Postmodernism in Parallax*

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Whatever happened to postmodernism? The darling of journalism, it has become the Baby Jane of criticism. Not so long ago the opposite was the case: prominent theorists on the left saw grand things in the term. For Jean-François Lyotard postmodernism marked an end to the master narratives that had long made modernity seem synonymous with progress (the march of reason, the accumulation of wealth, the advance of technology, the emancipation of workers, and so on), while for Fredric Jameson postmodernism invited a new narrative, or rather a renewed Marxian critique that might relate different stages of modern culture to different modes of capitalist production. For me as for many others, postmodernism signaled a need to break with an exhausted modernism, the dominant model of which focused on the formal values of art to the neglect not only of its historical determinations but also of its transformative possibilities. Thus even within the left—especially within the left—postmodernism was a disputed category. And yet, not so long ago, there was a time of a loose alliance, a sense of a common project, especially in opposition to rightist positions, which ranged from old attacks on modernism in toto (as the source of all evil in our hedonistic society) to new defenses of particular modernisms that had become official, indeed traditional, the modernisms of the museum and the academy. For this last position postmodernism could only be "the revenge of the philistines" (the happy phrase of Hilton Kramer), the vulgar kitsch of media hucksters, lower classes, and inferior peoples, a new barbarism to be shunned, like multiculturalism today, at all costs. In part our postmodernism was a refusal of this reactionary cultural politic and an advocacy of practices both critical of institutional modernism and suggestive of alternative forms, of new ways to practice culture and politics. And we did not lose. In a sense a worse thing happened: treated as a fashion, postmodernism became démodé.

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Of course, the category was not only emptied by the media; it was also critiqued within the left, often with good reason. Despite its announcement of the end of master narratives, the Lyotardian (or poststructuralist) version of postmodernism was regarded as just the latest proper name of the West, a West now narcissistically obsessed with its own postcolonial decline. So too, despite its attention to the capitalist dynamic of fragmentation, the Jamesonian (or Marxian) version of postmodernism was considered too totalistic, not sensitive enough to different differences. Finally, the art-critical version of postmodernism was seen to seal modernism in the very formalist mold that we wanted to break. In the process the term became not only banal but incorrect.

I too became suspicious of the term. And yet recently my attitude has shifted in a way that I can now only express anecdotally. In April 1992 I spent a few days in Detroit, a city occupied three times by the army, wounded by white flight, damaged by Reagan-Bush neglect. There the white tourist tends to travel from one cosmetic fortress to another. On one such trek my group stopped at Highland Park, the primary site of the Ford Model T, the first factory with an assembly line, the paradigm of Taylorist labor around the modern world. On cue our taxi, a Ford, broke down, and so we were stranded at this rusted plant, perhaps the most important site in twentieth-century industry, now lost between a deindustrial city core and a posturban residential ring, witness to the uneven development of our late-capitalist space-times, in a purgatory between modern and postmodern worlds. There I again saw that the category of postmodernism might still be used to think such a strange chronotropic terrain, one not unique to Detroit, of fortified cities armored against urban inhabitants and industrial remains suspended in twilight zones. How does one map such a space, measure such a time?

Such an anecdote might lead one to the model of postmodernism developed by Jameson over the last decade through which he relates different stages of Western culture to different means of capitalist production. To do so he adapts the long-wave theory of economic cycles propounded by the Marxian economist Ernest Mandel, according to which the capitalist West has passed through four fifty-year periods since the late eighteenth century (roughly twenty-five years each of expansion and stagnation): the industrial revolution (until the political crises of 1848) marked by the spread of handcrafted steam engines, followed by three further technological epochs—the first (until the 1890s) marked by the spread of machined steam engines; the second (until World War II) marked by the spread of electric and combustion engines; and the third (our own) marked by the spread of machined electronic and nuclear systems.1 Mandel relates these technological developments to economic stages:

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from market capitalism to monopoly capitalism (around the last fin-de-siècle) to multinational capitalism (in our own millennial moment). Jameson in turn relates these economic stages to artistic paradigms: the world view of realist art and literature incited by the pragmatic individualism encouraged by market capitalism; the subjectivist abstraction of high-modernist art and literature in response to the complexity, indeed the opacity, of bureaucratic life under monopoly capitalism; and the pastiche of postmodernist practices (art, architecture, fiction, film, food, and fashion) as a symptom of the dispersed borders, the mixed spaces, of multinational capitalism. His model is hardly as mechanical or deterministic as my précis: Jameson stresses that this development is very uneven, that each period is a palimpsest of emergent and residual forms, that there is never a clean break from one to the next. Nevertheless, his account has its critics. I noted the charge that it is too totalistic, that it sees the logic of capital as a great reaper that sweeps up everything in its path. For my purposes it is too spatialistic, not sensitive enough to the different speeds as well as the mixed spaces of postmodern society, to the deferred action as well as the incessant expansion of capitalist culture.

I borrow the notion of deferred action (Nachträglichkeit) from Freud, for whom subjectivity, never set once and for all, is structured in a series of anticipations and reconstructions of events that are often traumatic in nature: we come to be who we are only in deferred action. I believe modernism and postmodernism are comprehended, if not constituted, in an analogous way, in deferred action, as a continual process of anticipation and reconstruction. Every epoch dreams the next, as Walter Benjamin once remarked, but by the same token it also (re)constructs the one before it. There is no simple Now: every present is nonsynchronous, a mix of different times. Thus there is never a

2. The classic discussion occurs in the Wolfman case history, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1914/18). This slippage between "comprehended" and "constituted" is not only my vacillation; it operates in the very concept of deferred action, where the traumatic scene is famously ambiguous: is it actual, fantastmatic, and/or analytically constructed? My application of this concept is a stretch. In a future text I will develop its possible uses for (postmodernist) studies (especially around questions of retrospect and repetition in the avant-garde) as well as its potential abuses. For the time being, I can only assert that psychoanalysis is not restricted to the individual subject, even as I can only admit that most applications to cultural history tend to psychologize it. Even as I intend to complicate "development" with "deferred action," with the nonlinear and the never-complete, my extension of a concept regarding the (re)construction of the individual subject to the (re)construction of a historical "subject" is fraught with dangers. For example, can I address the category of the subject historically if my model of history presupposes its logic? Is this a productively deconstructive double-bind or a paralytically paradoxical one? (For the persistence of the logic of the subject in psychoanalysis, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, The Freudian Subject, trans. Catherine Porter [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988].)

timely transition, say, between the modern and the postmodern: our consciousness of a period not only comes after the fact; it is also always in parallax. (Postmodernism, in short, is like sex[uality]: it comes too early or too late.)

This is abstract as yet, so let me ground it in one possible account of the never-complete transition to the postmodern. Rather than use the cumbersome Mandelian scheme of four fifty-year periods of the modern West, I want to focus on three moments thirty years apart within the twentieth century: the mid-1930s, which I take to be the end of the great modernisms; the mid-1960s, which marks the full advent of postmodernism; and our own 1990s; and I will do so through particular texts. I will treat these moments in a discursive sense, to see how historical shifts may be registered in theoretical texts, which in turn will serve as both objects of historicization and means to historicize. At once arbitrary and symptomatic, my narrative will not say much about art. Instead, in addition to technological imbrications in cultural practices (which tend to be too privileged in these accounts), I want to address certain changes in Western conceptions of the individual subject and of the cultural other over this time. My reason for this focus is simple. The quintessential modern question concerned identity: Who are we? Most often answers came by way of an appeal to an otherness, either to the unconscious within or to cultural others without. Many modernists felt truth was located there; hence the significance of Freud and the profusion of primitivisms throughout the century. Indeed, many modernists conflated these two sites, the unconscious and the cultural other, while some postmodernists argue that both are now penetrated by capitalism, that these two natural preserves are acculturated. In any case, since they speak to the question of identity, the two discourses of the unconscious and the cultural other, i.e., psychoanalysis and anthropology, are the most privileged of modern human sciences. As such they may register more seismographically than any other discourses the epistemological changes that may help us to define a postmodernism that is not only journalistic.

Each moment that interests me here represents a significant shift in discourses on the subject, the cultural other, and technology. In the mid-1930s


5. This figure of the natural preserve (which Freud uses in relation to fantasy) may smuggle into postmodern discourse a romantic lapsarianism whereby the unconscious and the other, thought to be outside of history, can only be contaminated by it. This is not true of "the political unconscious" of Jameson, and yet in "Periodizing the 60s" he too speaks of a colonized unconscious (in *The 60s without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres et al. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]). As regards the cultural other, Baudrillard goes further: cryogenized, "we are all Tasaday" ("The Precession of the Simulacra," *Art & Text* 11 [Spring 1983], p. 10). In Jameson this other lost natural enclave is the precapitalist Third World agriculture penetrated by the technocratic "Green Revolution" of the 1950s.

Jacques Lacan was at work on the formation of the I, the first version of his famous "Mirror Stage" paper; Claude Lévi-Strauss was involved in the Brazilian field work that revealed the mythological sophistication of "the savage mind"; and Walter Benjamin was about to publish his great text on the cultural ramifications of modern technologies, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." By the 1960s each of these discourses had changed dramatically. The death of the subject, not its formation, was detailed by Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes (some of whom dated its disappearance to the revolts of 1968). So too, the anthropological other, inspired by the liberation wars of the 1950s, had begun to talk back, i.e., to be heard for the first time, most brilliantly in the rewriting of the Hegelian-Marxian master-slave dialectic by Frantz Fanon, whose The Wretched of the Earth was published in 1961. Meanwhile, the penetration of media into psychic structures and social relations had reached a new level, which was seen in two complementary ways — chiliastically by Guy Debord as an intensity of reification in his Society of the Spectacle of 1967 and ecstatically by Marshall McLuhan as an "extension of man" in his Understanding Media of 1964.

What has changed in these three discourses since then? In a sense the death of the subject is now dead in its turn: the subject has returned — but in the guise of a politics of new, ignored, and different subjectivities, sexualities, and ethnicities. Meanwhile, at a time when First, Second, and Third Worlds are no longer distinct (if they ever were), anthropology is newly critical of its own protocols, and postcolonial imbrications have complicated anticolonial confrontations. Finally, even as our society remains one of spectacular images à la Debord, it is also one of electronic discipline — or, if you prefer the technophilic version after McLuhan, a society of electronic freedom, of the new possibilities that await us in cyberspace, virtual reality, and the like. My purpose is not to prove one position right, the other wrong, nor to assert that one moment is modern, the next post, for again none of this develops evenly or breaks cleanly. Instead I want to suggest that each theory speaks of changes in its present, but only indirectly — in reconstruction of past moments (when these changes are said to have begun) and in anticipation of future moments (when these changes are projected to be complete). Thus the deferred action, the double movement, of modern and postmodern times.

7. This is not to suggest a narrative of naive simplifications followed by self-conscious complications. On the contrary, the postcolonial has not demystified, let alone displaced, the (neo)colonial. 8. Thus, for example, the discourse of the death of the subject is not proper to the 1960s; it is announced in the 1930s: not only by Benjamin (who, in the Artwork essay as well as "The Author as Producer," foresees the artistic-authorial "functions" as "incidental") but by Bataille, different Dadaists, Surrealists, and Constructivists, many others. In a sense it is only recapitulated in the 1960s. And yet it is this recapitulation that is its articulation, at least as a characteristic ideologeme; that is my point. My use of the term "the subject" (as well as the term "the cultural other") will slip
First, let me consider, very schematically and selectively, the discourse on
the subject over these three moments, and here as elsewhere I will take only
landmark examples. In the “Mirror Stage” paper, Lacan argues that the for-
mation of our ego rests on a primordial apprehension of our body in a mirror
(though any reflection will do), an anticipatory image of a bodily unity that as
infants we do not yet possess in actuality. It is this image that founds our ego
in this infantile moment, but founds it as imaginary, as locked in an identification
that is always also an alienation, for at the very moment that we see our self in
the mirror we see this self as image, as other. Importantly Lacan also suggests
that this imaginary unity of the mirror stage produces a retroactive fantasy of
a prior stage when our body was still in pieces, a fantasy of a chaotic body,
fragmentary and fluid, given over to drives that always threaten to overwhelm
us, a fantasy that haunts us in different ways for the rest of our life (all those
moments of pressure when you feel you are about to shatter). In a sense our
go is pledged first and foremost against the return of this body in pieces; it is
this that turns the ego into an armor (a term Lacan uses) to be deployed
aggressively against the chaotic world within and without — but especially with-
out, especially against all others who seem to represent this chaos for us.9 Lacan
does not specify his theory of the subject as historical, but I believe we must,
for this traumatized, armored, and aggressive subject is not just any being across
history and culture: it is a theory of the modern subject as fascistic subject. In
other words, inscribed in this theory is a contemporary history of which fascism
is the most extreme symptom: a history of world war and military mutilation,
of industrial discipline and machinic fragmentation, of mercenary murder and
political terror. It is in traumatic relation to such military-industrial events that
the modern subject becomes armored — against otherness within (sexuality, the
unconscious) and otherness without (for the fascist this can mean Jews, Com-
munists, gays, women), all figures of this fear of the body in pieces come again,
of the body given over to the fragmentary and the fluid. (Has this fascistic

trope repeated in “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis” (1948), its companion piece in Écrits (trans. Alan
the British Psychoanalytical Society on May 2, 1951, the trope reappears as the “narcissistic shield,
with its nacreous covering on which is painted the world from which [the ego] is forever cut off.”
Here Lacan is led to question the very value of a “strong ego.” Could its aggressivity, a “correlative
tendency” of its narcissistic basis and its paranoid structure, also be outside of the struggle to stabilize
it?
reaction not in part returned? Did it ever go away? Does it not rest potentially within us all? Or is to generalize it in this way to normalize it over much?)

What happens to this theory of the formation of the subject in the 1960s when the death of the subject is proclaimed? This is a moment of radically different historical forces and intellectual currents. In Paris it is the twilight of

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10. I suggested a fascistic referent of the Lacanian account of the ego in "Armor Fou," October 56 (Spring 1991). Susan Buck-Morss developed this connection in "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," October 62 (Fall 1992), and inspired by her text I return to it here. It is said that Lacan presented the first version of the "Mirror Stage" paper at the Fourteenth Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in Marienbad on August 3, 1936, i.e., in the midst of the Nazi Olympics: "The day after my address on the mirror stage, I took a day off, anxious to get a feeling of the times, heavy with promises, at the Berlin Olympiad. [Ernst Kris] gently objected 'Ca ne se fait pas!' (Ecrits, p. 239). To suggest such a historical referent for the Lacanian ego is no doubt offensive. But no less a commentator than Jacques-Alain Miller has also posited such a referent, albeit a rather different one: "There is, therefore, a single ideology of which Lacan provides the theory: that of the 'modern ego,' that is to say, the paranoid subject of scientific civilization, of which a warped psychology theorizes the imaginary, at the service of free enterprise" (Ecrits, p. 322). Moreover, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have recently argued that "the ideology of the subject . . . is fascism" ("The Nazi Myth," Critical Inquiry 16 [Winter 1990], p. 294).
structuralism, i.e., of the linguistic paradigm in which all cultural activity (the
myths of Indian groups for Lévi-Strauss, the structure of the unconscious for
Lacan, the modes of Paris fashions for Barthes) is recoded as a language. It is
this linguistic recoding that allows Foucault to announce in 1966 the erasure of
man, the great riddle of modernity, "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of
the sea."11 It is also this recoding that permits Barthes to declare in 1968 the
topping of the author, the great protagonist of humanist-modernist culture,
into the play of signs of the Text, which henceforth will replace the Work of
Art. Now this Barthesian formulation may help us to specify the figure that is
under attack here: it is not only the authorial artist of humanist-modernist
tradition; it is also the authoritarian personality of fascist structures, the figure
who compels singular speech and forbids promiscuous signification (after all
this is the 1960s, the days of rage against all such authoritarian institutions). In
a sense it is an attack on the fascistic subject as indirectly contemplated by Lacan,
an attack also made with the very forces that this subject most fears: sexuality
and the unconscious, desire and the drives, the jouissance (the privileged term
of French theory during this time) that shatters the subject, that surrenders it
precisely to the fragmentary and the fluid.12 All of these forces were celebrated
in art, theory, and praxis, all to challenge the fascistic subject, a challenge made
programmatic in Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus of 1972. There an appeal
to schizophrenia is made as a way not only to disrupt the armored fascistic
subject but also to exceed the rapacious capitalist one. Yet this appeal is tricky,
for if the fascistic subject is threatened by schizophrenic fragments and flows,
the capitalist subject thrives on such disruptive movements. Indeed, according
to Deleuze and Guattari, only absolute schizophrenia is more schizophrenic than
capital, more given over to decodings of fixed subjects and structures. On this
account what dispersed the subject, humanist or fascistic, in the 1960s, what
disrupted its institutions, was a revolutionary force, a whole congeries of such
forces (ex-colonial, civil-rights, feminist, student), but it was a revolutionary
force that, if not directed by capital, was at least released by it—for what is
more radical than capital when it comes to old subjects and structures that stand
in its way?

Tendentious though it is, this argument might then be extended to the
present return of the subject, by which I mean the partial recognition of new
and ignored subjectivities in identity politics and multicultural models. On the
one hand, the partial recognition of different subjectivities, sexual and ethnic,
in the 1990s reveals that the subject pronounced dead in the 1960s was a very

11. See Foucault, The Order of Things, pp. 381-87, here 387. "Since man was constituted at a
time when language was doomed to dispersion, will he not be dispersed when language regains its
unity?"

12. In Barthes the challenge of jouissance is directed at the connoisseur of plaisir, its class enemy
(sie) to speak) is less fascistic than bourgeois, even consumerist.
particular one, not to be mourned by all: white, bourgeois, humanist, male, heterosexual, a subject who only pretended to be universal. (Often taken for granted today, this revelation was the difficult labor of much analysis, first in feminism and then in gay and lesbian studies and multicultural critiques.) On the other hand, the present context of these different subjectivities, brazenly defined by Bush as The New World Order, suggests that the death of the subject then and the birth of the multicultural subject now must also be seen in relation to the dynamic of capital, its reification and fragmentation of fixed positions. Thus, even as we celebrate “hybridity” and “heterogeneity,” we must remember that these are privileged terms of advanced capitalism as well, that social multiculturalism coexists with economic multinationalism. Such a vision is not as totalistic or fatalistic as it sounds, for no order, capitalist or otherwise, can entirely control the forces that it releases. Rather, as Marx as well as Foucault suggest, a regime of power does not forbid its resistance so much as it prepares it, calls it into being, in ways that cannot always be recouped. This is true of the release of different subjectivities, sexual and ethnic, in The New World Order today. Yet it is also true that these forces need not be articulated progressively. And certainly they can provoke reactive responses—though to blame these forces for such national figures as Duke, Buchanan, Bush, and Quayle is truly to blame the victims, an ethical position that, perversely, these figures now also want to arrogate.

Let me leave this skewed history of the subject there, and pass abruptly to the second discourse that may help us to register the never-complete transition to the postmodern: the discourse on the cultural other. Here too I will highlight but three moments. The first, the mid-1930s in Western Europe, might be illuminated by a stark symptomatic juxtaposition. In 1931 a large exhibition concerning the French colonies was held in Paris to which the Surrealists responded with a small anti-imperialist show titled “The Truth about the Colonies.” These artists not only appreciated tribal art, not only appropriated its formal and expressive values, as the Cubists and the Expressionists had done; they also attended to its political ramifications in the present. Indeed, they constructed a chiasmic identification with the colonial others who, though they were the legatees of such tribal art, were made to disappear in its Western

13. Here again an instance of deferred action in postmodern culture. On the one hand, even as these critiques multiply the subject, they often reinstate its logic. On the other hand, they cannot be opposed to the discourse of the death of the subject, for they are partly prepared by it. On this last point see Ernesto Laclau, “Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity,” October 61 (Summer 1992).
"The Truth about the Colonies." Exhibition organized by Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, and Yves Tanguy. From Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution 4, 1931.

delectation. On the one hand, the Surrealists argued that these oppressed peoples were like exploited workers in the West to be supported in similar ways. (This potential solidarity between the colonial and the proletariat was later advanced by Aime Césaire, among others, who was greatly admired by the Surrealists.) On the other hand, the Surrealists announced that they too were primitives, that, as moderns given over to object desire, they too were fetishists. In effect, they transvalued the revaluation of fetishism performed in the analyses of commodity fetishism and fetishistic perversion: if Marx and Freud used the term as a critique of moderns, the Surrealists took it as a compliment. In this way they embraced this perceived otherness for its disruptive potential, again through an association between the cultural other and the unconscious.14

Yet this association remained primitivist: it still assumed a racialist analogy between "primitive" peoples and primal stages of psychosexual life. And in a different cultural politic it had a disastrous use, i.e., in Nazism. By 1937 the Nazis had produced the infamous exhibitions on "degenerate" art and music

14. In this sense the Surrealist subject was other to the fascist subject as indirectly contemplated by Lacan (who worked in the milieu of the Surrealists). In "Armor Fou" I argue that some Surrealists countered the fascist subject with "imagoes of the fragmented body" (e.g., Bellmer), while others did so with tropes of the heterogeneous and the acephalic (e.g., Bataille).
that condemned all modernisms—but especially ones that connected the cultural other and the unconscious, here the arts of "the primitive," the child, and the insane, in order to deploy the disruptive otherness of such alien figures. An ideal to the Surrealists, this primitivist fantasm was an enormous threat to the fascist subject, who also associated it with Jews and Communists, for it represented precisely the "degenerate" forces that threatened its armored identity—again, both from within and from without. Thus, if the Surrealists embraced "the primitive," the fascists abjected it: for the first it could not be close enough; for the second it was always too close. In the mid-1930s, then, a time of revolt and reaction at home and in the colonies, the question of the other for the European, on the left as well as on the right, was one of "correct distance."

I borrow this ambiguous term (replete with its nasty note of proper disdain) from the cultural critic Catherine Clément, who points out that at the moment when Lacan delivered the "Mirror Stage" paper in Nazi Germany Lévi-Strauss was in the Amazon at work on "the ethnological equivalent of the mirror stage." "In both cases," Clément writes, "the question involved is one of correct distance." What this might mean in the case of Lacan is fairly clear, for the "Mirror Stage" concerns the negotiation of distance between the fledgling ego and its image, between the infant and its mother. But what might it mean for Lévi-Strauss? A first response is also fairly clear: it too concerns the negotiation of distance, here between the anthropological participant-observer, the home culture, and the culture of study. But what might it mean specifically for Lévi-Strauss in the mid-1930s, a friend of the Surrealists, a Jew who departed a Europe on the verge of fascism? For this anthropologist, who has done so much to critique the category of race, to reenvision "the savage mind" as logical and the modern mind as mythical, the fascist extreme of nonidentification with the other was obviously disastrous, but the Surrealist tendency to over-identification was also potentially problematic. For while the first destroyed difference brutally, the second was perhaps too eager to appropriate difference, to assume it, to become it. A certain distance from the other was necessary after all. (Did Lévi-Strauss see this danger not only in the more excessive deformations of Surrealist art, but also in the more extreme experiments of the Collège de Sociologie?)

16. "There is no way out of the dilemma: either the anthropologist adheres to the norms of his own group and other groups inspire in him no more than a fleeting curiosity which is never quite devoid of disapproval, or he is capable of giving himself wholeheartedly to these other groups and his objectivity is vitiated by the fact that, intentionally or not, he has had to withhold himself from at least one society, in order to devote himself to all. He therefore commits the very sin that he lays at the door of those who contest the exceptional significance of his vocation" (*Tristes Tropiques* [1955], trans. [], and D. Weightman [New York: Atheneum, 1978], p. 384).
Twenty years later, with the publication of *Tristes Tropiques*, his memoir of this time, the question of correct distance was reframed. The primary threat to the other was no longer from fascism but from "monoculture," i.e., the encroachment of the capitalist West on the rest of the world. (At one point Lévi-Strauss writes of entire Polynesian islands turned into aircraft carriers, and whole areas of Asia and Africa become dingy suburbs and shanty towns.) One must argue with this fatalistic vision of an exotic world on the wane, which locates its only authentic moment in its precontact past, especially so since this remorse about the pure other lost over there can flip into a reaction against the dirty other found right here. Nevertheless, it does set the dominant tone of the Western discussion of correct distance vis-a-vis the other in the mid-1960s. No doubt to this other in the context of liberation wars from Algeria to Viet Nam, such a discussion was a cruel farce, preposterously belated in its liberal concern after decades of colonialist trauma. How could one speak, a Frantz Fanon might ask, of correct distance when colonialist domination had overcoded both bodies and psyches of colonized and colonizer alike? And yet this is exactly what concerns Fanon in a text like "On National Culture," first delivered to the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959. There, again in a rewriting of the master-slave dialectic, he distinguishes three phases for the renewal of national cultures. The first occurs when the native intellectual assimilates the culture of the colonialist power; the second when this intellectual is called back, as it were, to native traditions, which, however, socially separated as he or she is, tend to be treated exotically, as so many "mummified fragments" of a folklorish past; and finally the third phase when this intellectual, now a participant in a popular struggle, helps to forge a new national identity in active resistance to the colonialist power and in contemporary recoding of native traditions. Here too the question is one of correct distance, but it is reversed, now asked by the other: how to negotiate a distance not only from the colonialist power but also from the nativist past, how to renew a national culture that is neither neocolonial nor auto-primitivist?

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18. In other words, "correct distance" is potentially a primitivist ideologeme as well. It might imply an evolutionist mapping, residual from nineteenth-century racism, of time onto space, whereby "back then" becomes conflated with "over there," with the most remote marked as the most primitive. This mapping is not only racist (this site is always "dark") but also absurd, especially at a time of the multinational implosion of metropolitan core and imperial periphery. And yet it remains tenacious because it is fundamental to conceptions of history-as-development and civilization-as-hierarchy. The now-classic discussion of this space-time mapping is Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
20. In his conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon notes "the obscene narcissism" of Europe and invokes a different death of the subject: "Let us leave Europe where they are never done thinking of Man" (pp. 313, 311). At the same time he was aware of the dangers not only of neocolonial
What has happened to this problematic of distance today? To call our world postcolonial is to mask the persistence of colonial and neocolonial relations; it is also to ignore the fact that just as there was always a First World in every Third World there was always a Third World in every First World. And yet the recognition of this lack of distance may be termed postcolonial, indeed postmodern, at least to the degree that the modern world was often thought in terms of spatial oppositions not only between culture and nature, city and country, but also between metropolitan core and imperial periphery, the West and the Rest. Today, at least in economies retooled as post-Fordist, these poles do not orient much, these spaces have imploded somewhat—which is not to say that such power hierarchies have collapsed (it is more a matter of "the British Empire [replaced] by the International Monetary Fund"). However, for my analysis the question is: how are these worldly shifts registered, reconstructed, and/or anticipated, in recent theory? Is it too obvious to say that Derridean deconstruction is pledged to the very undoing of such oppositions as they inform Western thought, that Foucauldian methodology is founded in the very refusal of such foundations? Is not poststructuralism a critical elaboration of these events of the postcolonial, the postmodern (especially in its concern with "the event")? Or does it also serve as a ruse by which these events are epistemologically defused?

In the modern world the other confronted in the course of empire, provoked a crisis in cultural identity which the avant-garde attempted to resolve through the symbolic construct of primitivism, the fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of this otherness. But this resolution was also a repression: managed by the moderns, the other has returned at the very moment of its supposed eclipse; indeed, this return has become the postmodern event. In this sense the putative incorporation of the outside in The New World Order may have impelled its eruption into the field of the same as difference. This is what poststructuralism thinks, between the lines as it were, as when Derrida proclaims the end of any "original or transcendental signified . . . outside a system of differences." And yet the poststructuralists rarely attended to this other by its many names: they failed to answer the Fanonian demand for recognition in its recuperation but also of triumphal separatism—which led him to critique the Négritude movement. For a contemporaneous European response to this same problematic see Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" (1961), in History and Truth, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965).

22. Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," p. 184. Such spatial oppositions (e.g., sites of industrial production and places of raw materials and cheap labor) are not canceled. On the contrary, they are only complicated—revealed to be imbrications, never oppositions. How many other such oppositions have undergone a worldly deconstruction of late?
own terms. Too often they continued to project the other as an outside, as a space of ideological escape. Thus all the epistemological exoticisms—neo-orientalist oases and neo-primitivist resorts—that appear in the poststructuralist landscape: the Chinese script in Derrida that “interrupts” Western logocentrism, the Chinese encyclopedia in Foucault that confounds the Western order of things, the Chinese women that lure Kristeva with alternative identifications, the Japan of Barthes that represents “the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems,” the other space of nomadism that for Deleuze and Guattari cuts across capitalist territoriality, the other society of symbolic exchange that for Baudrillard haunts our own order of commodity exchange, and so on. And yet if poststructuralism could not find a correct distance either, at least it problematized the attempt to think difference as opposition, to oppose inside to outside, subject to other. This critique is extended in much postcolonial discourse (as it is in much gay and lesbian studies), and it is there that poststructuralism is most productive today. In this regard I can only disagree with the trashing of poststructuralism and/or postmodernism as just another proper name of the West.

I must break this line here in order to turn to my last track to the postmodern, the impact of technology on Western culture as thought in the mid-1930s, the mid-1960s, and the present. Here too I will argue that, even as one discursive moment leads to the next, this next comprehends the one before. Thus what Guy Debord defines in the spectacle of the mid-1960s are the technological transformations that Walter Benjamin described thirty years before in the mid-1930s; and what cyberpunk writers extrapolate in the mid-1990s are the cybernetic extensions that Marshall McLuhan described thirty years before in the mid-1960s. In discourse on technology the terms attached to these moments are both ideological and accurate: the age of mechanical reproduction in the 1930s, the age of cybernetic revolution in the 1960s, and the age of technoscience and/or technoculture today—i.e., when research and development, culture and technology, cannot be separated even heuristically. The attendant narratives are also both suspect and telling: e.g., the notion that we

25. With my focus on the (deferred) diachronic, I have not attended to synchronic links between different discourses. What are the possible relays, for example, between the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, the cybernetics of Norbert Weiner (whom Lévi-Strauss occasionally cites), and the mediatic explosion of the postwar period?
have now passed from an industrial or Fordist society to a postindustrial or post-Fordist one. For I agree with Mandel that the postindustrial signals not the supercession of industrialization but its full extension, just as I agree with Jameson that the postmodern announces not the end of modernization but its apparent apogee. Here, however, I want to stay with the ideologeme of distance raised in discourse on the cultural other, for it is also a crucial term in discourse on technology.

Benjamin writes "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" at a moment when mechanical reproduction had already become a cultural dominant.\(^2\) There, of course, he argues that such reproduction withers the aura of art, i.e., its uniqueness, authenticity, authority, distance, and that this withering "emancipates" art from its ritualistic bases, "brings things 'closer' to the masses."\(^3\) For Benjamin this eclipse of distance has great liberatory potential, as culture might be made more collective. But it also has great manipulative potential, as politics might be made more spectacular. Socialism or fascism? Benjamin asks in the most dramatic of modernist ultimatums. Yet even by 1936 this alternative could not hold— that is, if one takes the socialist referent to be the Soviet Union of Stalin (who was about to sign his pact with Hitler). In this primary instance the aestheticization of politics had already overwhelmed the politicization of art. Eight years later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer would trace a continuum from the total culture of Nazi Germany to the culture industry of the United States, and an additional twenty-three years later, in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord would argue that the spectacle dominated the consumerist West. (In 1988, in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, published a year before the recent revolutions, he pronounced the spectacle integrated West and East.)

In Benjamin the withering of aura, the loss of distance, impacts on the body as well as on the image: the two cannot be separated. At one point he makes an analogy between a painter and a magician on the one hand, and a cameraman and a surgeon on the other: whereas the first two maintain a "natural distance" from the motif to paint or the body to heal, the second two "penetrate deeply into its web."\(^4\) The new visual technologies are thus "surgi-
cal”: they reveal the world in new representations, shock the observer into new perceptions. For Benjamin this “optical unconscious” renders us both more critical and more distracted (such is his great hope for cinema), and he insists on this paradox as a dialectic. But here too it is not clear that it could be maintained. Already in 1931 Ernst Jünger had argued that technology was “intertwined with our nerves” in a way that subsumed criticality and distraction within “a second, colder consciousness.”29 And not much later, Heidegger announced that distance and closeness were folded into “a uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near.”30

Certainly by the mid-1960s the Benjaminian dialectic splits in such signal discourses on technology as Debord on spectacle and McLuhan on media. Implicitly, whereas Debord develops Benjamin on the image, McLuhan elaborates Benjamin on the body; however, both regard critical distance as all but doomed. For Debord spectacle subsumes criticality under distraction,31 and the dialectic of distance and closeness becomes an opposition of social separations concealed by imaginary unities (e.g., images of product-bliss, universal middle-classness, nationalist collectivity). On the one hand, external distance is eliminated in spectacle; on the other hand, it is reproduced as internal distance, the distance of spectacular fantasy. It is this subjectivist distance (which is really no distance at all) that underwrites the social separations.

Out of similar symptoms McLuhan makes a different diagnosis. As in Debordian spectacle so in his “global village”: distance, spatial as well as critical, is eclipsed. But rather than separation McLuhan sees “retribalization,” and rather than criticality lost he sees distraction transvalued.32 Apparently oblivious to Benjamin, McLuhan develops related ideas, often only to invert them. For McLuhan new technologies do not penetrate the body “surgically,” as they do for Benjamin, so much as they extend it “electrically.” Yet like Benjamin he sees in this process a double movement: technology is an excessive stimulus even as it is also a protective shield against such stimulus, against such shock—the first (the stimulus, the shock) converted by the body into the second (the shield).33 This parrying of shock is crucial to the Benjaminian dialectic of criticality and

31. In fact Debord invokes not the Benjaminian notion of “distraction” but rather the Lukácsian concept of “contemplation” used in History and Class Consciousness (1923) to think the subjective effects of capitalist mass production.
32. There is a strong primitivist turn in McLuhan, especially when tropes of commonality, indeed commingling, are required—and this at a time of revolution in the Third World.
33. Freud develops the model of the protective shield in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1923), and alludes to it in relation to the ego in Civilization and Its Discontents (1930). The psychic dimension of this model, however, is elided in McLuhan even more radically than in Benjamin.
distraction. But in McLuhan it flies apart into an opposition impossible to reconcile. “We have put our central nervous systems outside us in electric technology,” he writes more than once. Yet sometimes he sees this extension as an ecstatic body become electric, absolutely connected to the world, and sometimes as a “suicidal auto-amputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism.”

Today such dis/connection is even more extreme. Is our mediatic world one of increased interaction, as benign as the cyberspace of a telephone call or a databank; or is it one of invasive discipline, each of us so many “dividuals” electronically tracked, genetically traced, not as a policy of any maleficent Big Brother but as a matter of quotidian course? In so many ways it is both these worlds at once, and it is this new intensity of dis/connection that is postmodern.

Again, as of yet I can only develop this postmodern dis/connection anecdotally, and with this I will conclude. In the last few years, with the sacrificed students in Beijing and the fallen Wall in Berlin, the murderous war in the Persian Gulf and the madcap coup in the Soviet Union, I have come to feel wired to spectacular events. Like the mental patient in Gravity's Rainbow whose hysterical fevers mount with the destructive forces of World War II, my spirit seems to rise and fall with these events, and I do not think I am alone. This electrochemical wiring connects and disconnects us simultaneously: we are both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geopolitically remote from them. Such dis/connection is not new (think of the Kennedy assassination, the Munich Terror Games, the Lennon assassination, the Challenger explosion), but it has reached a new level of oxymoronic pain-and-pleasure. Such for me was the real CNN Effect of the Gulf War: repelled by the politics, I was riveted by the images, by a psycho-techno-thrill that locked me in, as smart bomb and spectator are locked in as one. A thrill of technomastery (my mere human perception become a super machine vision, able to see what it destroys and to destroy what it sees), but also a thrill of an imaginary dispersal of my own body, of my own subjecthood. Of course, when the screens of the smart bombs went dark, my body did not explode. In fact, it was bolstered: in a classic fascistic trope, my

34. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 60, 53. Note the different tropics of the body. In Benjamin the formal body remains central as object of technological prosthesis and as figure of the body politic. In McLuhan it is displaced as a trope by the nervous system: the social is seen as a network, not as a body. In much contemporary discourse the body, the social, has lost even this figural integrity. Consider too the different valuations given the media. Benjamin considers the problem of reproduction for values of art. For McLuhan (let alone Debord) art is no longer an issue, and the reproduced image is replaced by the metastatic media. And today the strange McLuhan thesis, “the content of the medium is another medium,” has become the everyday cyberpunk slogan, “computers melted other machines.”

body, my subjecthood, was affirmed in the destruction of other bodies. And again, I do not think I was alone in this awful affirmation.

These are but a few of the splittings of the subject that occur with a new postmodern intensity today: a spatiotemporal splitting, the paradox of great immediacy produced through extraordinary mediation; a moral splitting, the paradox of disgust undercut by fascination, or of sympathy undercut by sadism; and a splitting at the level of body-image, the ecstasy of imaginary dispersal rescued by the confirmation of ego armor. To me the postmodern subject is constructed in such splittings. Is it any wonder that this subject is often so dysfunctional? Is it any wonder that when it is able to function it often does so on automatic, given over to fetishistic responses, to partial recognitions syncopated with complete disavowals? (I know about AIDS, but I cannot get it; I know racists, but I am not one; I know what The New World Order is, but my paranoia embraces it anyway . . .

It has become common to refer to such recognition-cum-disavowal as cynical reason, a state in which agency is not so much canceled as it is relinquished—as if agency were a small price to pay for the shield that such cynicism might provide, the immunity that such ambivalence might secure. Yet these radical splittings need not render one politically autistic. Consider how difficult it was for heterosexual men to come to terms with sexual harassment during the Clarence Thomas hearings, or for middle-class whites to admit to the fact of judicial racism after the Rodney King verdict, but many did. These are moments of traumatic division, to be sure, but as such they are also moments when impossible identifications become possible.