



NEW ACCENTS

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The Politics of Postmodernism

Linda Hutcheon

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

New Accents deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded

piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at 'the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book should probably be entitled *Re-presenting Postmodernism*, for it literally presents once again certain core notions about the postmodern that I first developed in different contexts and with a different focus in two earlier studies – *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) and *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988). But what was missing from both these books is the subject of this one: that is, a general introductory overview of both postmodernism and its politics and an investigation of their challenges to the notion of representation in the verbal and visual arts.

In the other books, I always thanked my spouse, Michael Hutcheon, last, but this time my debt to him must be acknowledged from the start, for he is in a very real sense responsible for this work: his talent as a photographer and his abiding interest in photography as an art form and a semiotic practice provide the background for this entire book. In addition, his continued support and enthusiasm, his critical acumen and his fine sense of humor and his *aequinimitas* have never been more welcome. To him therefore go my deepest gratitude and affection.

Because of the cumulative nature of this study, I feel I ought also to thank once again all those I have already mentioned by name in the first two books – all those colleagues, students, and friends, all those artists, critics, and theorists who have contributed to my understanding of

postmodernism and to the sheer enjoyment I have experienced working on these projects. I hope they will accept one more time my thanks, this time collectively.

A special debt is owed to Terry Hawkes whose idea this book was and whose wit, warmth, and wisdom make him the fine editor and critic he is. To Janice Price, as always, my sincerest thanks for her unfailing confidence and friendship. Finally I must express my gratitude to the Isaac Walton Killam Foundation of the Canada Council whose Research Fellowship (1986–8) enabled this and the other books to be written: the generosity and faith the foundation shows toward its fellows makes scholarly work particularly rewarding.

Some of the ideas in this book have appeared elsewhere in print, though usually with a very different focus, depending on the occasion and the state of development of the ideas at the time of writing. I would like to thank the editors and publishers of the following journals and collections of essays for their support of work in progress: *Texte; Signature: A Journal of Theory and Canadian Literature*; *Style* (special issue editor: Mieke Bal); *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (special issue editor: Alain Goldschläger); *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (ed. Ronald Gottesman); *Bulletin of the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook* (ed. E. Ann Kaplan); *Postmodernism* (ed. Hans Bertens, London: Macmillan); *Intertextuality* (ed. Heinrich F. Plett, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter).

Special thanks go to the early audiences who helped me refine these ideas through their acute and discerning responses and to those who invited me to speak at their conferences or universities: SUNY-Stony Brook (E. Ann Kaplan); University of Western Ontario (Martin Kreiswirth); Queen's University (Clive Thomson); Toronto Semiotic Circle (Ian Lancashire); Victoria College (Barbara Havercroft) and University College (Hans de Groot), University of Toronto; International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies (Paul Bouissac); McMaster University (Nina Kolesnikoff); American Comparative Literature Association (Daniel Javitch).

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1

REPRESENTING THE POSTMODERN

WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word 'postmodernism.' As a result, any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions. It will aim to say what postmodernism is but at the same time it will have to say what it is not. Perhaps this is an appropriate condition, for postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political.

Postmodernism manifests itself in many fields of cultural endeavor – architecture, literature, photography, film, painting, video, dance, music, and elsewhere. In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic – or even 'ironic' – one. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as

undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees.

This kind of definition may seem to run counter to the majority of those discussed in the opening chapter of this book. But its roots lie in the sphere in which the term 'postmodern' first found general usage: architecture. And there we find a further contradiction. It is one which juxtaposes and gives equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded: to that which is inward-directed and belongs to the world of art (such as parody) and that which is outward-directed and belongs to 'real life' (such as history). The tension between these apparent opposites finally defines the paradoxically worldly texts of postmodernism. And it sparks, just as powerfully, their no less real, if ultimately compromised politics. Indeed it is their compromised stance which makes those politics recognizable and familiar to us. After all, their mode – that of complicitous critique – is for the most part our own.

REPRESENTATION AND ITS POLITICS

A decade or so ago a German writer stated: 'I cannot keep politics out of the question of post-modernism' (Müller 1979: 58). Nor should he. The intervening years have shown that politics and postmodernism have made curious, if inevitable, bedfellows. For one thing, the debates on the definition and evaluation of the postmodern have been conducted largely in political – and negative – terms: primarily neoconservative (Newman 1985; Kramer 1982) and neoMarxist (Eagleton 1985; Jameson 1983, 1984a). Others on the left (Caute 1972; Russell 1985) have seen, instead, its radical political potential, if not actuality, while feminist artists and theorists have resisted the incorporation of their work into postmodernism for fear of recuperation and the attendant de-fusing of their own political agendas.

While these debates will not be the main focus of this study, they do

form its unavoidable background. This is not so much a book about the representation of politics as an investigation of what postmodern theorist and photographer Victor Burgin calls the 'politics of representation' (Burgin 1986b: 85). Roland Barthes once claimed that it is impossible to represent the political, for it resists all mimetic copying. Rather, he said, 'where politics begins is where imitation ceases' (Barthes 1977b: 154). And this is where the self-reflexive, parodic art of the postmodern comes in, underlining in its ironic way the realization that all cultural forms of representation – literary, visual, aural – in high art or the mass media are ideologically grounded, that they cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses (Burgin 1986b: 55).

In saying this, I realize that I am going against a dominant trend in contemporary criticism that asserts that the postmodern is disqualified from political involvement because of its narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories and its seemingly limited accessibility – to those who recognize the sources of parodic appropriation and understand the theory that motivates it. But, what this study of the forms and politics of postmodern representation aims to show is that such a stand is probably politically naive and, in fact, quite impossible to take in the light of the actual art of postmodernism. Postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however 'aestheticized' they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity. While the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political action, it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique. To adapt Barthes's general notion of the 'doxa' as public opinion or the 'Voice of Nature' and consensus (Barthes 1977b: 47), postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import.

Umberto Eco has written that he considers postmodern 'the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e., that power is not something unitary that exists outside us' (in Rosso 1983: 4). He might well have added to this, as others have, the lessons learned from Derrida about textuality and deferral, or from Vattimo and Lyotard about intellectual mastery and its limits. In other words, it is difficult to

separate the 'de-doxifying' impulse of postmodern art and culture from the deconstructing impulse of what we have labelled poststructuralist theory. A symptom of this inseparability can be seen in the way in which postmodern artists and critics speak about their 'discourses' – by which they mean to signal the inescapably political contexts in which they speak and work. When discourse is defined as the 'system of relations between parties engaged in communicative activity' (Sekula 1982: 84), it points to politically un-innocent things – like the expectation of shared meaning – and it does so within a dynamic social context that acknowledges the inevitability of the existence of power relations in any social relations. As one postmodern theorist has put it: 'Postmodern aesthetic experimentation should be viewed as having an irreducible political dimension. It is inextricably bound up with a critique of domination' (Wellbery 1985: 235).

Yet, it must be admitted from the start that this is a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine. The ambiguities of this kind of position are translated into both the content and the form of postmodern art, which thus at once purveys and challenges ideology – but always self-consciously. The untraditional 'political' novels of Günter Grass, E.L. Doctorow, or any number of Latin American writers today are good examples. So too is Nigel Williams's *Star Turn* in which we find a simultaneous inscription and 'de-doxification' of both bourgeois and Marxist notions of class. The working-class narrator, Amos Barking, likes to hide his class origins: he goes by the name of Henry Swansea at work (in the wartime Ministry of Information). The novel takes place in 1945, however, a year in which, as Amos ironically notes, 'all working-class people are alleged to be heroes (perhaps because they are being killed in extremely large numbers)' (Williams 1985: 15).

This novel never lets its readers forget the issue of class; it never lets us avoid the (often unacknowledged) class assumptions we might possess. While a number of historical personages – Marcel Proust, Douglas Haig, Sigmund Freud – are presented as (acceptably) mad (thanks to their protective class identities), Amos announces:

Difficult as it may seem to you, dear reader, there are probably still people out there in the East End of London quite unaware that, when worn down by the problems of the world, a quick and simple solution is often to lie on a couch and talk about one's mother to a highly qualified stranger. In 1927 in the Whitechapel area, if you allowed the world to get you down, you tended to go and jump under a bus – still a popular option for members of the working class foolish enough to opt for neurosis.

(Williams 1985: 203)

But what is most obviously postmodern about the politics of this novel's mode of representation is that it does not stop at an analysis of class difference: race is shown to enter into complicity with class on both the formal and the thematic levels of the novel. The plot action revolves around Isaac Rabinowitz, the Jewish boy who wants to be known as Tom Shadbolt, all-English lad, and who ends up (ironically and tragically) as a stand-in look-alike for the fascist and racist Oswald Mosley. Not only are fiction and history mixed here in what I will argue to be a typically postmodern way, but class and race and nationality as well. Difference and ex-centricity replace homogeneity and centrality as the foci of postmodern social analysis. But even this focus on the 'marginal' gets called into question in this self-undercutting novel.

Amos calls England a 'complacent, marginal little kingdom' (Williams 1985: 17) and its marginality and complacency mirror his own: he witnesses the First World War from the sidelines; he meets D.H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Freud, Churchill, Goebbels, Lord Haw Haw (William Joyce), but somehow always remains peripheral to history. Fittingly, he spends the Second World War at home cynically writing propaganda. When he is forced to witness the firebombing of Dresden, his first reaction, not surprisingly, is evasion:

Don't think just because I'm British, Anglo-Saxon and the rest of it that I am party to all that. I'm not responsible for English history, thank you very much. I don't actually like very much in this rotten little island, including, as it happens, the present war.

(Williams 1985: 304–5)

It is his German Jewish boss, however, who refuses to let him avoid public responsibility, attacking him for feeling he has the liberty (and luxury) in a democracy to decide what is true and what is not (such as the concentration camps). He derides Amos's contempt of history and tries to show him the real pain and atrocity of war: 'You're a typical Englishman. . . . You've a marvellous talent for hypocrisy. You have a way with language that spells away your true feelings' (Williams 1985: 306). The overt self-consciousness about language and (hi)story-writing in the novel is tied directly to the political, as Amos is taught that '[y]ou can't hide behind your country and abuse it at the same time, any more than you can dodge history' (307). And not dodging history would mean taking into account class, race, gender, and nationality. It would mean de-naturalizing English social assumptions about each.

This is the kind of novel – both historical and self-reflexive – that enacts yet another of the ambiguities of the postmodern position. This paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites often results in its representations – be they fictive or historical – being offered as overtly politicized, as inevitably ideological. The conceptual grounding of such a postmodern view of the politics of representation can be found in many theories today. In fact there exists a journal, *boundary 2*, which clearly sees theory, postmodernism, and politics as being at the very heart of its agenda. However, the single most influential theoretical statement on the topic might well be Louis Althusser's much cited notion of ideology both as a system of representation and as a necessary and unavoidable part of every social totality (Althusser 1969: 231–2). Both points are important to any discussion of postmodernism and, indeed, inform the theoretical orientation of this book.

While it may indeed be the case that criticism in the literary and visual arts has traditionally been based on foundations that are expressive (artist-oriented), mimetic (world-imitative), or formalist (art as object), the impact of feminist, gay, lesbian, queer, Marxist, race, ethnicity, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theory has meant the addition of something else to these historical foundations and has effected a kind of merger of their concerns, but now with a new focus: the investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning. From this perspective what we call 'culture' is seen as the effect of

representations, not their source. Yet, from another point of view, western capitalist culture has also shown an amazing power to normalize (or 'doxify') signs and images, however disparate (or contesting) they may be. The work of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard has zeroed in on the socio-economics of our production and reproduction of signs. These studies have been influential in our understanding of postmodern culture. But it is specifically the politics of postmodern representation – the ideological values and interests that inform any representation – that will be the main focus of this book.

Underlying this notion of a postmodern process of cultural 'de-doxification' is a theoretical position that seems to assert that we can only know the world through 'a network of socially established meaning systems, the discourses of our culture' (Russell 1980: 183). And indeed I have chosen to concentrate here on two art forms which most self-consciously foreground precisely this awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of cultural knowledge and they do so by raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation. These are fiction and photography, the two forms whose histories are firmly rooted in realist representation but which, since their reinterpretation in modernist formalist terms, are now in a position to confront both their documentary and formal impulses. This is the confrontation that I shall be calling postmodernist: where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody. At this conjuncture, a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past.

Of course, the postmodern return both to figuration in painting and to narrative in avant-garde film has had an important impact on the question of representation in photography and fiction in recent years. Feminist theory and practice have also problematized the same issue, pointing to the construction of gender as both the effect and the 'excess' of representation (de Lauretis 1987: 3). Less obvious, perhaps, but just as significant to postmodernism have been the debates about the nature and politics of representation in history-writing (LaCapra 1985, 1987; White 1973, 1978b, 1987). Of course many other factors must be taken into account, but generally speaking, the postmodern

appears to coincide with a general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not reflect society so much as grant meaning and value within a particular society.

However, if we believe current social scientific theory, there is a paradox involved in this awareness. On the one hand, there is a sense that we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of visual and narrative representations and, on the other hand, we also seem to be losing faith in both the inexhaustibility and the power of those existing representations. And parody is often the postmodern form this particular paradox takes. By both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalize them, giving what Rosalind Krauss has called the strange sense of 'loosening the glue by which labels used to adhere to the products of convention' (Krauss 1979: 121). I am not referring here to the kind of ahistorical kitsch seen in some New York or Toronto restaurants or at Disneyland; rather, the postmodern parody in the work of Salman Rushdie or Angela Carter or Manuel Puig has become one of the means by which culture deals with both its social concerns and its aesthetic needs – and the two are not unrelated.

A slight detour is in order before proceeding, because I do not want to give the impression that representation is not problematized by other forms of postmodern art. As the next section will show, I want to model postmodernism in general on the example of postmodern architecture, where it is not just the representation of the historical past of architectural styles that gets de-naturalized, but also, e.g. in the work of Lars Lerup, even the representational notions of 'house' and the (North American) economic and social structures that engender them. Those social concerns and aesthetic needs once again come together in an interrogation of the ideology of the stable family unit and of the 'built as the vehicle of referentiality' (Lerup 1987: 99).

Much has been written about postmodernism in architecture (see bibliography entries on Jencks and Portoghesi) and of course the term 'postmodern' itself has been extended to cover most other art forms, as shown best by Stanley Trachtenberg's useful early anthology of studies, *The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*. In some art forms, such as film, the word postmodern is often restricted to avant-garde production. But, given the relative inaccessibility of such