



Arthur Kroker and David Cook. *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*. New World Perspective. Montreal, 1986.

REVIEWS

Postmodernism is the current intellectual commodity for sale and it's being flogged shamelessly by cultural critics and university professors. The term "postmodern" is without a doubt the fashionable catchword of the year, but it is also deceptive and confusing. Given the myriad meanings associated with postmodernism, it is best to start by making a distinction between a postmodernist theory, which concerns itself with knowledge, and a postmodernist condition, which deals more generally with the malaise of contemporary culture. The distinction is especially useful since one of the faults of Kroker and Cook's surly and maddening book is the failure to make even this relatively simple idea clear.

Critics of contemporary mass culture often speak plaintively of a postmodern condition. One does not need a great deal of insight to deduce that the increasing power and pervasiveness of the communication industry has created a mass culture that is capable of absorbing all political opposition as well as destroying unique cultural diversities. Whether we like it or not, the values of a consumer society permeate all of our cognitive abilities. Not only have we been seduced by our media images but, according to Jean Baudrillard, we have become fascinated with the media's references to human creation as an endless mirroring pro-

cess. Ours has become the information culture of the simulacrum, the simulated world of signs, in which the real has been replaced by the words and images which refer to it.

According to postmodernist theory, we are imprisoned in the "mirror of culture". Power in contemporary society lies in knowledge and language. So it comes as no surprise that the chief task of a postmodernist inquiry is to undermine the authority of signs and to which legitimates certain cultural representations while prohibiting and disavowing others. The aim is to scrutinize a wide range of privileged modes of knowing which carry a canonical authority, such as the "perspective" of a camera angle, the "discipline" of literary study, or the "reading" of a work. The most powerful weapons in the arsenal of postmodernist critique and art are the transformative tropes of parody, irony, puns, paradox, the visual techniques of collage and *trompe l'oeil*, and numerous other strategies of disorientation which by their very reflexive nature force an evaluation rather than the passive consumption of communication codes.

The Postmodern Scene draws generously from the ideas and strategies outlined above. It is a book which tries to say something, however opaquely and confusingly, about the deployment of power within postmodern culture. And accordingly, the work of the New French Thought theorists, as well as that of McLuhan and the Critical Theorists, is used to discuss both the hollowness of contemporary culture, and its reality effect (the flow of "dead" signifiers with which culture maintains its fictional images). The book is a collection of different articles, some of them written by Arthur Kroker, others by David Cook. Not surprisingly, many of these pieces were first published in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, of which Kroker is the editor. Taken as a whole the book lacks organization and coherence. What we have instead is something akin to literary montage, a series of disorderly, in places incoherent and at times also daunting, examinations of the cracks in the mirror of postmodern culture.

If the fragmentation technique of *The Postmodern Scene* owes something to Dada and McLuhan, the mood of the book comes from *The Day of the Locust*: despairing and unappealingly bleak. In the opening section, "Sunshine Reports," the authors make a number of proclamations about the postmodern condition. The essential idea, I think, is that a society of overabundance and excess such as ours inevitably generates an "excremental" culture, a term which is never adequately defined but which is perhaps ultimately self-explanatory. Postmodern culture is excremental in the sense that it is constantly involved in an endless process of cancellation, liquidation and reversal of meaning. Quality becomes quantity. The distinction between art and life is obliterated. Art loses its critical edge and its ability to comment on life, while ordinary life becomes an aestheticized scene, a *tableau vivant* in the service of consumer capitalism.

Postmodern culture also privileges those representations which can operate as exchange values, such as desire, seduction, and sexuality. These are the chief values of a consumer society and, predictably, they are regulated as socially exchanged commodities which participate in the pure representation of economic power. Yet underlying these values one can also detect the resonance of catastrophe, destruction, and nihilism. Perhaps the contemporary critic Neil Postman, in more accessible language, best described the conundrum of living in an excremental culture when he stated that we are "amusing ourselves to death."

From the jeremiad of "Sunshine Reports" we move to a section called "Sign Crimes," which deals first with a brief and curious examination of the Italian surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico, followed by an even stranger and longer chapter on St. Augustine. De Chirico's work and especially one of his more popular paintings, *Landscape Painter*, challenges the privileged distinction made by representational art between the sign and the referent. Realism fraudulently claimed that any external representation must be reproduced mimetically. De Chirico's painting defies the referential finality of signs. While the country landscape is accurately

trapped on canvas, the painter who apparently created the scene is a geometrical mannequin. By refusing to impose a conventional order on experience, de Chirico denies the reality principle of culture its "referential illusion."

The argument quickly turns bizarre with the excursus on St. Augustine, whom Arthur Kroker calls "the Columbus of modern experience" and "the first postmodernist theorist," as he was one of the first thinkers to carry out a metaphysical critique of representation. Much is made in this and subsequent chapters of the importance of Canadian philosopher Charles Norris Cochrane, who is credited as having understood Augustine as the theoretician of power. This theorist is more interesting for what Kroker has to say about Cochrane than it is for what he has to say about Augustine. Those who are interested in Augustine should either read Cochrane, or better still, Kenneth Burke, who manages to say decidedly more, and with much more clarity.

At this point it may be necessary to quote at length from *The Postmodern Scene* in order to demonstrate not only the inelegant style that characterizes the book but also the conflated discourse which is at times well-nigh impossible to decipher:

"Baudrillard's insight into the 'semiotic cancellation' at work in the simulacrum echoes Augustine's earlier, philological reduction of the sign system of the trinity (father/memory as signifier; son/intelligence as signified; and voluntas/will as the perspectival closing of the tautology) to a 'sound which is made by no language.' Baudrillard's 'semiological reduction' is nothing more than Augustine's insight that, in the mirror of the trinity, signifier and signified circle back towards one another as refracted and (simulated images) in a common tautology." (p.129)

This quote serves as a very good example of the type of rhetorical strategy which is at work throughout the text: the bringing together of two unrelated thoughts and traditions with the sensation, but not the sense, of their connection. In collapsing together Baudrillard and Augustine we have a simultaneous thwarting and accelera-

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tion of thought. But what are the authors saying with their flickering ideas?

I think that central to Kroker's and Cook's argument is the notion of the "cancellation of the real" and the social construction of a "dead sign" which postmodern culture increasingly and effectively achieves. A dead sign can be described as a signifier cut off from any historical referent. Thus unmoored the signifier implodes; it collapses into itself by becoming a tautology. One can, for instance, walk into a shopping mall and find a simulated street scene with quaint shop facades, old fashioned lamp posts and telephone booths, and stone paved streets. The scene is obviously rigged to impose on us a sensation that we are walking in a real city street, yet the signs that create the scene refer to their own surface gloss. In the shopping mall example, ordinary perception and reality come asunder and are skillfully managed as a symbolic organization, part of what the authors would call "relational power": the hyperreal and artificial social world in which all reality is liquidated.

The optical illusions that postmodern culture creates oscillate between the outer eye which registers and the inner eye which controls. A good figure for reflecting on this condition can be found, according to Arthur Kroker, in Rene Magritte's painting *False Mirror*, which shows an empty iris surrounded by the reflection of clouds. Magritte's eye represents "the terrorism of the world as a pure sign system [which] works at the symbolic level: a ceaseless and internal envelopment of its 'subject' in a pure symbolic domination" (p.83). Indeed, the next two sections of the book ("Sliding signifiers" and "Postmodernism and The Death of the Social") explore in more detail the dynamics of power in postmodernist society. Here the work of Foucault, Nietzsche, Barthes, Baudrillard and, interestingly enough, Talcott Parson is used to stress the point that power in postmodern culture asserts itself as an endless process of symbolization.

In the concluding section, "Ultramodernism," the authors' attention shifts to our new *fin de siecle* and its new signs of decadence, excess and

catastrophism as a way of life. Francesca Woodman's photographs, and Alex Colville's paintings are deemed by Kroker and Cook in many ways to exemplify the mood of impending disaster which is our lot. Like Alex Colville, Edward Hopper is an artist of hyperrealism. Hopper always tries to situate the viewer in the position of voyeur. His paintings are full of windows (*trompe l'oeil*) that give the viewer a glimpse into the outside world of a receding nature and an advancing urban sprawl. Hopper's paintings find continuity in the current work of the young neo-expressionist Eric Fischel. Once again, the viewer as voyeur takes on a privileged position as we are brought to the psychological edge of the postmodern condition. This is the parasitic culture which feeds on scenes of excess and disaster, as is evident in Fischel's depictions of desire without any apparent referent, seduction without love, and fatherly love bordering on incest. This is, so it is claimed, the psychological space of the postmodern condition: the unsettled discourse of a culture which has reached contentment with nihilism.

This book, for all its rhetorical excesses and sketchy and impressionistic formulations, is at times capable of a serious analysis of the abyss of modern subjectivity and culture. There are indeed several chapters which merit a close reading. Also, the author's reliance on the strikingly creative work of Georges Bataille provides the book with much of its provocative edge and some of its best metaphors. But throughout it all one must remember that we are dealing with a mode of thinking which is interested neither in the institutional nor the historical nature of social individuals who pursue and develop their daily interests; what it examines is "the liquidation of the real," based on a lame theory of language that is so all-embracing as to be virtually meaningless as an analytic construct. All social life involves some form of influence, molding, direction or compulsion, but the reduction of social relationships to the issue of language and power renders it almost impossible to make the fine intellectual, moral, and material distinctions necessary for any serious evaluation of change in society, or to hope for future action. It is no

wonder then that *The Postmodern Scene* is drained of any political content and lacks any sense of direction. The book holds out no hope, only fashionable nihilistic grief. It also displays a certain glib shrewdness in place of considered judgement.

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Tania Modleski, ed. ***Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture***. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Colin MacCabe, ed. ***High Theory/ Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film***. St. Martin's Press.

Two anthologies have recently appeared, generated out of an American conference, and a combined American and British Seminar, on the study of mass and popular culture. They are both uneven collections, yet *Studies in Entertainment* has a project which holds the essays together. The collection attempts to undo the strict division between high culture and mass culture imposed by the theorists and critics within the Frankfurt school. *High Theory/Low Culture*, on the other hand, has little guidance in its overall intention. This looseness in thought characterizes the majority of essays within the collection, leaving the reader wishing the contributors had stayed longer at the conference table to thrash out what it is they wanted to say.

The essays within *Studies in Entertainment* were first presented at a conference on Mass Culture in 1985 held by the Centre for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Its editor, Tania Modleski, is an associate professor of Film and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and is author of *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. What

binds the essays together in this collection is not only the topic of Mass Culture, but also, as Modleski states in her introduction to the text, it is the "voice of the women's movement" which reverberates throughout the book."

Studies in Entertainment is divided into four sections: the traditions of mass culture criticism; television; feminist studies in entertainment; and the boundaries between art and entertainment. This final section contains three essays which exemplify the theme of the collection - to redefine the distinctions between high culture (art) and mass culture (entertainment). Specifically, contributors attempt to reassess the possibility of an "oppositional" position to mainstream entertainment, this position being traditionally held by the avant-garde. Andreas Huyssen, in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," approaches the opposition of high art/mass culture as having been created by modernism which he sees as essentially misogynist, for it distinguished mass culture as a degraded Other to its own male grand recits. He optimistically, and simplistically, sees the dichotomy being overcome with the dissolution of modernism.

Tania Modleski begins the section with "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory." She looks at recent popular horror films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and a selection of the body of work of David Cronenberg, and sees these films as being just as "adversarial" as any avant-garde film. She bases this assessment on the fact that the horror film contains many of the elements characterizing a postmodern work: it dispenses with narrative, and what little narrative it retains is aimed at the destruction of all that is bourgeois; it refuses its audience the narcissistic pleasure of identification with characters, and it defies closure (the possibility of endless sequels has much to do with this latter trait). By finding in the horror genre "oppositional" qualities established by the avant-garde, Modleski concludes that a strict binary relationship no longer exists between high art and mass culture.