MICHIGAN STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y

Approaching Post-Modernism: Issues of Culture and Technology

ROB NIXON

That post-modernism has largely been ignored both by the English
Departments at South African universities and by their critics on
the left, is hardly surprising. After all, from a conservative
'lit. crit.' perspective, post-modernist texts are seen as super-
ficial, capricious and nihilistic, as poor material for sustained
textual scrutiny, and generally quite out of keeping with the
humanist spirit of the discipline. On the other hand, from the
perspective of the left, the same writing appears elitist, reac-
tionary, politically effete and supremely irrelevant. I shall
contest, however, that post-modernism does have a place -- and an
urgent one at that -- in English Department curricula, but only if
we redefine the term itself and the context in which it is to be
studied, thereby using it as an occasion for venturing well beyond
the garrison of the isolated text. For in essence, the high liter-
ature of post-modernism is only one manifestation of that techno-
logical imagination which has spread with the administered cul-
ture of post-industrial capital, and as such, any discussion of
it should be grounded in an understanding of the quietly coercive
apparatuses working to homogenize culture in both the West and
the Third World. Post-modernism is, then, a specific cultural
moment, one in which terms like 'scientific development', 'tech-
nological advancement', 'professionalism', 'progress' and 'modern-
ization', masquarade as politically neutral (i.e. non-interfering)
and as culturally and economically to the unequivocal advantage
of any society. Terms such as these help to market a surrogate
revolution; and just how surrogate is disclosed by the polemic
of the utopian technophiles:

> the comprehensive introduction of automation everywhere
> around the earth will free man *[sic]* from being an auto-
> mation and will generate so fast a mastery and multipli-
> cation of energy wealth by humanity that we will be able
> to support all of humanity in ever greater physical and
> economic success anywhere around his little spaceship
> *Earth*[1].

On a political level, what this kind of assertion masks is who

exactly sits at the controls of the meta-spaceship and, on a cul-
tural level, it conceals how, in Stanley Aronowitz' words, through
"the dissemination of industrialized entertainment the capacity of
persons to produce their own culture in the widest meaning of the
term has become restricted"[2]. Convinced that all cultural forma-
tions are tightly fused to the distribution of power in society,
I shall argue that the only adequate approach to post-modernism
is one that embraces a broader notion of the term and, proceeding
via the vigorous debate on the role of the culture industry,
shuns any purely formalist account or any derived solely from a
genealogy of belles lettres.

The concept of post-modernism first gained prominence in 1959 and
1960 through two seminal essays -- Irving Howe's "Mass Society and
Postmodern Fiction" and Harry Levin's "What Was Modernism?" --
both obituary pieces commemorating the passing of the literary
season of high modernism[3]. For Howe and Levin (as later for Frank
Kermode[4]), the 'post' in post-modernism was to be read as a mark
of decline, not transcendence, as a falling off from what Levin
described as the "uncompromising intellectuality" of high modern-
ism[3]. Certain other critics -- Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag and
Ihab Hassan amongst them -- took the opposing view and began in
the sixties to acclaim those authors who spawned the modernist
perception of the writer as the high priest in the *sancta sanc-
torum* of Art. Above all, it was Leslie Fiedler who became the
great champion of popular culture, seeing popularity as a much
safer guage of importance than the old modernist standards of
difficulty and 'profundity', Fiedler began, too, to promote that
blurring of the distinctions between high and low culture which
was already discernible in the writings of Alan Ginsberg, Jack
Kerouac, William Burroughs *et al*[5].

If the crumbling of the barriers separating high from low culture
was regarded by some left-leaning critics as a positive symptom
of the post-modernist era, for others on the left it gave cause
for alarm. Fiedler recognised that the source of the latter
group's anxiety was its conviction that the culture industry had
come to dominate the realm of the popular and threatened to ap-
propriate to itself the entire domain of art. In the face of
his opponents' criticisms, Fiedler continued to insist that popu-
lar culture be given its due and that if indeed it is "exploited
for profit in a commercial society, mass-produced by nameless col-
laborators, standardized and debased, that fact is of secondary
importance"[7]. But the question of manipulation is not so easily
spirited away. Fiedler's admonishment of critics for not taking
low culture seriously is founded on a conviction that its demo-
cratic value outweighs any reactionary effect it may have through
an unwitting subservience to the motives of a profiteering élite.
Yet in Fiedler's kind of argument it is very easy for an ambiguous
notion to creep in, so that what begins as a warning against un-
derestimating the importance of low culture may lead to the toler-
ance or even acclaim of very reactionary, manipulated elements
(eg. TV soap operas, *Superman* comics) in it, ignoring their
lamentable social consequences.

If the post-modernist age is, in Walter Benjamin's celebrated
phrase, the age of mechanical reproduction *par excellence*, the
suspicion may well be aroused that much purportedly popular art,
far from being the property of the people, is instead a manipu-

lative tool of the culture industry for creating sham collectives
through highly regulated discourses aimed at generating and tra-
ding in desires. This suspicion found its fullest expression in
the writings of Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Theodore
Adorno of the Frankfurt School, all of whom were highly sceptical
of popularity as any guarantor of value in a technological society!
Especially to Adorno, mass art (his preferred term) seemed fertile
ground for totalitarianism rather than democracy, and the only
way for an artist to break out of the circle of manipulation was
through an aesthetics of pure negativity. According to this view,
the work of art had to be turned in on itself as never before so
it would become a "windowless monad" that could not be reified
into an aesthetic commodity[9]. Such a work would be paradoxically
oppositional, by being useful in its very uselessness: "refrain-
ing from praxis, art becomes the schema of social praxis"[10]. That
is, for Adorno, the most social art in a technological-consumer
age is an art which breaks all social ties. But this is an un-
duly idealist and ascetic solution. For where Fiedler's position
may be weakened by an uncritical servility before all popular
taste, Adorno's stance suffers from precisely the opposite disa-
bility: it ignores the need for gratification, without which no
artist can lure an audience. One cannot counter the vices of
technology by denying oneself an audience, for clearly no book
can take effect until it is read, no music until it is heard.

Aside from the issue of gratification, there is a further reason
to be sceptical of Adorno's programme for a simultaneously oppos-
itional and autonomous art. The problem is one which has shadow-
ed avant-gardes throughout the century: how can one ensure that
subversive art is not co-opted by the *status-quo*? In Adorno's
case, the question becomes more specific: how can a non-instru-
mental art secure its autonomy in the face of an omnivorous cul-
ture industry? When he envisages artists opposing the administer-
ed culture of late capitalism with new, non-habitual forms, Adorno
sorely underestimates the extent to which the consumer society is
hospitable to rapid change and even has a vested interest in it.
In advocating an art that defamiliarises experience, he takes in-
sufficient account of the way capitalism itself works by disrup-
tion, of the way advertising and television are both bent on dis-
traction, so that the aesthetic of estrangement can be co-opted
and rapidly put to work by the system. After all, we live in an
era in which the dominant tradition is that of rapid replacement:
novelty is the very staple of the consumer society and rapidly
becomes its excrement. To realise just how comfortably avant-
gardes have been assimilated by the culture industry, one has
only to reflect on the pervasiveness of visual montage and sur-
realist techniques in advertising, on the rapidity with which
the very latest line in abstract art appears in corporate lobbies,
or on the success of Schoenberg's epigones in the service of
Hollywood. Kafka's parable of the leopards in the temple des-
cribes the scenario perfectly:

> Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs
> what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated
> over and over again; finally it can be calculated in
> advance, and becomes part of the ceremony[11].

Avant-garde irruptions into the sacred realm of established art
have, by this late stage in the century, certainly become a pre-
dictable aesthetic tradition and one well-adjusted to the re-

peated economic cycles of invention, reproduction, consumption and disposal. Hence Adorno's segregation of an autonomous high culture from a degraded and dependent mass culture cannot finally be upheld. For purely negative art, too, is likely to be drawn into the cycles of permissive consumerism and to ride, in complicity, on the merry-go-round of post-industrial capitalism.

The status of Adorno's work on aesthetics is ultimately ambiguous because, despite its neo-Marxist origins, it unfortunately provided certain conservative avant-gardists of the '60s and '70s with a powerful theoretical legitimation. Yet Adorno remains such a key figure in the post-modernist debate because he theorised extensively on two of the main cultural phenomena of the period: the sudden ascent of technological art forms with an unprecedented social reach, and the development of increasingly hermetic and autotelic forms of high culture by artists reconciled to tiny élitist audiences. It is to this latter phenomenon that we now turn.

Again and again in reactionary circles, post-modernism is defined in purely formal terms, with the work of artists like John Cage and O Messiaen, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg, Samuel Beckett and Alan Robbe-Grillet serving as touchstones. Only high art is considered and the emphasis is predominantly on chronicling changes in style. Christopher Butler, in *After the Wake*, exemplifies this strain of post-modernist criticism. Declaring his indifference to "sociological questions", he asserts: "I have not attempted to give a comprehensive or chronological account of experimental art, and have preferred to concentrate upon a limited number of essentially technical and aesthetic changes by which major contemporary artists freed themselves from the assumptions of modernism"[12]. By restricting himself to artistic lineages, that is, by cordoning off aesthetic from larger cultural concerns, Butler enfeebles his analysis of high post-modernism, robbing it of much of its explanetary potential.

To gauge further the limitations of purely formalist approaches to the subject, one need only consider the standard fare in courses on literary post-modernism at American and French universities: William Gass, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Robert Coover, Richard Sukenick, Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, Julio Cortezaar, Phillipe Sollers, Michel Butor, Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Italo Calvino. The usual tack is to look for family resemblances amongst the members of this pantheon, by tracing the literary ancestry of their texts back through modernism (and perhaps romanticism), showing how they take the modernist project through to its logical conclusions by realising its unfulfilled promises or exposing its incipient failings (depending on one's perspective). The most familiar of these developments from modernism through to post modernism can be charted as in the box on the next page.

Important as it is to record such changes, it is even more essential to uncover what any such purely belletristic genealogy of post modernism conceals. For by insisting that Robbe-Grillet and company are the rightful heirs to modernism, critics obscure the true status of the so-called post-modernists, who are nothing more than a minority group whose writings are symptomatic but certainly

not representative of the current epoch. Even in the realm of
high literature, the bulk of contemporary writing shows few, if
any, of the supposed hallmarks of post-modernism. Again, this
returns us to the problem of regarding post-modernism as an aes-
thetic style rather than as part of a cultural and economic
moment: too often the terms 'post-modernist' (in its narrow
sense) and 'contemporary' are treated as synomyms. How else could
a few references to the nihilism of Barth and Beckett be consid-
ered sufficient to demonstrate that literature has finally ex-
hausted itself, whereas in truth all that can be claimed is that
a certain limited lineage of contemporary culture has begun to
peter out?

MODERNISM	POST-MODERNISM
1) Cult of the estranged and aloof artist	Death of the author
2) Open-ended forms	Severly fragmented or decentred forms; collage/montage; found forms
3) Use of myth or symbol for formal coherence	No overarching formal structures; de-liberately transparent or superficial forms
4) Obsession with iconclasm; tradition jettisoned	Literature of exhaustion; hopeless-ness of breaking the already broken
5) Reduced reference to material, historical world; shift in in-terest to inner, psychological activities	Self-reference; the circles of lan-guage and fiction as ineluctable; extreme narcissim
6) Art for art's sake	Anti-art for anti-art's sake
7) Pathos of subjective memory	Total enclosure in the present un-folding of the text; a withered sense of any past or future
8) Hostility towards technology	Submission to technology; imita-tion of mechanical forms

Magic realism is one of the most significant strains of recent
high literature excluded by the narrow definition of post-modern-
ism: writers like Alejo Carpenter, Gabriel García Marquez, Carlos
Fuentes, and Salman Rushdie, far from avoiding social content,
have developed a fantastic mode that addresses issues of history
and community directly, particularly the emergence of hybrid sym-
bolic systems as the Third World is drawn into the whirlpool of
multinational capital and permissive consumerism. Any use of the
term post-modernism to confer a false symmetry on contemporary
literature -- implying that writers are typically playing end-
games or lost in the funhouse -- also suppresses a whole category
of recent fictions that confront the power of radio, film, tele-
vision, and the gutter press to shape and orchestrate subjectivi-
ties in an age of mechanical reproduction. Here I'm thinking of
works like Manuel Puig's *Heartbreak Tango*, *Betrayed by Rita Hay-
worth*, and *The Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, Luis Rafael Sanchéz's
Macho Comacho's Beat, Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the
Scriptwriter*, and Heinrich Böll's *Lost Honour of Katherina Blom*,
all of which connect with everyday life by staging the psycholo-
gical and social consequences of unremitting exposure to the media.

The narrow definition of post-modernism tries, like a corset, to streamline the body of contemporary culture which, however, refuses to be held in by any single aesthetic theory. I have suggested that a rigid, formalist approach distorts high literature and, even more damagingly, cordons it off from other interrelated cultural phenomena. Instead of pursuing some phantom uniformity, critics need to acknowledge the diversity of the cultural moment and attempt to explain it. At the most general level, this diversity has its source in "that ultimate transformation of late monopoly capitalism variously known as the *société de consommation* or as post-industrial society", a form of society which creates an illusory sense of plenitude by disrupting traditional image systems, and dispersing in their stead a glut of transitory images with no obvious relation to any coherent whole[13]. (Often, especially in the Third World, the result is an expansion of consumer choices in lieu of real political ones). Plainly, it's not that the cultural totality doesn't exist, but rather that -- because of a growing specialization of knowledge and the media's ability to repress and fracture information, foreshorten memory, and alter norms of concentration -- the average person is less and less capable of perceiving the whole. So paradoxically, in the very era when the power to produce and distribute images has become more centralised than ever, Western cultures appear increasingly fragmented and incomprehensible from within. The enormous psychological consequences of this paradox have been intuited by John Ashberry in "Definition in Blue", one of the most commanding evocations of the post-industrial era:

> The rise of capitalism parallels the advance of romanticism
>
> And the individual is dominant until the close of the nineteenth century
>
> In our own time, mass practices have sought to submerge the personality
>
> By ignoring it, which has caused it instead to branch out in all directions
>
> Far from the permanent tug that used to be its notion of "home".
>
> These different impetuses are received from everywhere
>
> And are as instantly snapped back, hitting through the cold atmosphere
>
> In one steady, intense line.
>
> There is no remedy for this "packaging" which has supplanted the old sensations.
>
> . . . .
>
> Each new diversion adds its accurate touch to the ensemble, and so
>
> A portrait, smooth as glass, is built up out of multiple corrections
>
> And it has no relation to the space or time in which it was lived[14].

What Ashberry is describing is a new mode of subjectivity, one shaped to an unprecedented degree by commodity fetishism, that is, by the way reproduced images or objects conceal all traces of their real origins in human relations. The process is mys-

tifying and dehumanising: the individual is subjected to a bar-
rage of mass practices that create a bricolage of contingent, free-
floating, but intensely immediate sensations, serving to divert
him or her from any comprehension of the whole. Both the under-
standing and the will are thwarted so that the consumer-subject
becomes, in effect, part of the realm of the already coded --
what Ashberry calls the "packaging". The result is a form of
social amnesia and inertia not unlike the Lacanian description
of schizophrenia in which:

> the only verbal operations available ... are those in-
> volved in the contemplation of material signifiers in
> a present which is unable to hold onto past and future.
> Each signifier thus becomes a perpetual present, an
> island or enclave in time, succeeded by a new present
> which emerges equally in the void, with no links to
> anything that preceded it, or any project to come[15].

In short, the post-industrial era has witnessed the splintering
of perception and a coeval splintering of the subject itself. For
the student of post-modernism, this development poses the problem
of achieving an overview of the culture; but although the problem
has reached a new intensity, in itself it is not entirely new, as
the altered modes of consciousness and perception are only the
latest phase of a longer process whereby, in Lukács' words, "the
specialization of skills has led to the destruction of every im-
age of the whole"[16]. Lukács' phrase is worth pondering, for it re-
fers as pointedly to the division of intellectual labour as it
does to any specialization in industrial labour; and today, the
fine mesh of academic disciplines -- together with the gaps be-
tween them -- certainly plays its part in breaking up any compre-
hensive image of culture as an entire way of life. One thing is
certain: the problem of achieving an overview will not be sur-
mounted as long as low culture is kept in quarantine so that aca-
demic discussions of high culture may proceed uncontaminated. In
trying to overcome this destructive elitism, we can take our cue
from Fredric Jameson who, with lapidary insight, has argued that
high and low culture must be seen in harness, as dialectically
independent phenomena, each affecting the development of the
other, rather than as rival claimants competing in "some timeless
realm of absolute aesthetic judgement"[17]. If we assume Jameson's
stance, our tasks as critics of post-modernist culture become
fourfold: to examine how aesthetic value is socially contested;
to guage how developments in high and low culture influence each
other dialectically; to study the emergence of hybrid forms
which, in terms of audience, style and function, are not readily
classifiable as either high or low but seem rather to serve as a
bridgehead between the two[18]. and finally, to investigate ways
of intervening strategically in the politics of contemporary
culture.

To Jameson's insistence that we take seriously the dialectics be-
tween the two poles of culture, we must add the need to distin-
guish between two components within low culture, between those
banausic mass forms that create a specious sense of community,
and the more authentic communality of popular culture which has
its source in the proletarian public space. For Adorno was
surely correct to assert that "the consensus which mass culture
propagates strengthens the blind, opaque authority"; by contrast,
popular culture proper has the capacity to be truly counter-

hegemonic[19]. On this score, Adorno was certainly closer to the mark than his contemporaries Brecht and Benjamin, whose faith in the revolutionary potential of technological forms was utopian and -- at the very least -- premature: witness the left's repeated failure to wrest control of the mass media from the official culture, German fascism and the American culture industry being the two most telling instances of this.

In striving for a conception of post-modernism at once more elastic and possessing greater explanetary power, our goal should be nothing less than an understanding of the nexus of high, mass, and popular cultures and their relation to the economic moment. To achieve this, it is essential to dispute the academic cartography of the cultural field and to recognise that if literature is cordoned off from the other facets of culture, we will be left with a very etiolated sense of post-modernism. After all, literature holds no more than a subaltern's rank in an era securely under the command of the moving image; as Sola Pool reminds us, "it is the mass media ... which make what should otherwise be wistful dreams of a few modernizers into the dynamic aspirations of a whole people"[20].

It is in the context of such pre-fabricated aspirations that we need to scrutinize the various hegemonic guises for persuading people to become unwitting accomplices in their own exploitation. In South Africa, where high culture is spread thin, where popular culture still runs deep, and where mass culture has made forbidding inroads, the scrutiny of hegemony entails an understanding of the regional distinctiveness of culture but also, and increasingly, its connection to the way transnational -- or perhaps we should call it corporate -- culture operates. And if we seek any further reminder that the issues of post-modernist culture and post-industrial economics are inextricably bound and that it is fully time to enter into debate with technology, we need only attend to the sardonic words of American performance artist, Laurie Anderson:

> Our plan is to drop a lot of odd objects onto your country from the air. And some of these objects will be useful. And some of them will just be ... odd. Proving that these oddities were produced by a people free enough to think of making them in the first place. The United States helps, not harms, developing nations by using their natural resources and raw materials[21].

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Buckminster Fuller, R. 1969: *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospect for Humanity*. Bantam, New York, p. 362. Cf. this elated description of television's potential for defusing class confrontation, taken from an editorial in the conservative Chilean newspaper, *El Mercurio*, 18 May, 1972: "Television levels out the classes by reuniting employers and employees in the same circuit, since these persons roll with the same sort of laughter at the same exploits or receive the same information burning with actuality. Europeans, Asians, North and South Americans, Africans, or Australians can feel the same emotions at the same time ... The old individualism of the French revolution falls before the weight of the super-collectivism of the technological revolution". Quoted in Mattelart, A. 1978: "The Nature of Communications Practice in a Dependent

Society", *Latin American Perspectives*, No 16, p. 24

2. Aronowitz, S. 1981: *The Crisis in Historical Materialism*. Praeger, New York, p. 235

3. Howe, I. 1959: "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction", *Partisan Review*, No 26, pp. 420-436; Levin, H. 1960: "What is Modernism?" Reprinted in *Refractions*, 1966, OUP, New York, pp. 271-292

4. See Part Two of Frank Kermode's *Continuities*. Random House, New York, 1968

5. Levin, *op. cit.* p. 292

6. See Fiedler, L. 1977: "Cross the Border-- Close the Gap" in A *Fiedler Reader*. Stein and Day, New York, pp. 270-294

7. Fiedler, L. 1972: "The Middle Against Both Ends" in Lodge, D. (ed.): *Twentieth Century Criticism*. Longman, London, p. 458

8. More recently, the cultural insights of the Frankfurt School have been taken up and developed (generally from a more semiotic and Lacanian perspective) by the *Tel Quel* group in post-'68 France. A Frankfurt School slant is evident, for example, in Julia Kristeva's insistence that in a post-modernist era, writing itself must be "suspicious of the mass produced unconscious and of everyone's favourite fantasy, warned by twentieth century's experience that generalising fantasies only leads more quickly to more massive ones". In Garvin, H.R. 1980: *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*. Bucknell U.P., Lewisberg, p. 141

9. Adorno, T.W. 1970: *Aesthetische Theorie*. Frankfurt, p. 15

10. *Ibid.* p, 339

11. Kafka, F. 1971: *Parables and Paradoxes*. Schocken, New York, p. 93

12. Butler, C. 1980: *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde*. Clarendon, Oxford, p. 111

13. Jameson, F. 1977: "Reflections in Conclusion" in *Aesthetics and Politics*. New Left Books, London, p. 208

14. Ashberry, J. 1976: *The Double Dream of Spring*. Ecco Press, New York, p. 53

15. Jameson's account, in "Language and Modes of Production" (unpublished manuscript), pp. 28-29

16. Lukács, G. 1983: *History and Class Consciousness*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, p. 103

17. Jameson, F. 1976: "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture", *Social Text*, No 1, p. 133

18. Examples of these intermediate cultural forms are: the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, EL Doctorow, and Kathy Acker; the music of Phillip Glass; the multimedia performances of Laurie Anderson

19. Adorno, T.W. 1975: "Culture Industry Reconsidered", *New German Critique*, No 6, p. 17. As Andreas Huyssen reminds us, Adorno's hostility towards the culture industry should not be misread as snobbery towards the popular: "Critics such as TS Eliot and philosophers such as Ortega y Gasset saw the masses as threatening to all culture *from below*. Adorno's insistence on autonomy, however, is the logical result of his analysis of mass culture as the intentional integration of its consumers *from above*. Adorno refers explicitly to changes in production and distribution". In "Introduction to Adorno", *New German Critique*, No 6, 1975, p. 8

20. Ithiel de Sola Pool, 1963: "Le Role de la communication le processus de la modernisation et du changement technologique" in Hoselitz, B. and Moore, W. (eds.): *Industrialisation et Société*. UNESCO, Paris, p. 287

21. Quoted in *New York Times Magazine*, 6 February, 1983, p. 27