearance and a search for the reasons why it disappeared. Postmodern thought generally behaves as if in complete ignorance of the news that division of labor and commodification are eliminating the basis for cultural or social heterogeneity. Pm seeks to preserve what is virtually nonexistent and rejects the wider thinking necessary to deal with impoverished reality. In this area it is of interest to look at the relationship between pm and technology, which happens to be of decisive importance to Lyotard.

Adorno found the way of contemporary totalitarianism prepared by the Enlightenment ideal of triumph over nature, also known as instrumental reason. Lyotard sees the fragmentation of knowledge as essential to combatting domination, which disallows the overview necessary to see that, to the contrary, the isolation that is fragmented knowledge forgets the social determination and purpose of that isolation. The celebrated 'heterogeneity' is nothing much more than the splintering effect of an overbearing totality he would rather ignore. Critique is never more discarded than in Lyotard's postmodern positivism, resting as it does on the acceptance of a technical rationality that forgoes critique. Unsurprisingly, in the era of the decomposition of meaning and the renunciation of seeing what the ensemble of mere 'facts' really add up to, Lyotard embraces the computerization of society. Rather like the Nietzschean Foucault, Lyotard believes that power is more and more the criterion of truth. He finds his companion in the post-modern pragmatist Richard Rorty who likewise welcomes modern technology and

questions about communication and meaning, so that the category of the aesthetic, for one, becomes problematic. For modernism, with its sunnier belief in representation, art and literature held at least some promise for providing a vision of fulfillment or understanding. Until the end of modernism, "high culture" was seen as a repository of moral and spiritual wisdom. Now there seems to be no such belief, the ubiquity of the question of language perhaps telling as to the vacancy left by the failure of other candidates of promising starting points of human imagination. In the '60s modernism seems to have reached the end of its development, the austere canon of its painting (e.g. Rothko, Reinhardt) giving way to pop art's uncritical espousal of the consumer culture's commercial vernacular. Postmodernism, and not just in the arts, is modernism without the hopes and dreams that made modernity bearable.

A widespread "fast food" tendency is seen in the visual arts, in the direction of easily consumable entertainment. Howard Fox finds that "theatricality may be the single most pervasive property of postmodern art." A decadence or exhaustion of development is also detected in the dark paintings of an Eric Fischl, where often a kind of horror seems to lurk just below the surface. This quality links Fischl, America's quintessential pm painter, to the equally sinister Twin Peaks and pm's quintessential television figure, David Lynch. The image, since Warhol, is self-consciously a mechanically reproducible commodity and this is the bottom-line reason for both the depthlessness and the common note of eeriness and foreboding.

Postmodern art's oft-noted eclecticism is an arbitrary recycling of fragments from everywhere, especially the past, often taking the form of parody and kitsch. Demoralized, derealized, dehistoricized: art that can no longer take itself seriously. The image no longer refers primarily to some 'original', situated elsewhere in the 'real' world; it increasingly refers only to other images. In this way it reflects how lost we are, how removed

from nature, in the ever more mediated world of technological capitalism.

The term postmodernism was first applied, in the '70s, to architecture. Christopher Jencks wrote of an anti-planning, pluralism approach, the abandoning of modernism's dream of pure form in favor of listening to "the multiple languages of the people." More honest are Robert Venturi's celebration of Las Vegas and Piers Gough's admission that pm architecture is no more caring for people than was modernist architecture. The arches and columns laid over modernist boxes are a thin facade of playfulness and individuality, which scarcely transforms the anonymous concentrations of wealth and power underneath.

Postmodernist writers question the very grounds for literature instead of continuing to create the illusion of an external world. The novel redirects its attention to itself; Donald Barthelme, for example, writes stories that seem to always remind the reader that they are artifices. By protesting against statement, point of view and other patterns of representation, pm literature exhibits its discomfort with the forms that tame and domesticate cultural products. As the wider world becomes more artificial and meaning less subject to our control, the new approach would rather reveal the illusion even at the cost of no longer saying anything. Here as elsewhere art is struggling against itself, its prior claims to help us understand the world evaporating while even the concept of imagination loses its potency.

For some the loss of narrative voice or point of view is equivalent to the loss of our ability to locate ourselves historically. For postmodernists this loss is a kind of liberation. Raymond Federman, for instance, glories in the coming fiction that "will be seemingly devoid of any meaning...deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and incoherent."

Fantasy, on the rise for decades, is a common form of the post-modern, carrying with it the reminder that the fantastic confronts civilization with the very forces it must repress for

whole is part of an enormous reaction in France since the '60s against marxist and Communist influences. While Lyotard's chief target is the marxist tradition, once so very strong in French political and intellectual life, he goes further and rejects social theory in toto. For example, he has come to believe that any concept of alienation — the idea that an original unity, wholeness, or innocence is fractured by the fragmentation and indifference of capitalism — ends up as a totalitarian attempt to unify society coercively. Characteristically, his mid-'70s *Libidinal Economy* denounces theory as terror.

One might say that this extreme reaction would be unlikely outside of a culture so dominated by the marxist left, but another look tells us that it fits perfectly with the wider, disillusioned postmodern condition. Lyotard's wholesale rejection of post-Kantian Enlightenment values does, after all, embody the realization that rational critique, at least in the form of the confident values and beliefs of Kantian, Hegelian and Marxist metanarrative theory, has been debunked by dismal historical reality. According to Lyotard, the pm era signifies that all consoling myths of intellectual mastery and truth are at an end, replaced by a plurality of 'language-games', the Wittgensteinian notion of 'truth' as provisionally shared and circulating without any kind of epistemological warrant or philosophical foundation. Language-games are a pragmatic, localized, tentative basis for knowledge; unlike the comprehensive views of theory or historical interpretation, they depend on the agreement of participants for their use-value. Lyotard's ideal is thus a multitude of "little narratives" instead of the "inherent dogmatism" of metanarratives or grand ideas. Unfortunately, such a pragmatic approach must accommodate to things as they are, and depends upon prevailing consensus virtually by definition. Thus Lyotard's approach is of limited value for creating a break from the everyday norms. Though his healthy, anti-authoritarian skepticism sees totalization as oppressive or coercive, what he overlooks is that the Foucaultian relativism

able instrumental 'tools' not only refuses an explicit overview of society but accepts the general division of labor which is at the heart of alienation and domination. The desire to respect differences, local knowledge and the like refuses a reductive, totalitarian-tending overvaluing of theory, but only to accept the atomization of late capitalism with its splintering of life into the narrow specialties that are the province of so many experts. If "we are caught between the arrogance of surveying the whole and the timidity of inspecting the parts," as Rebecca Co-may aptly put it, how does the second alternative (Foucault's) represent an advance over liberal reformism in general? This seems an especially pertinent question when one remembers how much Foucault's whole enterprise was aimed at disabusing us of the illusions of humanist reformers throughout history. The "specific intellectual" in fact turns out to be just one more expert, one more liberal attacking specifics rather than the roots of problems. And looking at the content of his activism, which was mainly in the area of penal reform, the orientation is almost too tepid to even qualify as liberal. In the '80s "he tried to gather, under the aegis of his chair at the College de France, historians, lawyers, judges, psychiatrists and doctors concerned with law and punishment," according to Keith Gandall. All the cops. "The work I did on the historical relativity of the prison form," said Foucault, "was an incitation to try to think of other forms of punishment." Obviously, he accepted the legitimacy of this society and of punishment; no less unsurprising was his corollary dismissal of anarchists as infantile in their hopes for the future and faith in human potential.

The works of Jean-Francois Lyotard are significantly contradictory to each other — in itself a pm trait — but also express a central postmodern theme: that society cannot and should not be understood as a whole. Lyotard is a prime example of anti-totalizing thought to the point that he has summed up postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" or overviews. The idea that it is unhealthy as well as impossible to grasp the

its survival. But it is a fantasy that, paralleling both deconstruction and high levels of cynicism and resignation in society, does not believe in itself to the extent of very much understanding or communicating. Pm writers seem to smother in the folds of language, conveying little else than their ironic stance regarding more traditional literature's pretensions to truth and meaning. Perhaps typical is Laurie Moore's 1990 novel, *Like Life*, whose title and content reveal a retreat from living and an inversion of the American Dream, in which things can only get worse.

## **The celebration of impotence**

Postmodernism subverts two of the over-arching tenets of Enlightenment humanism: the power of language to shape the world and the power of consciousness to shape a self. Thus we have the postmodernist void, the general notion that the yearning for emancipation and freedom promised by humanist principles of subjectivity cannot be satisfied. Pm views the self as a linguistic convention; as William Burroughs put it, "Your 'I' is a completely illusory concept."

It is obvious that the celebrated ideal of individuality has been under pressure for a long time. Capitalism in fact has made a career of celebrating the individual while destroying him/her. And the works of Marx and Freud have done much to expose the largely misdirected and naive belief in the sovereign, rational Kantian self in charge of reality, with their more recent structuralist interpreters, Althusser and Lacan, contributing to and updating the effort. But this time the pressure is so extreme that the term 'individual' has been rendered obsolete, replaced by 'subject', which always includes the aspect of being subjected (as in the older "a subject of the king," for example). Even some libertarian radicals, such as the Interrogations group in France, join in the postmodernist

chorus to reject the individual as a criterion for value due to the debasing of the category by ideology and history.

So pm reveals that autonomy has largely been a myth and cherished ideals of mastery and will are similarly misguided. But if we are promised herewith a new and serious attempt at demystifying authority, concealed behind the guises of a bourgeois humanist 'freedom', we actually get a dispersal of the subject so radical as to render it impotent, even nonexistent, as any kind of agent at all. Who or what is left to achieve a liberation, or is that just one more pipe dream? The postmodern stance wants it both ways: to put the thinking person "under erasure," while the very existence of its own critique depends on discredited ideas like subjectivity. Fred Dallmayr, acknowledging the widespread appeal of contemporary anti-humanism, warns that primary casualties are reflection and a sense of values. To assert that we are instances of language foremost is obviously to strip away our capacity to grasp the whole, at a time when we are urgently required to do just that. Small wonder that to some, pm amounts, in practice, to merely a liberalism without the subject, while feminists who try to define or reclaim an authentic and autonomous female identity would also likely be unpersuaded.

The postmodern subject, what is presumably left of subjecthood, seems to be mainly the personality constructed by and for technological capital, described by the marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton as a "dispersed, decentered network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychological interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion." If Eagleton's definition of today's non-subject as announced by pm is unfaithful to their point of view, it is difficult to see where, to find grounds for a distancing from his scathing summary. With postmodernism even alienation dissolves, for there is no longer a subject to be alienated! Contemporary fragmentation and powerlessness could hardly be heralded more

ality, a "carceral continuum" that expresses the logical finale of capitalism, from which there is no escape. But power itself, he determined, is a grid or field of relations in which subjects are constituted as both the products and the agents of power. Everything thus partakes of power and so it is no good trying to find a 'fundamental', oppressive power to fight against. Modern power is insidious and "comes from everywhere." Like God, it is everywhere and nowhere at once.

Foucault finds no beach underneath the paving stones, no 'natural' order at all. There is only the certainty of successive regimes of power, each one of which must somehow be resisted. But Foucault's characteristically pm aversion to the whole notion of the human subject makes it quite difficult to see where such resistance might spring from, notwithstanding his view that there is no resistance to power that is not a variant of power itself. Regarding the latter point, Foucault reached a further dead-end in considering the relationship of power to knowledge. He came to see them as inextricably and ubiquitously linked, directly implying one another. The difficulties in continuing to say anything of substance in light of this interrelationship caused Foucault to eventually give up on a theory of power. The determinism involved meant, for one thing, that his political involvement became increasingly slight. It is not hard to see why Foucaultism was greatly boosted by the media, while the situationists, for example, were blacked out.

Castoriadis once referred to Foucault's ideas on power and opposition to it as, "Resist if it amuses you — but without a strategy, because then you would no longer be proletarian, but power." Foucault's own activism had attempted to embody the empiricist dream of a theory — and ideology — free approach, that of the "specific intellectual" who participates in particular, local struggles. This tactic sees theory used only concretely, as ad hoc "tool kit" methods for specific campaigns. Despite the good intentions, however, limiting theory to discrete, perish-

which constitutes its subjects, is seemingly self-forming; this is a rather unhelpful approach to history resulting primarily from the fact that Foucault makes no reference to social groups, but focuses entirely on systems of thought. A further problem arises from his view that the episteme of an age cannot be known by those who labor within it. If consciousness is precisely what, by Foucault's own account, fails to be aware of its relativism or to know what it would have looked like in previous epistemes, then Foucault's own elevated, encompassing awareness is impossible. This difficulty is acknowledged at the end of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), but remains unanswered, a rather glaring and obvious problem.

The dilemma of postmodernism is this: how can the status and validity of its theoretical approaches be ascertained if neither truth nor foundations for knowledge are admitted? If we remove the possibility of rational foundations or standards, on what basis can we operate? How can we understand what the society is that we oppose, let alone come to share such an understanding? Foucault's insistence on a Nietzschean perspectivism translates into the irreducible pluralism of interpretation. He relativized knowledge and truth only insofar as these notions attach to thought-systems other than his own, however. When pressed on this point, Foucault admitted to being incapable of rationally justifying his own opinions. Thus the liberal Habermas claims that postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard are 'neoconservative' for offering no consistent argumentation to move in one social direction rather than another. The pm embrace of relativism (or 'pluralism') also means there is nothing to prevent the perspective of one social tendency from including a claim for the right to dominate another, in the absence of the possibility of determining standards.

The topic of power, in fact, was a central one to Foucault and the ways he treated it are revealing. He wrote of the significant institutions of modern society as united by a control intention-

completely, or existing anger and disaffection more thoroughly ignored.

## **Derrida, deconstruction & différance**

Enough, for now, on background and general traits. The most influential specific postmodern approach has been Jacques Derrida's, known since the '60s as deconstruction. Postmodernism in philosophy means above all the writings of Derrida, and this earliest and most extreme outlook has found a resonance well beyond philosophy, in the popular culture and its mores.

Certainly the "linguistic turn" bears on the emergence of Derrida, causing David Wood to call deconstruction "an absolutely unavoidable move in philosophy today," as thought negotiates its inescapable predicament as written language. That language is not innocent or neutral but bears a considerable number of presuppositions it has been his career to develop, exposing what he sees as the fundamentally self-contradictory nature of human discourse. The mathematician Kurt Gödel's "Incompleteness Theorem" states that any formal system can be either consistent or complete, but not both. In rather parallel fashion, Derrida claims that language is constantly turning against itself so that, analyzed closely, we can neither say what we mean or mean what we say. But like semiologists before him, Derrida also suggests, at the same time, that a deconstructive method could demystify the ideological contents of all texts, interpreting all human activities as essentially texts. The basic contradiction and cover-up strategy inherent in the metaphysics of language in its widest sense might be laid bare and a more intimate kind of knowing result.

What works against this latter claim, with its political promise constantly hinted at by Derrida, is precisely the content of deconstruction; it sees language as a constantly

moving independent force that disallows a stabilizing of meaning or definite communication, as referred to above. This internally-generated flux he called 'différance' and this is what calls the very idea of meaning to collapse, along with the self-referential nature of language, which, as noted previously, says that there is no space outside of language, no "out there" for meaning to exist in anyway. Intention and the subject are overwhelmed, and what is revealed are not any "inner truths" but an endless proliferation of possible meanings generated by *différance*, the principle that characterizes language. Meaning within language is also made elusive by Derrida's insistence that language is metaphorical and cannot therefore directly convey truth, a notion taken from Nietzsche, one which erases the distinction between philosophy and literature. All these insights supposedly contribute to the daring and subversive nature of deconstruction, but they surely provoke some basic questions as well. If meaning is indeterminate, how are Derrida's argument and terms not also indeterminate, un-pin-downable? He has replied to critics, for example, that they are unclear as to his meaning, while his 'meaning' is that there can be no clear, definable meaning. And though his entire project is in an important sense aimed at subverting all systems' claims to any kind of transcendent truth, he raises *différance* to the transcendent status of any philosophical first principle.

For Derrida, it has been the valorizing of speech over writing that has caused all of Western thought to overlook the downfall that language itself causes philosophy. By privileging the spoken word a false sense of immediacy is produced, the invalid notion that in speaking the thing itself is present and representation overcome. But speech is no more 'authentic' than the written word, not at all immune from the built-in failure of language to accurately or definitely deliver the (representational) goods. It is the misplaced desire for presence that characterizes Western metaphysics, an unreflected desire for the

In 1985 AIDS claimed the most widely known influence on postmodernism, Michel Foucault. Sometimes called "the philosopher of the death of man" and considered by many the greatest of Nietzsche's modern disciples, his wideranging historical studies (e.g. on madness, penal practices, sexuality) made him very well known and in themselves suggest differences between Foucault and the relatively more abstract and ahistorical Derrida. Structuralism, as noted, had already forcefully devalued the individual on largely linguistic grounds, whereas Foucault characterized "man (as) only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a simple fold in our knowledge that will soon disappear." His emphasis lies in exposing 'man' as that which is represented and brought forth as an object, specifically as a virtual invention of the modern human sciences. Despite an idiosyncratic style, Foucault's works were much more popular than those of Horkheimer and Adorno (e.g. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and Erving Goffman, in the same vein of revealing the hidden agenda of bourgeois rationality. He pointed to the 'individualizing' tactic at work in the key institutions in the early 1800s (the family, work, medicine, psychiatry, education), bringing out their normalizing, disciplinary roles within emerging capitalist modernity, as the 'individual' is created by and for the dominant order.

Foucault, typically pm, rejects originary thinking and the notion that there is a 'reality' behind or underneath the prevailing discourse of an era. Likewise, the subject is a delusion essentially created by discourse, an 'I' created out of the ruling linguistic usages. And so his detailed historical narratives, termed 'archaeologies' of knowledge, are offered instead of theoretical overviews, as if they carried no ideological or philosophical assumptions. For Foucault there are no foundations of the social to be apprehended outside the contexts of various periods, or epistemes, as he called them; the foundations change from one episteme to another. The prevailing discourse,

comparison, Kroker and Cook are undeniably correct in concluding that “the postmodern culture is a forgetting, a forgetting of origins and destinations.”

## Barthes, Foucault & Lyotard

Turning to other poststructuralist/ postmodern figures, Roland Barthes, earlier in his career a major structuralist thinker, deserves mention. His *Writing Degree Zero* expressed the hope that language can be used in a utopian way and that there are controlling codes in culture that can be broken. By the early '70s, however, he fell into line with Derrida in seeing language as a metaphorical quagmire, whose metaphoricity is not recognized. Philosophy is befuddled by its own language and language in general cannot claim mastery of what it discusses. With *The Empire of Signs* (1970), Barthes had already renounced any critical, analytical intention. Ostensibly about Japan, this book is presented “without claiming to depict or analyze any reality whatsoever.” Various fragments deal with cultural forms as diverse as haiku and slot machines, as parts of a sort of anti-utopian landscape wherein forms possess no meaning and all is surface. *Empire* may qualify as the first fully postmodern offering, and by the mid-'70s its author's notion of the pleasure of the text carried forward the same Derridean disdain for belief in the validity of public discourse. Writing had become an end in itself, a merely personal aesthetic the overriding consideration. Before his death in 1980, Barthes had explicitly denounced “any intellectual mode of writing,” especially anything smacking of the political. By the time of his final work, *Barthes by Barthes*, the hedonism of words, paralleling a real-life dandyism, considered concepts not in terms of their validity or invalidity but only for their efficacy as tactics of writing.

success of representation. It is important to note that because Derrida rejects the possibility of an unmediated existence, he assails the efficacy of representation but not the category itself. He mocks the game but plays it just the same. *Différance* (later simply ‘difference’) shades into indifference, due to the unavailability of truth or meaning, and joins the cynicism at large.

Early on, Derrida discussed philosophy's false steps in the area of presence by reference to Husserl's tortured pursuit of it. Next he developed his theory of ‘grammatology’, in which he restored writing to its proper primacy as against the West's phonocentric, or speech-valued, bias. This was mainly accomplished by critiques of major figures who committed the sin of phonocentrism, including Rousseau, Heidegger, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss, which is not to overlook his great indebtedness to the latter three of these four.

As if remembering the obvious implications of his deconstructive approach, Derrida's writings shift in the '70s from the earlier, fairly straightforward philosophical discussions. *Glas* (1974) is a mishmash of Hegel and Gent, in which argument is replaced by free association and bad puns. Though baffling to even his warmest admirers, *Glas* certainly is in keeping with the tenet of the unavoidable ambiguity of language and a will to subvert the pretensions of orderly discourse. *Spurs* (1978) is a book-length study of Nietzsche that ultimately finds its focus in nothing Nietzsche published, but in a handwritten note in the margin of one of his notebooks: “I have forgotten my umbrella.” Endless, undecidable possibilities exist as to the meaning or importance-if any-of this scrawled comment. This, of course, is Derrida's point, to suggest that the same can be said for everything Nietzsche wrote. The place for thought, according to deconstruction, is clearly (er, let us say unclearly) with the relative, the fragmented, the marginal.

Meaning is certainly not something to be pinned down, if it exists at all. Commenting on Plato's *Phaedrus*, the master of

de-composition goes so far as to assert that “like any text [it] couldn’t not be involved, at least in a virtual, dynamic, lateral manner, with all the words that composed the system of the Greek language.”

Related is Derrida’s opposition to binary opposites, like literal/metaphorical, serious/playful, deep/superficial, nature/culture, ad infinitum. He sees these as basic conceptual hierarchies, mainly smuggled in by language itself, which provide the illusion of definition or orientation. He further claims that the deconstructive work of overturning these pairings, which valorize one of the two over the other, leads to a political and social overturning of actual, non-conceptual hierarchies. But to automatically refuse all binary oppositions is itself a metaphysical proposition; it in fact bypasses politics and history out of a failure to see in opposites, however imprecise they may be, anything but a linguistic reality. In the dismantling of every binarism, deconstruction aims at “conceiving difference without opposition.” What in a smaller dosage would seem a salutary approach, a skepticism about neat, either/or characterizations, proceeds to the very questionable prescription of refusing all unambiguity. To say that there can be no yes or no position is tantamount to a paralysis of relativism, in which ‘impotence’ becomes the valorized partner to ‘opposition’.

Perhaps the case of Paul De Man, who extended and deepened Derrida’s seminal deconstructive positions (surpassing him, in the opinion of many), is instructive. Shortly after the death of De Man in 1985, it was discovered that as a young man he had written several anti-semitic, pro-Nazi newspaper articles in occupied Belgium. The status of this brilliant Yale deconstructor, and indeed to some, the moral and philosophical value of deconstruction itself, were called into question by the sensational revelation. De Man, like Derrida, had stressed “the duplicity, the confusion, the untruth that we take for granted in the use of language.” Consistent with this,

to our understanding. Postmodernism is apparently what we are left with when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.

Not only does pm echo Beckett’s comment in *Endgame*, “there’s no more nature,” but it also denies that there ever was any recognizable space outside of language and culture. ‘Nature’, declared Derrida in discussing Rousseau, “has never existed.” Again, alienation is ruled out; that concept necessarily implies an idea of authenticity which postmodernism finds unintelligible. In this vein, Derrida cited “the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of...” Despite the limitations of structuralism, Levi-Strauss’ sense of affiliation with Rousseau, on the other hand, bore witness to his search for origins. Refusing to rule out liberation, either in terms of beginnings or goals, Levi-Strauss never ceased to long for an ‘intact’ society, a non-fractured world where immediacy had not yet been broken. For this Derrida, pejoratively to be sure, presents Rousseau as a utopian and Levi-Strauss as an anarchist, cautioning against a “step further toward a sort of original an-archy,” which would be only a dangerous delusion.

The real danger consists in not challenging, at the most basic level, the alienation and domination threatening to completely overcome nature, what is left of the natural in the world and within ourselves. Marcuse discerned that “the memory of gratification is at the origin of all thinking, and the impulse to recapture past gratification is the hidden driving power behind the process of thought.” The question of origins also involves the whole question of the birth of abstraction and indeed of philosophical conceptuality as such, and Marcuse came close, in his search for what would constitute a state of being without repression, to confronting culture itself. He certainly never quite escaped the impression “that something essential had been forgotten” by humanity. Similar is the brief pronouncement by Novalis, “Philosophy is homesickness.” By



fusal [Left Bank Books, 1988], which deal with time, language, number, art, and agriculture as cultural estrangements owing to symbolization.) Meanwhile an estranged and exhausted public loses interest in the alleged solace of culture, and with the deepening and thickening of mediation emerges the discovery that perhaps this was always the meaning of culture. It is certainly not out of character, however, to find that postmodernism does not recognize reflection on the origins of representation, insisting as it does on the impossibility of unmediated existence.

In response to the longing for the lost wholeness of pre-civilization, postmodernism says that culture has become so fundamental to human existence that there is no possibility of delving down under it. This, of course, recalls Freud, who recognized the essence of civilization as a suppression of freedom and wholeness, but who decided that work and culture were more important. Freud at least was honest enough to admit the contradiction or non-reconciliation involved in opting for the crippling nature of civilization, whereas the postmodernists do not.

Floyd Merrell found that “a key, perhaps the principal key to Derridean thought” was Derrida’s decision to place the question of origins off limits. And so while hinting throughout his work at a complicity between the fundamental assumptions of Western thought and the violences and repressions that have characterized Western civilization, Derrida has centrally, and very influentially, repudiated all notions of origins. Causative thinking, after all, is one of the objects of scorn for postmodernists. ‘Nature’ is an illusion, so what could ‘unnatural’ mean? In place of the situationists’ wonderful “Under the pavement it’s the beach,” we have Foucault’s famous repudiation, in *The Order of Things*, of the whole notion of the “repressive hypothesis.” Freud gave us an understanding of culture as stunting and neurosis-generating; pm tells us that culture is all we can ever have, and that its foundations, if they exist, are not available

albeit to his discredit, in my opinion, was Derrida’s tortuous commentary on De Man’s collaborationist period: in sum, “how can we judge, who has the right to say?” A shabby testimony for deconstruction, considered in any way as a moment of the anti-authoritarian.

Derrida announced that deconstruction “instigates the subversion of every kingdom.” In fact, it has remained within the safely academic realm of inventing ever more ingenious textual complications to keep itself in business and avoid reflecting on its own political situation. One of Derrida’s most central terms, dissemination, describes language, under the principle of difference, as not so much a rich harvest of meanings but a kind of endless loss and spillage, with meaning appearing everywhere and evaporating virtually at once. This flow of language, ceaseless and unsatisfying, is a most accurate parallel to that of the heart of consumer capital and its endless circulation of non-significance. Derrida thus unwittingly eternalizes and universalizes dominated life by rendering human communication in its image. The “every kingdom” he would see deconstruction subverting is instead extended and deemed absolute.

Derrida represents both the well-travelled French tradition of *explication de texte* and a reaction against the Gallic veneration of Cartesian classicist language with its ideals of clarity and balance. Deconstruction emerged also, to a degree, as part of the original element of the near-revolution of 1968, namely the student revolt against rigidified French higher education. Some of its key terms (e.g. dissemination) are borrowed from Blanchot’s reading of Heidegger, which is not to deny a significant originality in Derridean thought. Presence and representation constantly call each other into question, revealing the underlying system as infinitely fissured, and this in itself is an important contribution.

Unfortunately, to transform metaphysics into the question of writing, in which meanings virtually choose themselves and thus one discourse (and therefore mode of action) cannot be

demonstrated to be better than another, seems less than radical. Deconstruction is now embraced by the heads of English departments, professional societies, and other bodies-in-good-standing because it raises the issue of representation itself so weakly. Derrida's deconstruction of philosophy admits that it must leave intact the very concept whose lack of basis it exposes. While finding the notion of a language-independent reality untenable, neither does deconstruction promise liberation from the famous "prison house of language." The essence of language, the primacy of the symbolic, are not really tackled, but are shown to be as inescapable as they are inadequate to fulfilment. No exit; as Derrida declared: "It is not a question of releasing oneself into an unrepressive new order (there are none)."

## The crisis of representation

If deconstruction's contribution is mainly just an erosion of our assurance of reality, it forgets that reality — advertising and mass culture to mention just two superficial examples — has already accomplished this. Thus this quintessentially postmodern point of view bespeaks the movement of thinking from decadence to its elegiac, or post-thought phase, or as John Fekete summarized it, "a most profound crisis of the Western mind, a most profound loss of nerve."

Today's overload of representation serves to underline the radical impoverishment of life in technological class society — technology is deprivation. The classical theory of representation held that meaning or truth preceded and prescribed the representations that communicated it. But we may now inhabit a postmodern culture where the image has become less the expression of an individual subject than the commodity of an anonymous consumerist technology. Ever more mediated, life in the Information Age is increasingly controlled by the manip-

ulation of signs, symbols, marketing and testing data, etc. Our time, says Derrida, is "a time without nature."

All formulations of the postmodern agree in detecting a crisis of representation. Derrida, as noted, began a challenge of the nature of the philosophical project itself as grounded in representation, raising some unanswerable questions about the relationship between representation and thought. Deconstruction undercuts the epistemological claims of representation, showing that language, for example, is inadequate to the task of representation. But this undercutting avoids tackling the repressive nature of its subject, insisting, again, that pure presence, a space beyond representation, can only be a utopian dream. There can be no unmediated contact or communication, only signs and representations; deconstruction is a search for presence and fulfilment interminably, necessarily, deferred.

Jacques Lacan, sharing the same resignation as Derrida, at least reveals more concerning the malign essence of representation. Extending Freud, he determined that the subject is both constituted and alienated by the entry into the symbolic order, namely, into language. While denying the possibility of a return to a pre-language state in which the broken promise of presence might be honored, he could at least see the central, crippling stroke that is the submission of free-ranging desires to the symbolic world, the surrender of uniqueness to language. Lacan termed *jouissance* unspeakable because it could properly occur only outside of language: that happiness which is the desire for a world without the fracture of money or writing, a society without representation.

The inability to generate symbolic meaning is, somewhat ironically, a basic problem for postmodernism. It plays out its stance at the frontier between what can be represented and what cannot, a half-way resolution (at best) that refuses to refuse representation. (Instead of providing the arguments for the view of the symbolic as repressive and alienating, the reader is referred to the first five essays of my *Elements of Re-*