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Regarding Postmodernism—A conversation with Fredric Jameson

ANDERS STEPHANSON

Anders Stephanson: Your argument about postmodernism has two levels: on the one hand an inventory of constitutive features, and on the other an account of a vaster reality which these features are said to express.

Fredric Jameson: The idea is to create a mediatory concept, to construct a model which can be articulated in, and descriptive of, a whole series of different cultural phenomena. This unity or system is then placed in a relation to the infrastructural reality of late capitalism. The aim, in other words, is to provide something which can face in two directions: a principle for the analysis of cultural texts which is at the same time a working system that can show the general ideological function of all these features taken together. I'm not sure that my analysis has covered all the essentials, but I tried to range across a set of qualitatively different things, starting with the visual, passing through the temporal, and then returning to a new conception of space itself.

Since our first concepts of postmodernism have tended to be negative (i.e., it isn't this, it isn't that, it isn't a whole series of things that modernism was), I begin by comparing modernism and postmodernism. However, the object is ultimately a positive description, not in any sense of value (so that postmodernism would then be "better" than modernism) but in order to grasp postmodernism as a new cultural logic in its own right, as something more than a mere reaction. Historically, of course, it *did* begin as a reaction against the institutionalization of modernism in universities, museums and concert halls, against the canonization of a certain kind of architecture. This entrenchment is felt to be oppressive by the generation that comes of age, roughly speaking, in the 60s; and, not surprisingly, it then tries systematically to make a breathing space for itself by repudiating modernist values. In the literary context, values thus repudiated include complexity and ambiguity of language, irony, the concrete universal, and the construction of elaborate symbolic systems. The specific features would of course have been different in other arts.

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You begin the exploration with an analysis of depth and surface in painting.

I wanted to focus on a certain flatness, not to be confused with the way in which modernist painting famously reconquered the surface of the painting. I describe this in terms of the disappearance of a certain *depth*, a word I wanted to function in a deliberately ambiguous way. I meant not only visual depth—that was already happening in modern painting—but also interpretative depth, the idea that the object was fascinating because of the density of its secrets and that these were then to be uncovered by interpretation. All this vanishes. Similarly, because it is a sub-theme of the relationship between postmodernism in the arts and contemporary theory, I tried to show how this goes along with a new kind of conceptualization which no longer involves *philosophic* notions of depth, that is, various hermeneutics in which one interprets an appearance in terms of some underlying reality which these philosophies then uncode. Finally, there is also the abolition of historicity and historical depth, what used to be called historical consciousness or the sense of the past. In short, objects fall into the world and become decoration again; visual depth and systems of interpretation fade away; and something peculiar happens to historical time.

This is then accompanied by a transformation of the depth of psychological *affect* in that a particular kind of phenomenological or emotional reaction to the world disappears. Symptomatic here is the changeover from anxiety—the dominant feeling or affect in modernism—to a different system of which schizophrenic or drug language gives the key notion. I am referring to what the French have started to call *intensities* of highs and lows. These have nothing to do with “feelings” that offer clues to meaning in the way anxiety did. Anxiety is a hermeneutic emotion, it expresses an underlying nightmare state of the world; whereas highs and lows really don’t imply anything about the world, you can feel them on whatever occasion. They are no longer *cognitive*.

You speak here of “the hysterical sublime” and “the exhilaration of the gleaming surface.” In the “dialectical intensification of the autoreferentiality of all modern culture,” we face a complete lack of affect punctured by moments of extreme intensity.

Dialectically, in the conscious sublime it is the self that touches the limit; here it is the body that is touching its limits, “volatilized” in this experience of images to the point of being outside of itself, losing itself. It is a reduction of time to an instant in a most intense final punctual experience of all of these things, but it is no longer *subjective* in the older sense that a personality is standing in front of the Alps and knowing the

limits of the individual subject and the human ego. On the contrary, it is a kind of non-humanist experience of limits beyond which you get dissolved.

Whereupon we reach the temporal aspect.

Yes. The visual metaphoric depth gives way to a description of temporal disconnection and fragmentation, the kind of thing embodied for example in John Cage's music. Discontinuity in sound and time is then seen as emblematic of the disappearance of certain relationships to history and the past. Analogously, it is related to the way we describe a text today as the production of discontinuous sentences without any larger unifying forms. A rhetoric of texts replaces older notions of a work organized according to this or that form. Indeed, the very language of form disappears.

In the 60s, I was once told, the average camera movement—a change of view, a zoom, a pan—did not go below something like 1 per 7.5 seconds in an ordinary 30-second commercial, the reason being that this was considered the optimum of what the human perception could handle. It is now down to something like 3.5 or less. I have actually timed commercials where it is about 1 change per 2 seconds, 15 changes in a matter of 30 seconds.

We are approaching a logic of subliminality there and your example effectively illustrates this new logic of difference to which we are being programmed, these increasingly rapid and empty breaks in our time. Each training in an increased tempo is a training in feeling it natural to shift from one thing to another.

Paik's video art is, as you say, a valuable postmodernist place to explore this problem.

As a kind of training in a new logic of difference. An empty formal training or programming in a new way of perceiving difference.

What exactly is that new way of perceiving difference?

I tried to put this in the slogan "difference relates." The very perception of breaks and difference becomes a meaning in itself, not a meaning that has content but one that seems to be a meaningful yet new form of unity. This kind of view does not pose the problem "how do we relate those things, how do we turn those things back into continuities or similarities"; it simply says, "when you register difference, something positive is happening in your mind." It's a way of getting rid of content.

From this diagnosis of the temporal you proceed to the spatial.

I then link these two sets of features (surface, fragmentation) in terms of the spatialization of time. Time has become a perpetual present and thus spatial. Our relationship to the past is now a spatial one.

Why does it necessarily become spatial?

One privileged language in modernism, Proust or Thomas Mann for example, always used temporal description. That notion of “deep time,” Bergsonian time, seems radically irrelevant to our contemporary experience, which is one of a perpetual spatial present. Our *theoretical* categories also tend to become spatial: structural analyses with graphs of synchronic multiplicities of spatially related things (as opposed to, say, the dialectic and its temporal moments), and languages like Foucault’s with its empty rhetoric of cutting, sorting and modifying, a kind of spatial language in which you organize data like a great bloc to be chopped up in various ways. This happens to be how I in particular “use” Foucault, with limitations that will probably infuriate his disciples. Much of Foucault, on the other hand, was already familiar: the binary opposition between center and margin was largely developed in Sartre/Saint Genet; the concepts of power had emerged in many places, but fundamentally in the anarchist tradition; the totalizing strategies of his various schemes also have many analogies from Weber on. I propose rather to consider Foucault in terms of the *cognitive mapping* of power, the construction of spatial picture-models, the transfer of conceptions of social power and its forms onto powerful spatial figures. But then, of course, once one puts it that way, his own figures—the grid, for example—become starkly relativized and cease to be theories as such.

Where does “hyper-space” come into the spatial argument?

Normal space is made up of things, or organized by things. Here we are talking about the dissolution of things. In this final component of hyperspace, one cannot talk about components anymore. We used to talk about this in terms of subject-object dialectics; but in a situation where subjects and objects have been dissolved, hyperspace is the ultimate of the object-pole, intensity the ultimate of the subject-pole, though we no longer have subjects and objects.

At any rate, the notion of spatialization replacing temporalization leads back to architecture and new experiences of space which I think are very different from any previous moments of the space of the city, to name one example. What is striking about the new urban ensembles around Paris, for example, is that there is *absolutely no perspective at all*. Not only has the street disappeared (that was already the task of

modernism) but all profiles have disappeared as well. This is bewildering and I use existential bewilderment in this new postmodern space to make a final diagnosis of the loss of our ability to *position ourselves within this space and cognitively map it*. This is then projected back on the emergence of a global multinational culture which is decentered and cannot be visualized, a culture in which one cannot position oneself. That is the conclusion.

To be more specific, you use, very elegantly, Portman's Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as an example: a mirror facade, a self-enclosed structure in which it is impossible to orientate oneself. Yet the new commercial spaces around Rodeo Drive are the very opposite of what you describe: quaint squares, readily visible spaces where things can be purchased in quite obvious and conventional ways.

But that is the Disney version of postmodern architecture, the Disneyland pastiche of the older square or piazza or whatever. I picked emblematic things and by no means everything can be analyzed in that vein. These other examples are not exemplary of the hyperspace, but they certainly are exemplary of the production of simulacra. Disney's EPCOT is another excellent example.

His compressed version of the world in other words, little toy countries where you can orientate yourself in no time at all.

I suppose you can orient yourself because paths have been laid long for you to move along, but where you actually are is a real problem. For you may in fact be in the Florida Everglades and in this case you are not only in a swamp but also in a simulacrum of somewhere else. Disneyland is on the whole supremely prophetic and paradigmatic of a lot of this stuff.

The emergence of postmodernism is materially tied in your analysis to the rise of American capital on a global scale, dated to the late 50s and early 60s. However, the United States was then actually beginning to experience a relative decline in its postwar dominance: other nations were coming back economically, there was an upsurge of third-world liberation movements and the return in the first world of oppositional ideologies very much fashioned on the depth model (marxism for one).

Notions of the discontinuity of culture and economics can account for some of that. The setting in place of American power is one thing; the development of a culture which both reflects and perpetuates that power is a somewhat different matter. The old cultural slate had to be wiped clean and the reason that could happen in the United States rather than in Europe was the persistence of *l'ancien regime* in Euro-

pean culture. Once modernism broke down, the absence of traditional forms of culture in the US opened up a field for a whole new cultural production across the board. Individual things could be pioneered in Europe, but a *system* of culture could only emerge from this American possibility. At the moment when American power then begins to be questioned, a new cultural apparatus becomes necessary to reinforce it. The system of postmodernism comes in as the vehicle for a new kind of ideological hegemony which might not have been required before.

Isn't this view close to straightforward functionalism or instrumentalism?

Yes and no. There is certainly a way in which this system—from the export of American television shows to so-called high cultural values, above all the very logic and practice of “American” consumption itself—is as effective a vehicle for depoliticization as religion may once have been. There had to be channels of transmission and those are laid in place with communications systems, television, computers and so forth. Worldwide, that’s really only available in the 60s. Suffice it simply for a power elite to say: “Well, in this situation we need a cultural system which has to correspond to changes that are taking place in people’s lives and offer a kind of content.” The new life experience embodied in postmodernism is very powerful precisely because it has a great deal of *content* that seems to come as a solution to existential problems.

A lot of other discontinuous systems are going on here too. Some of the *social* effects of American hegemony are not felt until the 60s—the agricultural revolution for example—so it’s wrong to see this merely in terms of political power. A lot of the social resistance of the 60s comes when people—peasants for instance—begin to realize what the neo-colonial systems are doing to ways of life that had been exploited before but left relatively intact. The emergence of resistance does not necessarily merely mean the rolling back of American influence; it can be a symptom of the disintegrating forces of that influence on deeper levels of social life than the political one.

When you depict the capitalist destruction of Van Gogh’s world of peasant shoes and Heidegger’s country pathway, you do so in terms of Tafuri’s account of the modernist project in architecture: the aim of insuring that the future holds no surprises, the idea of “planification” and elimination of future risk. This seems a valid point. However, you skate rather easily over the modernizing features of marxism itself, the results of which are clear and obvious in the unthinking destruction of the environment in Soviet-style societies. Planification with a vengeance, it actually prepares the grounds for future disaster. The obliteration of Heidegger’s pathway can thus be seen as an integral feature of any modernizing ethic.

Plainly, in an advanced society our immediate oppositional tendency is to talk about restraining technological progress. I am not sure poor societies always have that option. Some of these features, what is happening to cities like Moscow, are part of what could be called *the cultural debt crisis*. Think of the 60s and 70s here, where they were sucked into the world system and began to feel they had to have tourists and build big hotels. One has to distinguish between the Promethean scenario—the struggle with nature—and other kinds of commodification that they really get from us in a lot of ways.

Yet Stalin was a great admirer of American technology and Taylorist efficiency. The fact that they engage in this sort of destruction is not only a question of wanting to catch up with the west or having to compete with the west; it is also embedded in a certain kind of marxist theory. By delineating the problematic in an exclusively capitalist domain you render yourself open to the objection that there is a strong element of conquering nature and older “logics” in marxist as well as capitalist thought. Marcuse’s analysis of Soviet theory is surely unequivocal on this point. If your argument, in short, is built on the idea of the relentless ordering of the world in terms of the commodifying logic of capital, then it must also be clear that certain marxisms are far from innocent.

I agree. But the emphasis on production and productivity and catching up with capitalism is at least part of the rivalry that capitalism has laid on these underdeveloped countries: they have to catch up. Therefore we have a very elaborate dialectical process where these societies have found it necessary to go beyond self-sufficiency or autarchy to generate modernization for a lot of reasons like armament.

Yes, but the conception of modernity is there from the outset.

That is indeed an ideological conception, and no doubt it needs to be rethought.

Your model goes from the microlevel, assorted things here and there, to the macrolevel represented by Mandel’s concept of Late Capitalism. These “homologies” between the three moments of capital and the three moments in cultural development (realism, modernism and postmodernism) lend credence to descriptions of your position as unreconstructed Lukacsianism. It does seem a case of expressive causality, correspondences and all.

However, it is difficult to see how one can preserve a consistent political commitment if one adopts poststructuralist fantasies of pure contingency and non-relation. In a nutshell, a certain amount of reductionism is necessary. Hence, objections to the actual concept of the three stages of capitalism aside, I think the idea of

this kind of model perfectly proper. Problems arise, however, with the mediating instances, the way in which you jump from the minute to the staggeringly global.

But Lukacs takes a moralizing position on modernism which is neither historical nor dialectical. He thinks it is something essentially morally wrong that can be eliminated by an effort of the will. That is something very different from my presentation of something that seems *more* morally horrendous, namely postmodernism. As for expressive causality, I find it paradoxical that a discontinuous and dialectical model of something can be criticized for being an idealistic continuity which includes a telos. Each of these moments is dialectically different from each other and has different laws and modes of operation. I also make a place for overdetermination, that is, some things are enabled by developments in the cultural realm which tie into others at certain conjunctures. I don't think that's what one would do in a model of "the Spirit of the Age." For example, the notion of hegemony is not normally thought to be Hegelian. In talking about a certain kind of cultural hegemony, I have left a space for oppositional or enclaves of resistance, all kinds of things not integrated into the global model but necessarily defined against it. I can see how in some very loose and general sense one can make the sort of characterization you made, and in the same loose and general sense it wouldn't bother me. If we talk about the specifics of the thing, then I would want to see what reprehensible things it ended up doing before I accepted it. On the other hand, as you say, any attempt to be systematic potentially attracts those criticisms because one is trying to make a reduction.

What distinguishes your concept of postmodernism is in fact that it is conceived not as a stylistic mode but as a cultural dominant. In that way it bears little relation to the ideas of everyone from Tafuri to Lyotard.

Two things here. First, it's important to understand that this notion of a 'dominant' does not exclude forms of resistance. In fact, the whole point for me in undertaking this analysis was the idea that one wouldn't be able to measure the effectiveness of resistance unless one knew what the dominant forces were. My conception of postmodernism is thus not meant to be a monolithic thing but to allow evaluations of other currents within this system—which cannot be measured unless one knows what the system is.

In the second place I want to propose a dialectical view in which we neither see postmodernism as immoral, frivolous or reprehensible because of its lack of high seriousness, nor as good in the McLuhanist, celebratory sense of the emergence of some wonderful new utopia. Features of both are going on at once. Certain aspects of postmodernism can be seen as relatively positive, such as the return of storytelling after the sort of poetic novels that modernism used to produce. Other features are

obviously negative (the loss of a sense of history for example). All in all, these developments have to be confronted as a historical situation rather than as something one morally deplores or simply celebrates.

Moralizing aside, is postmodernism not predominantly negative from a marxist perspective?

Think of its popular character and the relative democratization involved in various postmodernist forms. This is an experience of culture accessible to far more people than the older modernist languages were. Certainly, that cannot be altogether bad. Culturalization of things on a very wide front might be deplored by people for whom modernism was a very sophisticated language to be conquered by dint of self-formation, of which postmodernism is then a bastardization and vulgarization. Why this should be condemned from a left standpoint is however not clear to me.

In that sense no, but as you yourself have emphasized, simple opposition to totality in the name of some celebrated fragmentation and heterogeneity renders the very idea of critique difficult.

Yet even heterogeneity is a positive thing: the social rhetoric of differences reflected in this and that is surely not in itself a bad thing. The point is that many of these seemingly negative features can be looked at positively if they are seen historically. If you see them as items in a defense of postmodern art, then they don't look the same. Postmodern architecture is demonstrably a symptom of democratization, of a new relationship of culture to people, but this does not mean that you can defend or glamorize the buildings of the postmodernists because they are populist buildings.

It is obvious, nevertheless, that postmodernist discourse makes it difficult to say things about the whole.

One of the ways of describing this is as a modification in the very nature of the cultural sphere: a loss of the autonomy of culture, a case of culture falling into the world. As you say, this makes it much more difficult to speak of cultural systems and to evaluate them in isolation. A whole new theoretical problem is posed. Thinking at once negatively and positively about it is a beginning, but what we need is a new vocabulary. The languages that have been useful in talking about culture and politics in the past don't really seem adequate to this historical moment.

Yet you retain the classical marxist paradigm: the master narrative underneath this search for a new vocabulary is very traditional.

Traditional in a sense but it implies a third stage of capitalism which is not present in Marx . . .

Nor indeed is the second one, "monopoly capitalism," which was an invention of the Second International bought wholesale and with very bad results by the Third.

The marxist framework is still indispensable for understanding the new historical content, which demands, not a modification of the marxist framework, but an expansion of it.

Why is that clear?

Contemporary marxist economics and social science is not a rewriting of 19th century marxism. One can dramatize this as Mandel does by saying that it is not that reality has evolved away from the model, it is not that this is no longer the capitalism analyzed by Marx, but that it is a much closer, *purier* version of capitalism. A feature of this third stage is that the precapitalist enclaves have systematically been penetrated, commodified and assimilated to the dynamics of the system. If the original instruments of marxism are unserviceable it is not that marxism is wrong now but that it is *true* now than in Marx's time. Hence we need an expansion of these instruments rather than a replacement of them.

The old Lukacsian model of truth and false consciousness is, I suppose, one casualty in this regard.

In the more interesting parts of Lukacs, that is not in fact the model. Let me put that in a more personal way. Obviously, there is false consciousness and there are moments when one wants to denounce certain things as sheer false consciousness. That is essentially a political decision and part of a struggle that has to be. In ideological analysis, on the other hand, the denunciation of works of art for embodying false consciousness was possible only in a more heterogeneous class situation, where the working classes were a nation within the nation and did not consume bourgeois culture. When one takes one's stand in such circumstances, then one can see that certain kinds of objects—Proust for example—are decadent in the sense of not being the mode in which either experience or artistic form makes any sense to people who work. From that viewpoint one can denounce the decadence and false consciousness which Proust undoubtedly embodied. But now, when these class differences are no longer secured by social isolation and with a continuing process of massive democratic culturalization, there is no space which the left can be outside. My position on

ideological analysis of works of art today is therefore that you don't denounce them from the outside. If you want to denounce them as false consciousness, you have to do it from the inside and it has to be a *self-critique*. It is not because false consciousness doesn't exist anymore—perhaps because it is everywhere—that we have to talk about it in a different way.

You propose, then, to preserve “the moment of truth” in postmodernism. What exactly is it?

I am using contemporary German post-Hegelian language here. Ideological analysis from that vantage point means talking about the moment of truth and the moment of untruth, and in this case I am trying to say that insofar as postmodernism *really expresses* multinational capitalism, there is some cognitive content to it. It is articulating something that is going on. If the subject is lost in it, and if in social life the psychic subject has been decentered by late capitalism, then this art faithfully and authentically registers that. That's its moment of truth.

Modernism, as you have argued, emerges at the same time as mass culture to which it is thus inextricably linked. Postmodernism can then be seen as the collapse of these two into one again. Terry Eagleton has reformulated this as a kind of sick joke on the historical avant-garde, where the avant-garde attempt to break down the boundaries between art and social life suddenly becomes a reactionary implosion.

It's not a matter of becoming that, but being *revealed* as that. The other version of that account which I find very persuasive is that of Tafuri in connection with architecture. He tries to show that the protopolitical aesthetic revolution first laid down in Schiller—i.e., we must change our existential experience and that will in itself be a revolution—is virtually taken over word for word by le Corbusier: we change the space we live in and then we don't need political revolution. The protopolitical impulse of modernism, according to Tafuri, is necessarily always predicated on exclusion, for the radical new space of the modern thing must begin by a gesture of excluding the old fallen space that is to be revolutionized. Implicit here is the belief that this new space will fan out and transform the old space. Instead it simply remains an enclave space; and when the existential and cultural spatial revolution fails to take hold in this fallen outlying world, the building or work of art becomes an isolated monument, testifying to its own sterility or impotence. It ceases to be a revolutionary gesture. So what Eagleton is ironizing is in Tafuri's account already implicit in the first modernisms.

There is a misreading of your reading of Tafuri which seems to say that by calling for a "properly Gramscian architecture" you are simply calling for some cleared enclave of resistance, not quite what you are arguing.

In my appeal to a Gramscian architecture, I also mentioned Lefebvre. I was thinking not of an architectural practice as such but of an awareness that the locus of our new reality and the cultural politics by which it must be confronted is that of space. We must therefore begin to think of cultural politics in terms of space and the struggle for space. Then we are no longer thinking in old categories of critical distance but in some new way where the disinherited and essentially modernist language of subversion and negation is conceived differently. Tafuri's argument is couched in cultural terms, but what matters in any defeat or success of a plan to transform the city is political power, control over speculation and land values and so on. That's a very healthy infrastructural awareness.

How does this differ from traditional politics?

The difference is that the political project is projected onto at least two levels: the practical matter of this place, this terrain, and these resistances; and then, above and beyond that, the cultural vision of utopian space of which this particular enclave is but a specific figure. All of which can be said in a more banal way in terms of the decay of the very concept of socialism which we can observe everywhere (in all three worlds): it is a matter of reinventing that concept as a powerful cultural and social vision, something one does not do simply by repeating a worn-out name or term. But it is a two-level strategy: the specific space or place *and* the global vision of which the first is only one particular manifestation or local fulfillment. Add to this the fact and problem of the new global systemic space and we have a demand made on the political imagination which is historically unparalleled.

Let me put it this way: there exists today a global capitalist, or late capitalist culture, which we call, as is now apparent, postmodernism. It is a tremendously powerful force which, in sheer gravitational attraction and capability of diffusion, is known, or used to be known, as cultural imperialism. Nothing like a global socialist culture exists as a distinct oppositional force and style to this. On the other hand, when one proposes such a political project to some of the interested parties, they rightly begin at once to worry about the dissolution of that national situation and culture which has generally played such a powerful role in socialist revolutions. What is wanted is therefore a new relationship between a global cultural style and the specificity and demands of a concrete local or national situation.

Is the spatial aspect not really what social democrats in Europe have been concerned with, sometimes successfully, for a long time?

The problem with the social democratic governments is that they've gained power in a nation-state whose economic realities are really controlled by the international market. They are therefore not in control of their own national space. Ultimately, I am talking about a global space which is not an abstract speculative thing. I am talking about the fact that the proletariat of the first world is now in the third world, that production is taking place around the Pacific basin or wherever. These are practical realities, and the control of national space may itself be an outmoded idea in a situation of multinationals.

Indeed, one may take your macro-analysis to mean that the task of radical first-world intellectuals is a kind of "third-worldism." This, to my mind, recalls various "bribery theories" of the 60s—using the absence of movement among the western working class as a justification for fixation on other and less quiescent continents. Eventually these positions were discarded and rightly so.

The attractiveness of "third worldism" as an ideology rises and falls with the condition of the third world itself, but the political movement going on today—such as there is—is in places like Nicaragua and South Africa. Surely, then, the third world is still very much alive as a possibility. It is not a matter of cheering for third-world countries to make their revolution; it is a dialectical matter of seeing that we here are involved in these areas and are busy trying to put them down, that they are part of our power relations.

But that tends to end up in moralism: "we shouldn't do this and we shouldn't do that in the third world." Once one has realized that, what is there to do? No particular politics follows as far as the first world itself is concerned. One tends to end up with Paul Sweezy's position where the only thing to do is to prevent interventions in the third world. This strikes me as a bit barren.

Well, what are the alternatives? We are talking about culture and culture is a matter of awareness; and it would not be a bad kind of awareness to generate that we in the superstate are at all times a presence in third-world realities, that our affluence and power are in the process of doing something to them. The form this awareness takes in American culture has to do not only with foreign policy but also with the notion that the US itself is a third-world country. In a way, we have become the biggest

third-world country, in the production of unemployment, the production of non-production, the flight of factories and so on.

Why does that make us a third-world country? It seems like the definition of a first-world one.

If the third world is defined, as it sometimes has been, as the development of under-development, then it does seem clear that we have begun to do this to ourselves as well. In any case, the apparent return to some finance capitalism with dizzying edifices of credit and paper no longer reposing on the infrastructure or “ground” of real production offers some peculiar analogies to current (poststructuralist) theory itself. Let’s say that here the first world—if it does not revert back into third-world realities—unexpectedly and in a peculiar dialectical reversal begins to touch some features of third-world experience, perhaps another reason third-world culture has lately become one of our passionate interests.

In arguing against condemnation and celebration, you wish to encourage a critique which goes through postmodernism in a sort of “homeopathic” way.

To undo postmodernism homeopathically by the methods of postmodernism: to work at dissolving the pastiche by using all the instruments of pastiche itself, to reconquer some genuine historical sense by using the instruments of what I have called substitutes for history.

How is this “homeopathic” operation to be understood more specifically?

The figure of homeopathic medicine here does not imply that that is the only way culture functions, but it is often the case. Modernism, for example, was an experience of nascent commodification which fought reification by means of reification, in terms of reification. It was itself a gigantic process of reification internalized as a homeopathic way of seizing on this force, mastering it and opposing the result to reifications passively submitted to in external reality. I am wondering whether some positive features of postmodernism couldn’t do that as well: an attempt somehow to master these things by choosing them and pushing them to their limits. There is a whole range of so-called oppositional arts, whether it’s punk writing, or ethnic writing, which really try to use postmodern techniques—though for obvious reasons I dislike the term technique—to go through and beyond. It’s certainly wrong to go down the list of contemporary trends and once again, in typical leftwing fashion, try and find out which is progressive. The only way through a crisis of space is to invent a new space.

Despite the disappearance of a sense of history, there is no lack of historical elements in postmodern culture.

When I talked about the loss of history, I didn't mean the disappearance of images of history, for instance in the case of nostalgia film. The increasing number of films about the past are no longer historical but images, simulacra, pastiches of the past. It is effectively a way of satisfying a chemical craving for historicity with a product which is a substitute for it and which blocks it.

But historical images are always in a way substitutes.

That is not the way Lukacs analyzed the historical novel in its emergent form. I would also argue that something like science fiction can occasionally be looked at as a way of breaking through to history in a new way, achieving a distinctive historical consciousness by way of the future rather than the past, becoming conscious of our present as the past of some unexpected future rather than as the future of a heroic national past (the traditional historical novel of Lukacs). But nostalgia art gives us the image of various generations of the past as fashion-plate images, which entertain no determinable ideological relationship to other moments of time: they are not the outcome of anything, nor the antecedents of our present; they are simply images. This is the sense in which I describe them as substitutes for any genuine historical consciousness rather than specific new forms of the latter.

The cannibalizing of styles is part and parcel of this type of "historicity."

What the architects call historicism, the eclectic use of dead languages.

I first became aware of this a couple of years ago with regard to fashion, when the 50s was being mined along with its ideological orientation: the schlock of the Eisenhower epoch, the fascination with television series of that period and so forth. Now, when that seems exhausted, there is excavation of the 60s, not the politicized 60s but the 60s of the go-go girls. One can imagine that even the militant 60s can be used for stylistic innovation, rather in the manner in which Macy's department store instantly transforms East Village vogues into commercial values.

Perhaps one could write a history of these nostalgias. It would be plausible to say that in a moment of exhaustion with politics the images that are cannibalized and offered by nostalgia film are those of a great depoliticized era. Then, when unconsciously political drives begin to reawaken, they are contained by offering images of a

politicized era. We are all happy to have a movie like *Reds*, but is that not also a nostalgia film?

Perhaps, but nostalgia is difficult to avoid in popular depictions of the past.

What is at stake is a historical situation and one can't wish this postmodern blockage of historicity out of existence by mere self-critical self-consciousness. If it's the case that we have a very real difficulty in imagining the radical difference with the past, then this difficulty cannot be overcome by an act of the will, by deciding that this is the wrong kind of history to have and that we ought to do it in some other way. This for me is the fascination with Doctorow's novels. Here we have a radical leftwing novelist who has seized the whole apparatus of nostalgia art, pastiche and postmodernism in order to work himself through them instead of attempting to resuscitate some older form of social realism, an alternative which would in itself become another pastiche. Doctorow's is not necessarily the only possible path, but I find it an intriguing attempt "homeopathically" to undo postmodernism by the methods of postmodernism: to work at dissolving the pastiche by using all the instruments of pastiche itself, to reconquer some genuine historical sense by using the instruments of what I have called substitutes for history.

In your terms this might be another version of third-worldism in the cultural sense. We come back to looking for some alternative place which is neither the past of the first world, the great moment of modernism, nor its present which is that of schizophrenic textuality.

But how is it possible, in a mode of cultural expression which, by definition, is superficial, to say anything about deep structures? After all, the essence of marxism is to say something about what "really is."

There Doctorow is still my best example, for by turning the past into something which is obviously a black simulacrum he suddenly makes us realize that this is the only image of the past we have, in truth a projection on the walls of Plato's cave. This, if you like, is negative dialectics, or negative theology, an insistence on the very flatness and depthlessness of the thing which makes what isn't there very vivid. That is not negligible. It is not the reinvention of some sense of the past where one would fantasize about a healthier age of deeper historical sense: it is the use of these very limited instruments to show their limits. And it is not *ironic*.

*But how does one use that perception of difference to get somewhere else? If you resort to homology, you've basically done the same thing that you criticize in *Reds* but not in Doctorow.*

The problem of homologies (and the unsatisfactory nature of these parallels or analogies between levels) has been a constant theoretical concern for me. Something like homology does seem difficult to avoid when one attempts to correlate distinct semi-autonomous fields. I've played with alternative concepts: Sartre's notion of the *analagon* and Peirce's concept of the *interpretant*. Both of these stress the operation of reading analogies off the allegorical object, rather than discovering them ontologically, as "realities" in the world. And each seems in addition to contribute a little towards clarifying the process I've called cognitive mapping, the invention of ways of using one object and one reality to get a mental grasp of something else which one cannot represent or imagine. As an emblem of this process I might offer the picture of those hypersterilized laboratory chambers into which enormous gloves and instruments protrude, manipulated by the scientist from the outside. The normal body is doing one thing, but the results are taking place in another space altogether and according to other dimensions, other parameters. It must be a bewildering set of tasks to exercise, as far from our normal bodily operations as the deductive or abductive appropriation of the banana is for the laboratory monkey. But that, if it were possible, would give you an idea of the new kinds of representational processes demanded here.

The personal "style" so typical of modernism has according to you become a mere code in postmodernism.

This is another feature developed primarily by poststructuralism, namely, the eclipse of the old personal subject and ego. Modernism was predicated on the achievement of some unique personal style which could be parlayed out to the subject of genius, the charismatic subject, the supersubject if you like. If that subject has disappeared, the styles linked to it are no longer possible. A certain form of depersonalization thus seems implicit in all of this: even when modernism itself is pastiched, it is only an imitation of style, not a style.

Still, I always insist on a third possibility beyond the old bourgeois ego and the schizophrenic subject of our organization society today: a *collective subject*, decentered but not schizophrenic. It emerges in certain forms of storytelling that can be found in third-world literature, in testimonial literature, in gossip and rumors and things of this kind. It is a storytelling which is neither personal in the modernist sense, nor depersonalized in the pathological sense of the schizophrenic text. It is decentered since the stories you tell there as an individual subject don't belong to you; you don't control them the way the master subject of modernism would. But you don't just suffer them in the schizophrenic isolation of the first-world subject of today. None of this is to reinvent style in the older sense.

Some years ago, in a wholly different context, you called the brush-stroke the very

sign of the modern genius; pointing specifically to de Kooning's mega-brushstroke as the last gasp of some individualizing art. Yet the next morning neo-expressionism brought back this mega brushstroke with a vengeance. Would you then say that this was pastiche, not the surviving element of some older modernism?

Some of it is merely a pastiche of modernist subjectivity.

Certain of these painters, Immendorf for instance, were on the other hand quite explicitly political with interesting stories to tell.

A lot of it is European or from the semi-periphery of the American core (e.g. Canada). It would seem, for instance, that neo-expressionism flourished particularly in Italy and Germany, the two western countries which experienced the historical "break" of fascism. One could argue with Habermas here who sees the German version of neo-expressionism as reactionary. We, on the other hand, could perhaps use it in other ways, not classing it as a morbid attempt to reinvent a subjectivity which in the German tradition is tainted anyway.

And now we see the return of minimalism, blank surfaces and "neo-geo" forms looking rather like 60s and early 70s to me. The cannibalization of styles has apparently been "revved up," conceivably ending in some furious, vertiginous act of biting its own tail.

You suggest an interesting connection between Tafuri's rigorous anti-utopianism—his almost Adornian negative dialectics of architecture—and Venturi's celebration of Las Vegas: the system, for both, is essentially a massively all-encompassing one which cannot be changed. The difference is that Tafuri stoically refuses it, while Venturi invents ways of "relaxing" within it.

For Tafuri, Venturi is himself part of an opposition which is rather that of Mies to Venturi. One solution is that of absolute Mallarmean purity and silence; the other is the abandonment of that final attempt at negative purity and the falling back into the world. The problem with Venturi's architecture or his "solution"—characteristic of a lot of poststructuralisms today—is the appeal to irony, which is a *modernist* solution. He wants to use the language of the vernacular of Las Vegas, but, being engaged in art and aesthetics, he also has to have some kind of minimal distance to it. All of this art, as Tafuri says, is predicated on distance and distance is always a failure: since it distances itself from what it wants to change, it can't change it.

This reminds me of your criticism of Lyotard's concept of postmodernism: he claims to have eliminated the master narratives but then smuggles them back in again.

His most famous statement on postmodernism is that it should prepare for the return of the great modernisms. Now does that mean the return of the great master narratives? Is there not some nostalgia at work here? On the other hand, insofar as the refusal of narratives is viewed as the place of the perpetual present, of anarchist science to use Feyerabend's term (the random breaking of paradigms and so on), we're in full postmodernism.

So the master narratives in that sense are not dead.

All one has to do is to look at the reemergence of religious paradigms, whether it is Iran, or liberation theology, or American fundamentalism. There are all kinds of master narratives in this world which is presumably beyond narrative.

The appropriation of modernism in the United States, when it comes, is quite different from the European predecessors. Though in itself a depoliticized art, postwar modernism here is nevertheless employed in very instrumental ways.

The political elements of "original modernism" in its historical emergence were left out in this process of transplantation so that the various modernisms have been read as subjectivizing and inward-turning. Other features vanished too. The whole utopian and aesthetico-political element in modern architecture, Le Corbusier for example, is no longer visible when we are talking about great monuments and conventions imitated in the schools. At the same time one must say that this modernism was no longer being produced: there was not a living modernism that could have been encouraged in a different way.

You mention somewhere Habermas's defense of the idea of a possible high modernism again and point out that this seems to be a defense against a political reaction which in West Germany is still really anti-modernist. In this country the case is in fact the opposite, is it not? The Hilton Kramers here are obviously not defending radicalism. Defense of postmodernism—one thinks of Tom Wolfe—can on the other hand also be associated with rightwing politics.

The modernism Hilton Kramer wants to go back to is the subjectivizing modernism of the 50s, the American reading of modernism which has been sullied, lost its purity and so must be recovered. However, Habermas's modernism (I hesitate to call it the genuine article) is seen in the context of 1910 and is therefore something very different. Modernism elsewhere died a natural death and is thus no longer available, but modernism in Germany was of course cut short by Nazism and there is thus an

unfulfilled character to that project which I presume someone like Habermas can attempt to take up again. But that option is not viable for us.

The coupure in the “dominant” occurs, as you outline it, in the late 50s or early 60s. Art becomes completely enmeshed in the political economy of its own sphere, which in turn becomes part of a greater economic system. Emblematic among the pictorial artists here is Warhol, whom you contrast with van Gogh in the initial delineation of modernism/postmodernism. Warhol is perhaps almost too obvious a case. How does a contemporary of his like Rauschenberg fit in?

Rauschenberg is transitional, coming in at the tail end of abstract expressionism but now in the most recent stuff developing a whole panoply of ways of doing postmodernism. His new work are all collage surfaces with the photographic images, of which there are, symptomatically, both modernist and postmodernist ones in the same work. The other thing about him is that he works a lot in third-world countries where a lot of these photographs are from.

In dealing with postmodernism, one can isolate people who made some pioneering contributions, but aesthetic questions about how great these are—questions that can legitimately be posed when you’re dealing with modernism—make little sense. I don’t know how great Rauschenberg is, but I saw a wonderful show of his in China, a glittering set of things which offered all kinds of postmodernist experiences. But when they’re over, they’re over. The textual object is not, in other words, a work of art, a “masterwork” like the modernist monument was. The appreciation of it no longer requires the attachment of some permanent evaluation to the work as it would with the modernist painters or writers, and in that sense it is more of what I sometimes call a disposable text. You go into a Rauschenberg show and experience a process done in very expert and inventive ways; and when you leave it, it’s over.

What was the reaction of the Chinese audience?

Fascination, puzzlement. I tried to explain to my Chinese students about postmodernism, but for a general Chinese audience it would simply just be “western art.” To understand it you have to understand it in our historical context: it isn’t just modern art in general but a specific moment of it.

How are the traditional ways of apprehending art changing with all the great social transformations now going on in China? Is there an attempt to rejuvenate modernist notions of creativity, to replace tradition with western subjectivity?

It is not being replaced in that way. There is a lot of translation of western bestsellers

but also of high culture; translations of *The Sound and the Fury*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, but also lots of Arthur Haileys. Maybe I can explain it in terms of theory. The Chinese are now interested in two kinds of theory: western theory and traditional Chinese theory. It is felt that both of these are levers that can get them out of the kind of essentially Soviet cultural theory they were trained on in the 50s. As Deng You-mei, one of the most interesting Chinese writers, said to me: "We are not much interested in western modernism as such. We are bored by novels that don't tell stories." In other words, the elaborate symbolism you find in James Joyce or Virginia Woolf doesn't do anything for them. Right after the fall of the Gang of Four, it was important to recoup some of what had been forgotten, but when I got there and thought I was bringing some enlightenment about Kafka, they informed me that they had been interested in this at the end of the 70s but not anymore. Deng You-mei said: "What you have to realize is that for us realism is also western. Our realisms come out of the western traditions; certainly the dominant realism of the 50s was the Soviet one. We think there is something different from both modernism and realism and that is traditional Chinese storytelling."

This is the third world's input into the whole poststructuralist debate on representation which is loosely assimilated to realism over here: if it is representation and realism, it's bad, and you want to break it up with the decentered subject and so on. But these Chinese strings of episodic narratives fall outside this framework. They are an example of going back to the sort of storytelling which one finds both in the third world's discovery of its own way of telling stories *and* in a certain form of postmodernism. So one has to rethink this question of realism and representation in the Chinese context. I took a tour through some famous grottos with stalactites. Imagine the bourgeois public that hates modern art and here in the same way you have a guide with a little light projector who proclaims: "Look at these rocks. There is an old man, three children, there's the goddess, etc." And you think: this is the most rudimentary form of what we denounce as representation in the west, a public that thinks in these terms. But China developed, alongside this popular realistic or representational perception, a very different kind of spatial perception in the evolution of the written characters. It is possible, therefore, that an oppositional culture in China might take the form of a revival of certain kinds of popular ways of seeing things, ways which would not necessarily seem the same to us.

What about allegory here? You have referred to allegory in the third-world novel as well as with regard to postmodernism.

That was one attempt to theorize a difference in third-world culture from our own. In non-hegemonic situations, in situations of economic or cultural subalternity, there tends to be a reference to the national situation that is always present and always felt

in a way that it cannot be in the dominant culture of the superstate. But this type of analysis is not intended as a program for art to the effect that we should now begin to write allegories.

The Chinese cave mentioned before cannot be described as one of hyperspace.

Nor does it really betoken any radical cultural difference. This is exactly what the American tourist would do with the caves in Louisville, Kentucky. Whether it is a revolutionary peasantry looking at these or an American tourist is not relevant to that conception. If, as Bourdieu has explored, people have no institutional reason to justify the aesthetic operation to themselves, namely by seeing that it is somehow good and a sign of social distinction to have a little artistic training, then they have to have another reason for doing it, and that reason ends up in seeing likenesses. Seeing likenesses in this basically mimetic sense is not inherently a sign of the people or the popular either, but it is certainly an interesting index of the relationship of culture to people for whom culture is not a socially signifying property or attribute.

In postmodernism on the other hand, everyone has learned to consume culture through television and other mass media, so you no longer need a rationale. You look at advertising billboards, you look at collages of things because it is there in external reality. The whole matter of how you justify to yourself the time of consuming culture disappears: you are no longer even aware of consuming it. Everything is culture, the culture of the commodity. That's a very significant feature of postmodernism, which accounts for the disappearance from it of the traditional theories, justifications and rationalizations of what we used to call aesthetics (and of concepts of high culture).

Postmodern art may in some sense be disposable texts but its monetary value is of course anything but disposable and transient. Warhol, it should be underlined, does not appear in the model as, traditionally understood, an originator. Your object is the systemic, not the evaluation of contemporary artists.

In trying to theorize the systematic, I was using certain of these things as allegories. From this angle it makes no sense trying to look for individual trends, and individual artists are only interesting if one finds some moment where the system as a whole, or some limit of it, is being touched. Evaluation does come in since one can imagine a much less interesting postmodernist exhibition and one would then have to say that that painter is not as good as Rauschenberg. But this is not the same kind of use of aesthetic axiological evaluation that people felt themselves able to do when they were handling modernism, making relative assessments of Proust against Mann for example.

All the great modernists invented modernism in their own fashion. It is likewise clear that no one single postmodernist can give us postmodernism since it is a system involving a whole range of things. Warhol is emblematic of one feature of postmodernism and the same goes for Paik. They allow you to analyze and specify something partial, and in that sense their activities are surely original: they have identified a whole range of things to do and then moved in to colonize this new space. However, this is not original in the world-historical sense of the great modernist creator. If a single artist actually embodied all of these things, Laurie Anderson for example, she would no doubt be transcending postmodernism. But where Wagner, in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, may have done something like that in a key moment of modernism, Laurie Anderson's *Gesamtkunstwerk* does not do that for a non-systematizable system, a non-totalizable system.

This leaves no great space for criticism of individual works. What is the task once one has related the part to the whole?

If they are no longer *works*, in other words. This is particularly true for video, which one usually sees in batches. You have put the finger on the fundamental methodological problem of the criticism of postmodernism. For to talk about any single one of these postmodernist texts is to reify it, to turn it into the work of art it no longer is, to endow it with a permanence and monumentality that it is its vocation to dispel. A critic supposed to analyze individual texts is thus faced with almost insuperable problems: the moment you analyze a single piece of video art you do it violence, you remove some of its provisionality and anonymity and turn it into a masterpiece or at least a privileged text again. It's much easier to deal with it in terms of trends: here's a new trend (described as such and such) and here's another. But the whole language of trends is the dialectic of modernism.

We are returning here to the problem of evaluation.

The Cubans, who have a different system, point out that our sense of value, in a good as well as bad sense, is given to us by the art market. One possible opposite of this would be a situation—I'm expanding on their argument—where only a few styles would be permitted. But in a country like Cuba, devoid of an art market but exceedingly pluralistic culturally, where you will find everything from social realism to pop-art to abstract expressionism, there is no mechanism which can say that this is more advanced than that. One begins to sense then that the art market has an almost religious-ontological function for us. We don't have to face this radical plurality of styles of "anything goes" because somebody is always around to tell us that this thing

is a little newer than that one. Or more valuable, since I think now our value system depends on that transmission of the market mechanism.

So how do the Cubans evaluate?

It is a real problem: they don't know. They confront the death of value (in Nietzsche's version, the death of God) in a much more intense way than we do. We still have these marvelous theological mechanisms by which we pick things out and sort them. They have a more interesting problem of what the value of art would be in a situation of complete freedom, in the Nietzschean sense: freedom, that is, to do anything you want. Then value enters a crisis also of the Nietzschean type. This is not the case where there is still a market, or where only a few styles are permitted and anyone who pushes against the paradigm can be identified. Then, too, you certainly know where you stand in terms of value.

You say somewhere that the dialectical imagination to which Marcuse refers has atrophied. Yet at the same time you say that a constitutive feature of mass culture is that it satisfies a deep utopian impulse in the consumer. If the imagination has been atrophied, the impulse has not?

Marcuse, ironically, was the great theorist of the autonomy of culture. The problem is that he reverts in a much simpler manner to Adorno's modernism, to its autonomy. But Adorno's great aesthetics—the aesthetics you write when it is impossible to write aesthetics—involves time and death and history: experience is historical and condemned to death in a sense. Marcuse's concept finally simplified that complexity out of Adorno, taking up an older modernist model which is not now helpful. His notion of the utopian impulse is a different matter. The objection there is that he falls back on a position where the autonomy of art still permits a kind of full expression of the utopian impulse.

Adorno's negative dialectics is criticized in your account for allowing no resistance to the overall system. Nothing, seemingly, is to be done. You point to the similarities here with the poststructuralist tendency to see the system as complete and completely unchangeable in its systematicity; and I suppose one could indeed say that about Foucault et al at certain times. The result is pessimism, and it matters less that the first model is dialectical while the latter is one of heterogeneity and contingency. Yet a quick reading of F. Jameson leaves one with a distinct residue of pessimism as well.

The whole point about the loss in postmodernism of the sense of the future is that it also involves a sense that nothing will change and there is no hope. Facile optimism is on the other hand not helpful either.

In “going through” poststructuralism and postmodernism and preserving its moment of truth, you are intermittently very hard and negative, quite rightly emphasizing the politically unsavoury effects.

There one can make a distinction. There is a difference between the production of ideologies about this reality and the reality itself. They necessarily demand two different responses. I am not willing to engage this matter of pessimism and optimism about postmodernism since we are actually referring there to capitalism itself: one must know the worst and then see what can be done. I am much more polemical about postmodernist *theories*. Theories which either exalt this or deal with it in moral ways are not productive and that I think one can say something about.

The reconquest of a sense of place here, the attainment of a new cartography, is primarily a call directed to the left itself. We are not referring to any great political practice but about arguing with the 1500 people who happen to be deeply influenced by Deleuze and Guattari. For a large proportion of intellectuals of self-professed radical persuasion would no doubt describe themselves as heavily influenced by post-structuralist ideologies.

That's why it's worthwhile to get a systemic sense where all these things come from so that we can see what our influences are and what to do about them. The proliferation of theoretical discourses was healthy because it led to some awareness of their political consequences. In moments of economic crisis or intervention abroad, people can determine more clearly what any given theory does or allows one to do. It is a matter of theoretical and historical self-knowledge, and what I am engaged in is in fact a struggle within theory as much as anything else. If I were making videos I would talk about this in a different way.

In that respect, yours is a systematic project of building “totalizing” models, something which, to understate the case, has been fairly unpopular among the western intelligentsia in the last decade. Are people now perhaps more receptive to “model-building”?

They are more receptive to the historical features of it, to the idea of thinking historically about it. They are not necessarily more receptive to the marxist version of this historical inquiry but perhaps they are willing to entertain it on some super-market-pluralist basis.

The historical dimension counteracts the postmodernist immersion in the present, the

dehistoricizing or nonhistorical project. In that sense it goes outside the postmodern paradigm.

That is essentially the rhetorical trick or solution that I was attempting: to see whether by systematizing something which is resolutely unhistorical, one couldn't force a historical way of thinking *at least about that*. And there are some signs that it is possible to go around it, to *outflank* it.