Postmodernism: Progressive or conservative?

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Summary

Postmodernism has been defined in different ways. One can however identify three dominant themes: suspicion of metanarratives, the fictionalization of reality, and embracing mass culture.

Different approaches to understanding postmodernism are outlined. There is an internal explanation, an external explanation and a view that postmodernism shows all on the surface and needs no explanation at all. These determine the positions taken in the "progressive or conservative" debate.

The argument that postmodernism is progressive holds that it liberates us from all metanarratives, highlights the textual nature of reality, and challenges the institutions of high culture. Those who see it as ultimately conservative argue that it tends to obscure the underlying social causes of which it is merely the superficial symptom, thereby enhancing a false sense of freedom that ultimately helps to maintain the status quo.

It is finally argued that a progressive approach to culture would not rely on that which is typically postmodern, but go beyond it.

Opsomming

Die postmodernisme is reeds op verskillende maniere gedefinieer. Mens kan egter drie dominante temas onderskei: suspisie jeens metanarratiewe, die fiksionalisering van die werklikheid, en vereenselwiging met massakultuur.

Verskillende verklarings vir die postmodernisme word geskets. Daar is 'n interne en 'n eksterne verklaring, sowel as 'n siening dat die postmodernisme alles op die oppervlak toon en dus geen verklaring benodig nie. Hierdie verklarings bepaal die stellingnames in terme van die "progressief of konserwatief"-debat.

Volgens die argument dat die postmodernisme progressief is, bevry dit mens van alle metanarratiewe, werp dit lig op die tekstuele aard van die werklikheid en bied dit 'n teenvoeter vir die eksklusiwiteit van hoë kultuur. Dié wat dit as konserwatief beskou argumenteer weer dat dit die onderliggende werklikheid waarvan dit maar die oppervlak-simptoom is, versluier, en sodoende 'n vals nosie van vryheid skep wat op die ou end die status quo help handhaaf.

Daar word uiteindelik geargumenteer dat 'n progressiewe benadering iets meer sal moet doen as om te steun op dit wat tipies postmodernisties is.

1 Postmodernism: definition

What is postmodernism, or at least, how has it been defined? This is not an easy question to answer, for if one looks at the literature, one doesn't find one definition that is used by all. To take a few examples:

Lyotard (1984) defines the postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. It is a heterogeneity which is opposed to consensus and to any oppositional thinking such as that which characterises "the grand narratives of the past". It favours rather the co-existence of many different language games. Its principle is the inventor's "paralogy" – the invention of new knowledge.

In another text, "Answering the Question: What is postmodernism" (Lyo-

tard, 1986), he opposes it to realism (of which he gives a crude caricature) and links it to modernism: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern" (1986: 79). Postmodernism is thus synonomous with the avant-garde, that which renews what capitalism has made dull, or "derealized" (1986: 74).

Gerald Graff (1979) argues that postmodernism should not be seen as a break with romantic and modernist assumptions. He sees it rather as a logical culmination of the premises of these earlier movements (1979: 32) and defines it as a movement that calls into question the traditional claims of literature and art to truth and human value (1979: 32). It does this by systematically inverting modernism's uncompromising intellectuality and parodying its respect for truth and significance. Postmodernist art doesn't try, as modernism did, to impose human order on the inhuman chaos of the world it is confronted by. It does not see history as something with value, pattern or rationally intelligible meaning. All attempts to impose these are seen as but a refuge from truth.

Victor Burgin (1986) associates postmodernism with the democratic assertion of a plurality of interests after the events of May 1968 in France. He takes over Lyotard's notion of the master narratives of the past being subverted. Art is similarly seen as asserting itself in terms of a plurality of local narratives which are continually in the process of writing and revision.

Fokkema (1984) does not see postmodernism simply as a continuation of modernism and tries to show in what respects it departs from it. It challenges, not previous ways of representing reality, as in the case of modernism, but any attempt at representation, any hierarchy, any coherent view of the world, any explanation of it at all. Instead it favours arbitrariness, enumeration, and the labyrinth. It is not a case of words trying to capture the world, but instead of words inventing the world. It is selfconscious as modernism is, but not of experimenting with the medium so much as being selfconscious about the code.

David Lodge (1977) also holds that whereas the modernists were critical of the attempts before them to impose patterns on human experience, the postmodernists are critical of any hope of making sense of reality. Postmodernism subverts all faith that there is "a figure in the carpet". Consequently the world is experienced as being absurd. Making use of devices such as contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short circuits, postmodernism undermines the comforting certainty of meaning that fiction traditionally provided.

Brian McHale (1987) sums up the findings of Graff, Fokkema and Lodge by formulating a general thesis that whereas modernist fiction is predominantly epistemological in its concerns, postmodernist fiction focuses on the ontological.

Ihab Hassan (1975) lists a whole number of ways in which postmodernism has progressed from modernism and comments that "illusionism takes the place of realism, not only in art but also in life" – something to which the media contribute. And when art is viewed like anything else in life, Fantasy is loosened from its objective correlatives and becomes supreme.

Andreas Huyssen (1984) points out that the most significant trends within

postmodernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture (1984: 16). The challenge was not so much against modernism as such, but against "high modernism" – that which had become domesticated in the 50s and part of the "liberal-conservative consensus of the times" (1984: 18). As with the earlier avant-garde on the continent, postmodernism according to him was initially (in the 60s) characterised by a sense of rupture, crisis, discontinuity and generational conflict. Later on (in the 70s and 80s) postmodernism differs from modernism in its creative relationship between high art and forms of mass culture, thereby breaking down the privileging of any of these categories that were central to classical accounts of modernism.

Fredric Jameson (1984c) also emphasises the effacement of the earlier distinction between high art and so-called mass culture that modernism depended on for its specificity. What has happened, according to Jameson, is that aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally. The economic need for ever more novel goods at ever greater rates of turnover has been supplied for by the modernist aesthetic which already had its own dynamic of continual innovation.

A concomitant feature of postmodernism, according to Jameson, is its superficiality – its abandonment of the notion of truth or depth, replacing it with the surface play of textuality and multiplicity. Personal expression is replaced by a styleless pastiche. The norm has been replaced by a stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without norm. This is seen for example in the random cannibalization in architecture of styles of the past.

Terry Eagleton (1985) sees postmodernist culture as a parody of the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde. It parodies its anti-representationalism. Instead of turning away from representation of reality to creative intervention in that reality, it spurns representation simply because it does not believe that there is any reality to represent. All it represents is its own nature, its self-referentiality.

Linda Hutcheon (1988) also sees postmodernism as parody but in a profoundly different sense to that in which Eagleton uses the word. For her, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges. It works within the very systems it attempts to subvert and is totally dependent on that which it questions. Parody is therefore, according to her, a perfect postmodern form, for "it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (1988: 11).

Hal Foster (1983) sees post-modernism as the return of the "surrealist revolt" necessitated by the fact that modernism is dominant but dead. The postmodernism of resistance is to him the return of the modernist crisis in Western representation. He also distinguishes a postmodernism of reaction – which is a populist attack on modernism, advocating a return to representation.

Leslie Fiedler (1970) characterises postmodernist writing as being at the furthest possible remove from art and the avant-garde. It is not compromised by the market it fears, according to him – it chooses precisely those genres most associated with exploitation by the mass media, such as the western,

science fiction and pornography. Postmodernism closes the gap that aristocratic conceptions of art have opened between young and old, and between art and popular culture. Pop Art is for him subversive of old hierarchies. It takes into the citadel of high art precisely the popular literature that the parents of the present generation kept from them.

One sees then, that whereas Lyotard and Graff with their different approaches both see postmodernism as a continuation of modernism itself, others like Fokkema, Lodge and McHale see it as a departure from modernism. Whereas Jameson and Huyssen argue more along the lines of an adaptation of modernism, Eagleton and Hutcheon in their different ways call it a parody, while Fiedler sees it as directly opposed to modernism. One sees also that different writers find different features of postmodernism to be significant, some emphasising features that are completely left out of the definition of others. Whereas Jameson, Graff, Huyssen, Foster, Fiedler, Hutcheon and Hassan, for instance, stress the way in which postmodernism has closed the gap between modernism and popular culture, this feature is not mentioned at all by Fokkema, Eagleton, Lodge, Burgin or Lyotard. The suspicion of metanarratives and the positing of heterogeneity in the place of any totalizing system which receives so much attention in the work of Fokkema, Lodge, Lyotard, Burgin, Hutcheon, Hassan, Jameson and Graff, receives no attention from Huyssen, Foster, Fiedler or Eagleton. And whereas Graff, Hassan, Eagleton, Fokkema, and McHale stress the disappearance of the distinction between fiction and reality, this is not mentioned at all by Jameson, Huyssen, Fiedler, Lodge or Burgin, while it is contested by Hutcheon who holds that the distinction is not ignored, but problematised. One has, therefore, a typically postmodern heterogeneity of definitions and it would be very unpostmodern to impose any order on it by trying to arrive at one definitive description. One can however, I will argue, identify three dominant themes.

1   The first I shall call: *suspicion of metanarratives*. Whereas modernists still attempted to make the chaos cohere by resorting to what Eliot called "the mythical method", postmodernism is skeptical of the imposition of any order on the world. It does not, for instance, turn to Homer or the Grail Legend to restore some timeless order to the incoherent experience of the dislodged individual wandering though Dublin or London but favours rather contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, permutation, enumeration and a heterogeneity of styles taken from diverse genres and periods in history.

2   The second theme I shall call: *the fictionalization of reality*. In this respect postmodernism significantly departs from modernism and opposes itself to realism. The modernists were still realists in a sense: they were trying to depict a more realistic representation of their experience of reality than the formulas of nineteenth-century realism allowed for. Their selfconscious experimenting with the medium was aimed at finding better ways to capture their own subjective impressions of it.

Postmodernism does not try to capture the world out there or inside one any more. It has become skeptical of whether any such reality exists at all. It is not experimenting with new ways to represent what is, but rather with

inventing new realities, creating other imaginary worlds. The emphasis has shifted, as Brian McHale (1987) points out, from an epistemological problem to an ontological freedom. The divide between the real and illusion, dream and fantasy has become blurred. Science fiction has for instance been elevated from a marginal position to become a representative genre. Where for Vondel "De wereld is een speeltoneel" and for Shakespeare "All the world's a stage", a suitable postmodernist motto would be that "All reality is fiction".

3   The third theme I shall call: *embracing mass culture.* In this regard postmodernism radically departs from "high modernism" by challenging its hostility to mass culture. It has turned to the market place and integrated aesthetic wisdom into commodity production. Applying modernist and avant-garde strategies to popular genres, it engages in a creative relationship with popular culture, choosing precisely those genres most associated with exploitation by the mass media, and those which modernism most distanced itself from.

If one considers the ways in which different writers have defined or described postmodernism, one arrives at the following schematic representation in terms of which of the above three themes they stressed or mentioned at all.

	Suspicion of meta-narratives	Fiction-alization of reality	Embracing mass culture	Relation to Modernism
Jameson	Y	–	Y	Adapt
Graff	Y	Y	Y	Continue
Huyssen	–	–	Y	Adapt
Foster (–)	–	N	Y	Oppose
Fiedler	–	–	Y	Oppose
Hassan	Y	Y	Y	Depart from
Hutcheon	Y	N	Y	Parody
Eagleton	–	Y	–	Parody
Fokkema	Y	Y	–	Depart from
Lodge	Y	–	–	Depart from
McHale	–	Y	–	Depart from
Foster (+)	–	Y	N	Repeat
Burgin	Y	–	–	–
Lyotard	Y	–	N	Continue

(Note: Y stand for "Yes" and N for "No" while a dash indicates that the theme doesn't enjoy any attention at all. Hal Foster distinguishes between two postmodernisms, one of resistance (+) and one of reaction (–) which are both represented.)

This represents a variety of perspectives. But although the definitions themselves can be seen to vary considerably, they do have Wittgensteinian family resemblances to one another: there is no one definition of postmodernism, but they do all somehow seem to be related. The distribution according to the

table shows that there are at least three significant themes in terms of which postmodernism has been defined, and which writers with different approaches to the phenomenon tend to emphasize, notice or ignore.

2 Trying to understand postmodernism

Those who attempt to understand the phenomenon, tend to explain postmodernism in two ways: an internal explanation in terms of cultural history, and an external explanation in terms of society.

1 The internal explanation:

The emergence of postmodernism is explained by some in terms of a dynamic internal to culture. Andreas Huyssen (1984), for instance, explains it in terms of legitimate dissatisfactions with modernity. He sees postmodernism as initially being a revolt against "high modernism" – the version of modernism which had become institutionalized in the burgeoning museum, gallery, concert, record and paperback culture in the 1950s. He stresses that it is a revolt against this "high modernism" and not against modernism per se. Modernist styles have actually not been abolished, according to him, and continue to enjoy a kind of half-life in mass culture. Postmodernism appropriates many of the aesthetic strategies and techniques of modernism, inserting them and making them work in new constellations. Fredric Jameson (1984a) gives a similar explanation:

> Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us, on the whole, as rather "realistic"; and this is the result of a canonization and an academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally, which can be traced to the late 1950s. This is indeed surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics. (1984a: 56)

Lyotard, who sees postmodernism as modernism "in its nascent state" (1984: 79), gives an explanation which amounts to the same. Postmodernism is for him "that which searches for new presentations" – that which "in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (1984: 81), something like the modernist avant-garde, and which finds its impetus and logic in the aesthetics of the sublime.

This is however where the correspondence between Lyotard and the others ends, for, as the table indicates, by "postmodernism" he doesn't mean quite the same thing. By defining it as modernism in its nascent state he is in fact not distinguishing it from modernism at all. In fact he attributes it, not to a later stage of capitalism as Jameson does when he relates postmodernism to multinational capitalism, but to a need to generate new presentations which is characteristic of capitalism in general:

> Capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social

roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery . . . Classicism seems to be ruled out in a world in which reality is so destabilized that it offers no occasion for experience but one for ratings and experimentation. (1984: 74)

This brings me to the second way in which postmodernist culture is understood: in relation to society.

2 The external explanation:

Fokkema (1984) links postmodernism, as defined by him, to a particular way of life common in the Western world, including part of Latin America. Its literary preference for nonselection coincides with an "embarras du choix" offered by luxurious living conditions, which enable many people to have numerous options. A favourable reception of postmodernism in China is, for instance, inconceivable.

Fredric Jameson (1984a) similarly relates postmodernism to a specific type of society – that of the consumer society of the multinational capitalism of today.

> What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (Jameson, 1984a: 56)

It is however for Jameson not so much the aesthetic of the avant-garde that generates novel goods, nor the appropriation of the aesthetic strategies and techniques of modernism that Huyssens talks about, but rather the random cannibalization of styles of the past. This he attributes to the fragmentation of bourgeois society:

> If the ideas of a ruling class were once the dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm. . . . with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture. (1984a: 64)

This normlessness itself reflects a more fundamental feature of multinational capitalism according to Jameson: the difficulty of representing its technology, symbolized by the shape of the computer, whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power, and bears no functional relationship to the workings of what goes on inside like, for instance, the outward appearance of a locomotive used to. Jameson suggests

> that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism. (1984a: 79)

This lack of representation of the underlying mechanisms of an economic and technological reality is that of the "culture of the simulacrum" – that which

> comes to life in a society where exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced, a society ... (in which) the image (according to Guy Debord) has become the final form of commodity reification. (Jameson, 1984: 66)

Victor Burgin, also referring to Debord, concurs:

> this is not simply a society of the image, it is a society in which the image has effectively *replaced* that which it purportedly represents. (Burgin, 1986: 169)

All one has, in the culture of the simulacrum, is the copy without the original, exchange-value without the use-value it is supposed to represent, a pastiche of styles from the past without any sense of the history they are taken from, textual play without reference.

This culture of the simulacrum not only reflects present-day multinational capitalism, but is part and parcel of it, according to Jameson:

> no doubt the logic of the simulacrum, with its transformation of older realities into television images, does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it. (1984a: 85)

Or in the words of Gerald Graff:

> our consumer society not only popularizes ideologies of alienation; to an increasing extent it invests its capital in them. (1979: 223)

> A formidable conglomerate of publicists, theoreticians, musicians, bards, prophets, therapists, mystagogues, sexualogues, and ideological dietitians and haberdashers has formed a kind of alienation industry, supported by the expanding segment of society which predicates its very sense of community on the type of "disinherited mind" that was once the monopoly of the antagonists of bourgeois society. The success of this industry testifies to the ability of modern capitalism to profiteer of the very psychopathology that it brings about. (Graff, 1979: 224)

Terry Eagleton too offers a similar explanation when he talks of the dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production:

> Reification, once it has extended its empire across the whole of social reality, effaces the very criteria by which it can be recognized for what it is and so triumphantly abolishes itself, returning everything to normality. (1985: 61)

3 The suspicion of explanation:

Postmodernism itself, according to Linda Hutcheon, would not go along with the above approaches which try to explain it in terms of an underlying reality that it masks:

> Postmodern texts contest the view that the role of criticism is to enunciate the latent or hidden, be it ideological or rhetorical. (Hutcheon, 1988: 211)

This is because "they decode themselves by foregrounding their own con-

tradictions" (1988: 211) and "the visible paradoxes of the postmodern do not mask any hidden unity which analysis can reveal" (1988: 21).

Furthermore, "these contradictions of postmodernism are not really meant to be resolved, but rather are to be held in an ironic tension" (Hutcheon, 1988: 47). Postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, remains fundamentally contradictory, "offering only questions, never final answers" (1988: 42). Since it holds that "you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value you choose to challenge" (Hutcheon, 1988: 223) it questions our dominant, liberal humanist culture from within (as deconstruction does in the case of Western metaphysics) and is skeptical of any final answers. It aims rather to "interrogate and demystify those totalizing systems that unify with an aim to power" (Hutcheon, 1988: 186).

As opposed to the external explanations of postmodernism as a symptom of multinational capitalism and the culture of the simulacrum that conceals the underlying social reality it is symptomatic of, there is then the characteristically postmodern questioning of any such explanation. These different ways of understanding postmodernism form the bases for the different positions taken in the "progressive or conservative" debate.

3 The "Progressive or conservative" debate

Habermas (1983) associates postmodernism (the specific West German version of it, at least) with neoconservatism. This is reiterated by Hal Foster (1983: xii), Jameson (1984a: 57) and Burgin (1986: 46). Others like Graff, Huyssens and Eagleton adopt a critical approach. Yet not all of them wish to relinquish the terrain to the opposition. Against a postmodernism of reaction Hal Foster posits the possibility of a lesser known postmodernism of resistance which "seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations" (1983: xii). Huyssen similarly believes that postmodernism has a critical dimension "even though it may be difficult to identify" (1984: 9). According to him it lies "precisely in its radical questioning of those presuppositions which linked modernism and the avant-garde to the mindset of modernization" (1984: 11). Hutcheon holds that postmodernism "like Brecht's epic theater might be able to dramatize and even provoke change from within" (1988: 7). Jameson sees the culture of postmodernism as something that we are irrefutably within, and arguing that it is within it that one should seek the seeds of the new, takes its populist orientation as a point of departure (1984c: 62).

Even if it is seen as reactionary, postmodernism is still a cultural phenomenon of importance. Those who have tried to explain it have seen it as symptomatic of recent developments within capitalist society. And even if it goes against representation and any realism itself, it does represent, as Eagleton says, a form of realism on another level. Analyzing this phenomenon and trying to work out how it relates to the rest of the society leads to insight – an understanding of the manner and the extent to which technical and economic developments have manifested themselves in the cultural domain – and, as Jameson says, it is there that one has to start if one is going to be realistic

about any alternative. Defining postmodernism could thus be the identification of a symptom, and assist in the diagnosis of a disease.

This type of realism is, however, a realism at another level, not that of postmodernism itself. It is the answer to external questions asked about postmodernism, attempts to make sense of it, to understand it, to incorporate it into a metanarrative – precisely the type of endeavor that is most untypical of postmodernism itself.

But what about postmodernism itself? Postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, questions from within.

3.1 When metanarratives become suspect ...

"Postmodernism," in the words of Hutcheon, "questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy" (1988: 41). This is because this questioning is totally dependent upon that which it interrogates. From this position postmodernism offers no idea of what the new is, or in fact whether there is going to be something else that will come in the place of the liberal humanist tradition that is being questioned. In the contradictions of postmodern works, according to Hutcheon, "we may find no answers, but the questions that will make any answering process even possible are at least starting to be asked" (1988: 231). As such, the progressiveness of postmodernism does not go beyond questioning what exists.

Another position (that of Lyotard) would however be that its assertion of plurality, heterogeneity and the suspicion of metanarative *is* the new. This postmodern condition then signifies a liberation from the tyranny of the old metanarratives and a refusal to accept any new ones. From this position postmodernism itself would therefore be inherently progressive in that it liberates us from the illusions that metanaratives have foisted upon us, and that its plurality, contradiction, discontinuity, etc., would be the only worthwhile condition to have.

There is however another position: that postmodernism does not free us of illusions but in fact does the opposite by helping to obscure the underlying reality. Modernism, which attempted to be realistic in terms of how reality was experienced, tended to give only the superficial impressions of a changing situation without understanding the underlying causes. Where modernism "did not actually effect the total subjectivization and privatization of human experience," according to Gerald Graff, "postmodern fiction carries this logic to its limit so that we reach a consciousness so estranged from objective reality that it does not even recognize its estrangement as such" (1979: 208).

Terry Eagleton agrees:

> The depthless, styleless, dehistoricized ... surfaces of postmodernist culture are not meant to signify an alienation, for the very concept of alienation must secretly posit a dream of authenticity which postmodernism finds quite unintelligible. ... Reification, once it has extended its empire across the whole of social reality, effaces the very criteria by which it can be recognized for what it is and so triumphantly abolishes itself, returning everything to normality. (1985: 61)

By obscuring and smoothing over the very problem it is symptomatic of, postmodernism thus prevents the insight needed to consider changing the situation. Insofar as it has that effect it is conservative, helping to maintain the status quo. As Gerald Graff puts it: "A confused self is as good as an indoctrinated self from the ruling-class point of view" (1979: 213).

3.2 When reality becomes fiction ...

Here again there is more than one possible position. Those that see post-modernism as progressive, would hold that it liberates us from the illusion of the old metanarratives that there is something like a reality that is not itself a fiction. This view would seem to be not so far-fetched if one considers the relativism of Karl Popper's philosophy of science. From this point of view the relevation that everything one encounters is text, and essentially of the same nature of fiction, would be a more realistic way of seeing the world. This is the position that Hutcheon holds on behalf of postmodernism:

> in arguing that History does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and "gleefully" deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. (1988: 16)

It is not this that anyone would have problems with, but rather with another version of postmodernism that *does* put in brackets the existence of reality. When, according to Fokkema, "in the universe of Postmodernism, words invent our world, words shape our world, words are becoming the sole justification of our world" (1984: 45), when it clearly shows a bias by prefer-ring "imagination over experience, verbal texts over the empirical context" (1984: 55), then questions could be raised. In the words of Hassan:

> Postmodern aesthetics makes use of no special attitude or set, and art is viewed just as anything else in life. When art is viewed like anything else in life, Fantasy is loosened from its objective correlatives; Fantasy becomes supreme. (1975: 47)

It can be argued that, as radical as postmodernism's reinterpretation and relativization of facts and history may be, this does not in reality further any progressive cause. As Gerald Graff puts it: "One does not try to change the world but rather alters one's perspective (or 'consciousness') so as to *see* the world in a new way" (1979: 59).

To the extent that postmodernism "abandons all pretence to a critique that would go beyond language games, beyond epistemology and the aesthetic", as Andreas Huyssen puts it, "it certainly frees art and literature from that overload of responsibilities – to change life, change society, change the world – on which the historical avant-garde shipwrecked, and which lived on in France through the 1950s and 1960s embodied in the figure of Jean Paul Sartre" (1984: 43). When combined with a suspicion of the modes of compre-hension associated with politics, it becomes an excuse for not accepting any social and political responsibility at all.

3.3 Embracing mass culture ...

The way in which postmodernism has embraced mass culture and done away with modernism's aloofness from popular genres seems to be the feature that shows most promise for giving it a progressive meaning. It is here that the artistic and literary institutions are being challenged in a way which seems radically to undermine the old class divisions in culture.

There are, however, two points of qualification that I would like to raise. Firstly: does the fact that postmodernism embraces mass culture mean that it itself becomes part of mass culture? In architecture one doesn't see it reflected in the way the masses decorate their own houses; it is generated rather by architects and when found in houses, signifies not only trendiness but also wealth. As public architecture one comes across it in entertainment parlours, hotels and shopping malls – the spaces constructed by big capital. One finds it where the public are invited to enter the self-contained complexes of another world where, for those who have the money, every need is provided for and every fantasy entertained. It is not the world of the townships or the suburbs, but that of the Las Vegas strip, of advertising and commodity capital.

When one looks at those popular TV series described as postmodernist by Lawrence Grossberg (1987), the trendy dress of the characters in *Miami Vice,* the tongue-in-cheek humour in *Moonlighting* and even the lifestyle one encounters in *L.A. Law* seem to cater specifically for what one could call a "yuppy" audience. When one looks at those novels that are most typically postmodernist, one finds them gravitating towards the shelves of Exclusive Books rather than the CNA, Hillbrow and Hyde Park rather than Benoni or Soweto. It seems that postmodernist popular culture caters for a slightly more sophisticated audience than the general masses. It tends to be not so much a genuinely popular culture, but more the popular culture of the elite.

This brings me to my second point: even where postmodernism does have a wide and popular distribution (as it inevitably has in TV series), it is not necessarily appreciated the same way by all. Jancks makes the point that

> while modernism depended on the elite coding of professional architecture, postmodernism's primary distinguishing characteristic is that it is "double-coded", respecting both the professional and popular codes simultaneously, thereby speaking a "language" that can be understood by two quite different groups through its uses of signifiers accessible to both professional and layman. (Collins, 1987: 21)

The same text or cultural artifact is thus double coded in the sense that it conveys an esoteric message to the initiated and another popular message to the general masses. One could thus ask: have the class divisions between high and mass culture really been done away with, or have they just been accommodated and smoothed over?

4 Conclusion

The arguments for seeing postmodernism as progressive are, then:

1 that it liberates us from all metanarratives – from Stalinism, Nazism, Christian Nationalism and liberal humanism,
2 that it liberates by highlighting the textual nature of our versions of reality and history, and
3 that it challenges the institutions of high culture. This would be the approach of a typical postmodernist.

On the other hand the arguments for seeing it as ultimately conservative are:
1 that it frees one not only from all metanarratives but also from any perspective on reality, thereby obscuring the underlying social causes of which it is merely the superficial symptom,
2 that in bracketing reality and questioning the status of any attempt to get to terms with it, it puts a question behind any attempt to change the world and thereby frees one also of social and political responsibility, and
3 that the attack on institutions of high culture seems not to have done away with class differences which are simply maintained in a less obvious way through the double codedness of a postmodernism adapted to the market place.

If one looks at works that exemplify the three main themes of postmodernism that I have outlined above, such as *Snow White* by Donald Barthelme, *Trout Fishing in America* by Richard Brautigan, "Blow Up" by Julio Cortazar, *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, and *Labyrinths* by Jorge Luis Borges, or *Miami Vice* and the multitude of imaginative videos that accompany pop songs on TV, or the Cine Entertainment Centre in Johannesburg and the Perm Building in Grahamstown, then the progressiveness of postmodernism would depend on how one understands it – as a liberating truth which exposes all its contradictions on the surface, or as a sympton of an underlying phenomenon (such as multinational capitalism and the culture of the simulacrum). The former understanding would be that of someone like Lyotard for whom postmodernism exemplifies the inherent progressiveness of capitalism, or perhaps even of an anarchist who would in principle support any rebellion against metanarratives, or of any conscience-stricken liberal whose concern goes no further than a questioning of his own liberal humanist tradition. The latter would be that of Marxists like Jameson and Eagleton who see postmodernism as being essentially conservative, or of any other critically minded person concerned not only with a revolution in style but with real social change.

There is a third in-between position such as that of Hal Foster, James Collins and Linda Hutcheon who argue that even if postmodernism is symptomatic of multinational capitalism, it still has some progressive potential. The point to make about this is that though the progressive potential is certainly there, it is limited. It is limited on the one hand to a questioning of cultural codes that is only significant for those who confront the esoteric level of double coded postmodernist phenomena. It is limited on the other hand to a subsection of postmodernism – to the marginal writing by gays, blacks and feminists and those authors who, like Doctorow, decide to touch on political issues. Typically postmodern as it may be to also find such writing included within the heterogeneity that the concept provides for, it is not their political

orientation that is typically postmodern. Such political orientation is, for instance, not found in the works mentioned above and pertains to a limited subset of the overall trend without necessarily changing the social significance of the phenomenon as a whole.

Even when progressive in intent the postmodernist nature of such texts render them double coded in another way, according to Hutcheon. Since they both affirm and question at the same time,

> because they are always paradoxically both inside and outside, compromised and critical, postmodern challenges have proved to be what Gerald Graff once called politically 'ambidextrous,' open to appropriation from the Right, Left, or Center. (Hutcheon, 1988: 205)

The effect of even the relatively small subsection of postmodernism that intends to further the cause of the left is also dubious since its political message can so easily be cancelled out by the typically postmodern question marks behind all alternatives. Can one really call a work progressive if it cannot hold that the alternative isn't as questionable as the present, that it isn't just another fiction, another illusion? Can one call a work progressive if it goes no further than to provide esoteric allusions, or to simply entertain? A progressive work will have to provide something more than what is most typically postmodern.

If the Left is going to use postmodernism, I would argue that it would not be by relying on any of the typically postmodernist themes I have outlined – suspicion of metanarrative, bracketing reality and the embracing of mass culture. It would rather do what Jameson argues for and accept postmodernism, not as being itself progressive, but as a sign of the times which forces one to try and understand this new symptom, thereby gaining fresh insight into our changing world which would enable one to forge ahead:

> the new political art – if it is indeed possible at all – will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is, to say, to its fundamental object – the world space of multinational capital – at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (Jameson, 1984a: 92)

It is thus not that which is typically postmodernist itself that would be progressive from this perspective, but the way in which one goes beyond it.

For the postmodernist, there is no way beyond postmodernism, especially if one accepts Hutcheon's view that it cannot do other than challenge the liberal humanist tradition from within:

> One of the lessons of the doubleness of postmodernism is that you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value you choose to challenge. (Hutcheon, 1988: 223)

One does not, however, have to look too far to find that this liberal humanist tradition *is* being challenged from without. Postmodernism is, as Lyotard

points out, characteristic of the "most highly developed countries", not of the third world. As Fokkema puts it, it is inconceivable in a country like China. It is equally inconceivable as part of workers' culture or the culture of the Mass Democratic Movement here in South Africa.

Postmodernism is completely untypical of the culture of the people who have to deal with the harsh realities of Apartheid and repression, who do not bracket or question the reality of their everyday experience, and who unite in struggle to establish an alternative metanarrative to that of Apartheid. By its very nature (being suspicious of all metanarratives) one would rather expect to find it reflecting the situation of those who do reject Apartheid but feel equally unsure of any alternative – the liberal bourgeousie who occupy the so-called political "middle ground". This, I would argue, is exactly what one is starting to find here in South Africa. The April '88 SAVAL congress on postmodernism attracted a markedly different group from that which attended the recent report back on the CASA (Culture for Another South Africa) conference of ANC and UDF cultural workers in Amsterdam.

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