

## The Challenge of Critical Reflexivity Through a Postmodern Paradox

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The similarities between the latest developments of critical discourse and the logic of fashion are undeniable. This is hardly surprising, given the conditions in which the university system operates, both in developed countries and increasingly so in Brazil. Once the emphasis is placed on quantity and production, once it is agreed, however surreptitiously, that publishing and quality are synonymous (Waters 2004), novelty becomes a value in itself and easily degenerates into newfangledness. What is astounding, however, is the degree to which this *modus operandi* remains unreflected by those who take part in it. Every couple of years new concepts enter the critical arena, are used to exhaustion and silently fall into oblivion, being replaced by newer ones. The 80s was the decade of textuality and deconstruction, which were then closely followed by the body and the poetics of desire; the 90s witnessed the consolidation of identity, hybridity and postcolonialism, while our decade seems to have inaugurated theories of empire. This succession of concepts, and the increasing speed with which they have been introduced, poses a problem for those unwilling to merely utilize them. As tools for thinking such concepts and theories resemble machines and their sheer application in the periphery reproduces patterns of technology importation by undeveloped countries from the advanced center. On the other hand, just ignoring them is equally unsatisfactory, for it obliterates whatever truth content they must have, however minimally, to be viable as concepts. The challenge then is to practice a heightened sense of self-reflexivity, to think at the same time

*from* theories' concepts but also *through* and *against* them. This is what is attempted below in relation to one important, once path-breaking concept: that of postmodernity.

## I

It is not surprising that discourses on postmodernism have aged at an incredibly fast pace, to the point that to some the latter is already an unutterable concept, not primarily due to theoretical shortcomings or inconsistencies, but because it has become purely and simply too boring. And yet, few affects are as productive as boredom. The problem with the postmodern was that it ended up as a victim of its own desire. If it posited a break or a turning away from modernism and modernity, which were themselves responsible for the establishment of a tradition of ruptures, it was because the postmodern saw in the world the abundance of the multiple. Under the most diverse guises, as hybridity or otherness, difference or plurality, discourses on postmodernism believed themselves capable of announcing the overcoming of modern thinking, a kind of rationality characterized by that hunger for domination and control embedded in total planning – as the examples Schönberg's twelve-tone technique and the construction of Brasília attest. In contrast to this, postmodernism promised liberty through endless quotability, collage, montage, and parody, the abolition of the auratic and autonomous work, and the erasure of the division between high- and low-brow cultures. In opposition to elitist aristocratism it offered democratic pluralism.

A fruitful summary of all this can be found in David Harvey's appropriation (43) of I. Hassan's schematic comparison between modernism and postmodernism (here, already, a multiplying practice of citation and iteration). The series of binary oppositions may be viewed as an *ad absurdum* proliferation of an otherwise self-defeating strategy, since dualism is precisely what postmodern theorists want to avoid. The ironic intention becomes thus obvious, the more so because irony itself is one of the categories in the following list, which makes it interestingly self-conscious and self-referential. The series runs:

**modernism**

romanticism/Symbolism  
form (conjunctive, closed)  
purpose  
design  
hierarchy  
mastery/logos  
art object/ finished work  
distance  
creation/totalization/synthesis  
presence  
centering  
genre/boundary  
semantics  
paradigm  
hypotaxis  
metaphor  
selection  
root/depth  
interpretation/reading  
signified  
lisible (readerly)  
narrative/*grande histoire*  
master code  
symptom  
type  
genital/phallic  
paranoia  
origin/cause  
God the Father  
metaphysics  
determinacy  
transcendence

**postmodernism**

paraphysics/Dadaism  
antiform(disjunctive,open)  
play  
chance  
anarchy  
exhaustion/silence  
process/performance/happening  
participation  
decreation/deconstruction/antithesis  
absence  
dispersal  
text/intertext  
rhetoric  
syntagm  
parataxis  
metonymy  
combination  
rhizome/surface  
against interpretation/misreading  
signifier  
scriptable (writerly)  
anti-narrative/*petite histoire*  
idiolect  
desire  
mutant  
polymorphous/androgynous  
schizophrenia  
difference/difference/trace  
The Holy Ghost  
irony  
indeterminacy  
immanence

Included in the list is almost everything one could expect to represent postmodernism, articulated in the most economical and inorganic, that is to say, non-narrative way: not only Derrida, Lyotard, Barthes, Deleuze & Guattari, but also linguistics, logics, psychoanalysis, literary theory and theology – all of them put together without any hierarchy or anteriority, democratically and eclectically merely listed: parataxis instead of hypotaxis. The result is an agglomerate that bespeaks completeness

without incurring in totalization, an infinite potential for differentiation, instead of that necessary imposition of boundaries that stands as a precondition for any idea of wholeness. However, for all its multidimensionality and disseminating character, or, rather, precisely because of it, this list eventually solidifies in and insists on one fluctuating seme, a common denominator in one way or another belonging to all terms, and which would make itself present in any other ones that could follow, namely that of “excess.” Unmistakably and unavoidably, under the most different guises, inspirations and tendencies, postmodern rhetoric is one of *abundance*.<sup>1</sup>

As a regulating idea or insurmountable postmodern horizon, abundance is most clearly present in those introductory texts that intend to divulge the postmodern – interestingly enough themselves more abundant (i.e. to be found in the market in greater quantities) than the “primary” or “original” sources. Wolfgang Iser’s *Ästhetisches Denken* is exemplary in this sense. Throughout the book’s seven essays we are reminded that “Today’s society is no uniform troops, but resembles a loose network of heterogeneous forms. This is its reality at the same time that it marks an ideal” (75). In Iser’s view, as that which is most essential and characteristic to reality, multiplicity is immediately accessible in the world. All that needs to be done is for this heterogeneity to be apprehended by the critic and written down in what Iser calls aesthetic thinking (41-78). This kind of availability and lack of mediation generates an interesting dualism in the book regarding two kinds of propositions, those which refer to the object discussed (architecture, design, commercials etc.), and those which divulge its multiplicity; as a result, the text’s weakness comes from the eventual supremacy of the latter (abstract) over the former (concrete). The word “abundance” is anything but abundant; imputations of inexhaustibility do not suffice to change the truth that the object (visual, urban, aural or otherwise) cannot fulfill all of the critic’s desires, but must contain lacks in itself. It is precisely through the repression of scarcity and need in postmodern discourse that it so easily fell prey to a dialectics of novelty

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, in literature we are told that: “Postmodern stylistics is a stylistics of excess; the text is *too* rich, the surface *too* lush, the prose *too* joyous. Postmodern stylistics is altogether too too” (Dettmar 49).

versus sameness.<sup>2</sup> It is not only the case that one could always argue from the other side, showing, for instance, that the core of what exists is not difference but unheard-of homogenization. Marxists do have a point when they stress that all history so far has been a pre-history of mankind.<sup>3</sup> For instance: never before was the totality of things to be bought so huge, never before was it so easy to travel and avoid real otherness. Following the general tendency in the world of business, which, as Marx long ago foresaw, has led to ever-greater concentration of capitals, to mergers and to the establishment of mega-transnational corporations, the culture industry has neutralized competition as a driving force of change and now manages to impose its own pasteurized version of sameness everywhere in the globe. But one could go one step further. It is fair to argue that the standardized side of mass production invaded postmodern theories themselves. Just as any other artifact on the market, discourses on the postmodern were overproduced and very quickly degenerated into slogan brandishing and name dropping; due to the sheer repetitiveness of postmodernist dicta in the most dissimilar contexts and disciplines (multiplicity badly multiplied) the postmodern itself started to belong to the category it at all costs tried to evade: it became boring.

Still, and this is the other side of the question, there are cases in which a turn to the different, to what is other or new, rather than being merely postulated, is in fact demonstrated. As an example one could mention Adorno's short text "The Art and the Arts,"<sup>4</sup> where he works out the thesis of an aesthetic "in-fringe-ment" (in German *Verfransung*<sup>5</sup>). In a nutshell, Adorno coins this concept to account for a process whereby the

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<sup>2</sup> No one dealt with this in a more thorough fashion than T.W. Adorno (see, e.g., "Über Statik", 217-37).

<sup>3</sup> Recently, this argument has been most forcefully worked out by Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981).

<sup>4</sup> "Die Kunst und die Künste" (432-53).

<sup>5</sup> The concept first appeared in English as "transgression," which is clearly an unsatisfactory translation. "Franse" in German is thread or fringe, which makes "infringement" particularly adequate. See Hauke Brunkhorst (43-61). A good discussion of this theme can be found in Christine Eichel's informative work (1993).

arts start to converge into one another, thus leaving behind their assigned places, their ordering in traditional aesthetics (e.g. in Hegel's, where to each genre a pigeonhole is allotted according to its participation in the Idea), in order to form a new kind of unity. Gyorgy Ligetti's "Atmospheres," for instance, does not contain melodies anymore, but presents sheer masses of sound constantly changing in tone, pitch, timbre and volume. Music here starts to look like painting, in that its temporal dynamic loses terrain to the color of sound. The reverse happens to painting, for once a picture starts to make use of several vanishing points, it cannot be apprehended in one single act of perception, but has to be viewed from different perspectives, thus incorporating time within itself. A further elective affinity can be found in painting as it starts to have objects attached to the canvas, which makes it resemble sculpture, and sculpture, as in Richard Serra's amazing pieces now displayed at New York's MoMa, flirts with architecture. As for literature, it begins to adopt seriality, an originally musical technique; conversely, music takes the score ever more seriously and now incorporates in its notation signs that cannot be translated into sound: in the irretrievable residue of the letter it becomes literary. Finally, and most significantly, one could mention architecture's recent tendency to quote different styles in the very same building, which brings a new sense of narrativity into it, thus integrating a new sense of time that "literalizes" it.

This "promiscuity" (Adorno's term) among the branches of art stands in sharp contrast to the avant-gardes, insofar as the latter's programmatic concerns very easily jeopardized artistic quality; the infringement of arts' boundaries, in opposition, has taken place as a spontaneous movement, devoid of immediate theoretical concerns. The knotted arts (*verfranzte Künste*) could thus be thought to correspond to a new period in the history of aesthetics, when, revolting against the increasing homogenization of the world, the arts homogenized themselves in a closer unity. What is frustrating about Adorno's text, however, is that this great finding, that the arts have developed to an autonomization of their linguistic aspect (in German, their *Sprachcharakter*), that they are now strangely more unified and imbued of a more similar spirit – this conclusion begs to have a broader name, to be generalized into a broader movement or tendency. Now, among all the more wide-ranging concepts available to us today, the

only satisfactory one, the only one that is capable of signing our time with a proper name is that of the postmodern itself.

Thus the paradox: it is possible to claim that, whenever postmodernism is regarded as an object to be approached, described and judged, whenever it is *announced*, it reverts to its opposite: not novelty, but repetition; not the absolute wow!, but the ever-the-same. On the other hand, in those cases when theoretical discourse manages to produce the unexpected, most of the time unconcerned about postmodern issues (and sometimes even against the postmodern itself<sup>6</sup>), the concept of postmodernity asserts itself unequivocally as the only one fit for a time of incessant and ever-faster change; it thus shows us the emergence of as yet unimagined possibilities. Here, rupture with the modern is not merely posited or taken for granted anymore, but becomes the result of the interpretative process itself, the outcome of its own hermeneutical logic. In sum, this is the paradox of something that ceases to be itself the moment it is invoked, at the same time that it remains the necessary name for that which emerges as an event.

This does not mean, of course, that all works explicitly dealing with postmodern themes or bearing the name as a title are fated from the start to repeat themselves to exhaustion; what it means, rather, is that successful postmodern texts must incorporate in themselves countercurrents to their overt purposes. One may argue, indeed, that this drawing away from themselves, this disjunction or fault line between conscious project and unexpected result is what makes those few interesting books on postmodernism worth reading. Thus, to take a well-known case, Fredric Jameson's own *Postmodernism* (1991) could very easily miscarry in its idea of a new phase in capitalism's history, for the very thought structure underlying the book, the historical homology between kinds of representation and broad, social-economic forms, is irredeemably simplifying in nature. Nevertheless, working against the grain of this framework the reader finds in the text truly breathtaking analyses of cultural artifacts belonging to the most different spheres, including painting, film, video, architecture,

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<sup>6</sup>This is the case of Compaignon's *Les cinq paradoxes de la modernité*, which tries to contain the postmodern in a chapter, but as Jameson (1998) observes, eventually becomes an interesting example of postmodern discourse in its own right.

Theory, linguistics and economics. These do not summon up the concept of the postmodern but produce it; naming becomes now a more relative and mediated process, inasmuch as it emerges at the end as something not in perfect agreement with what it was at the beginning: the postmodern is here what it has become.<sup>7</sup>

## II

This puzzling paradox is not an autonomous cultural phenomenon, but is grounded on the peculiar situation of today's hermeneutical technologies and their places of enunciation; this is a question which, in short, involves the means of production of meaning. Here we touch on the complicated, reciprocally determining relationship between postmodernism and Theory: for if the latter is perhaps the most typical product of the former, postmodernism can be viewed as a theory in its own right, one that has to share the general intellectual space with other ones. And since it is impossible to determine in this case which is inside which, it is only logical to posit that postmodernism's peculiar situation extends into that of Theory. In fact, the same problematic involving the abundance of multiplicity can also be found here. On the one hand, there was never before so much meaning available, so much potential for the creation of sense. Today's Theory is characterized by the immense gamut of interpretative master codes at its disposal (from traditional phenomenology, hermeneutics, and semiology, through Freud and Lacan, to Foucault, Cultural Studies, Queer

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<sup>7</sup>This structural non-coincidence between project and result, method and reading, is to be found at the core of Derrida's texts, themselves widely regarded as affiliated to postmodernism. What makes secondary literature on deconstruction in general so unbearably uninventive is embedded in what the genre "secondary literature" implies: clarification, explanation, discussion, exemplification. In opposition to this, Derrida's texts very self-consciously construct the contexts they work from, with and against. In this sense, all of Derrida's mannerisms, his rhetorical questions, neologisms, interruptions and detours, his interweaving of highly contrasting topics and works in the same exposition represent the very core of his philosophy, and not those overt, pseudo-avant-garde slogans such as "metaphysics of presence," "il n'y a pas du hors texte" and the like.

Theory, Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, etc). These theoretical currents are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they may be combined in interesting hybrid theories, thus making for partial non-totalizing totalization. The same holds true to Theory's objects: they also have lost any a priori determination. Accompanying the belated historical weakening of religion and the slacking of moral codes in literary theory (the precursor of today's Theory),<sup>8</sup> the conditions were created under which anything let itself be interpreted – from the history of obesity to the writing of the railroad systems, from the semiotics of reptiles to the sexuality of ties. If literary theory could still be taken to encompass a field, however problematically, Theory now resembles nothing so much as the structure of a nebula.

And yet, never before was reality so resistant to the production of meaning, not because of any traditional limiting element, not because of censorship or impositions from the “outside,” but due to its sheer economic monopolization. As postmodernism's closest relative, Theory both feeds on, and is limited by, this state of affairs. When it forgets the boundaries that frame its loci of enunciation, the university, the academic journal, circles of intellectuals, and purports to describe reality as such, it enters in contradiction with itself, generating the same impoverishing results mentioned above regarding postmodernism. When it plunges in reality, forgetting itself and taking from it the potentials that lie dormant there, it then becomes worthy of its own name by not mentioning it. The dilemma is then what to do with this overall paradox, which is common to Theory as a postmodern phenomenon and to postmodernism as a theoretical stance: a *Zeitgeist* that can only be true to itself by its own self-obliteration, a reality that desperately begs to become what it was promised to be – as if things could be seen from two perspectives, or had two faces, depending on how and from where one deals with them: theoretical entities full of meaning, or humdrum, everyday objects of monotony. The answer is surely not found by overlooking one of the poles in this force field, neither

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<sup>8</sup> It is always astounding to remember that, under New Criticism, no longer than thirty years ago, literary studies in both England and the United States were still fundamentally moral in character and represented, however feebly, surrogates to religion.

in the celebration of abundance, which forgets the drudgery of daily routine and the repetition of society's reproduction, nor in the denial of change, which refuses to see what is happening before our own eyes.

Indeed, one is tempted here to adopt the old Marxist opposition and interpret this overall situation as involving a contradiction between the forces and relations of production of meaning. Interpretative codes want to break away from its academic fetters and meet what lies outside;<sup>9</sup> doing this they would awaken a new potential for meaning in the objects themselves, which would be utterly transformed. Constructing real plurality would mean nothing less and redeeming things in the world to an apotheosis of sense, something not unlike Ernst Bloch's idea of a concrete utopia, which he sees inhabiting the very materiality of things. On the other hand, the academic space works both to foster and seclude its products. Foster, because the academy, just like any other capitalist enterprise, has to motivate an increasing and incessant production of meaning, at ever-shorter turnovers: the theoretical fashions. This applies to all kinds of propositions that can be made inside the university and its affiliated circles, including self-criticisms and denunciations, iconoclasm and different kinds of negation, anti-interpretative gestures, and perhaps even this paper. Seclude, because as a whole the academy is complicit with the system that wants to tame and restrict meaning. It therefore makes sure that what is produced inside it remains accessible only to the few who can afford it. This, the university apparatus can easily achieve by means of the star-system it encourages among professors, as well as by the promotion of different forms of symbolic capital, not to mention the safeguarding of its products through copyright and the like. The postmodern could only

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to observe that a good deal of what was most innovative and exciting in recent Theory originated in movements outside the academy, or at least in tension with it. So it is that structuralism, as well as its "post", had ties, albeit tenuous ones, with the French avant-garde around the *Tel Quel* group. Or, in another significant example, one could think of the theological influence on the Frankfurt School, which was mediated by Jewish Youth groups and so strongly marked authors such as Benjamin, Bloch, Horkheimer and Adorno. A different kind of exteriority, finally, can be found in the more recent post-colonial studies, which to a great extent rely on the experience of scholars from the periphery of capitalism.

be true to its own desire under different conditions of production of meaning. But this is a political question, no longer a theoretical one, that depends on the radical democratization of the production of meaning and its institutions. What we can do in theory is holding tight, in the same space, the two opposites described above. In other words, what is needed is a kind of writing that does not surrender to the lure of immediate abundance, nor stubbornly clings to the continuation of old misery, but which is capable of exhibiting their belonging together in tension: a kind of writing that, by denying a hasty reconciliation, maintains open the new or different that was always there.

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