

ISTITUTO UNIVERSITARIO ORIENTALE

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AION

anglistica



ISTITUTO UNIVERSITARIO ORIENTALE

# ANNALI

XXVIII, 3

## anglistica

MODERNISMO  
E POSTMODERNISMO

NAPOLI 1985

## MODERNO O POST: UN'INTRODUZIONE

*Il dibattito su modernismo e postmodernismo ha assunto in anni recenti i lineamenti del 'discorso' letterario e culturale autonomo: « come già la 'querelle des anciens et des modernes' e la disputa tra classici e romantici, l'opposizione moderno-postmoderno è infatti diventata una sorta di genere letterario » (M. Ferraris, Tracce, Milano, Multhipla, 1983, pp. 7-8). In Inghilterra è arrivato tardi e all'inizio solo per riflesso, attraverso riviste e lavori critici australiani e nord-americani. Nei primi anni ottanta, le traduzioni di Baudrillard, la raccolta di saggi curata da Hal Foster (The Anti-Aesthetic, Washington, Bay Press, 1983, poi ripubblicata da Pluto Press nel 1985, con il titolo Post-modern Culture) e il saggio di F. Jameson su New Left Review (« Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism », n. 146, 1984) hanno suscitato un certo cauto interesse e una catena di reazioni difensive. Baudrillard è stato spesso citato, a dispetto della sua visione apocalittica e negativa, come il profeta del mondo del simulacro; a Jameson, che pure scrive in difesa del modernismo, hanno risposto Perry Anderson, Dan Latimer e Terry Eagleton con atteggiamenti di ripulsa verso la nuova 'estetica populista' che non hanno nulla delle interessanti ambiguità e chiaroscuri del discorso di Jameson.*

*A dispetto del ritardo, si potrebbe dire che c'è stata una maggiore presenza dell'interesse critico che della pratica artistica. Si dovrebbe piuttosto parlare di pratica massmediale perché l'eterogeneità degli stili e dei discorsi che va sotto il nome di postmoderno si è realizzata più nel campo del cinema, della pubblicità, e soprattutto dell'editoria giovanile — under-*

ground e non — che in quello del romanzo e della poesia. Ma la peculiarità del dibattito britannico è data soprattutto dal sospetto verso definizioni ed etichette, verso gli -ismi, che è stato spesso caratteristica della cultura inglese del Novecento. È calata sulla polemica una cappa di sospetti e di accuse, di discolpe e pentimenti centrata sul rifiuto della teoria e in particolare della teoria che viene dall'esterno. I toni sono stati quelli non nuovi del dibattito sulla 'povertà della teoria', della difesa — almeno iniziale — spesso opposta dal pragmatismo inglese all'altrove geografico e teoretico. In questo caso complicato dalle difficoltà di un momento di transizione particolarmente difficile per la sinistra, e per la critica marxista in particolare.

Mi riferisco qui, infatti, prevalentemente a tale ambito, e all'interno di esso a quell'area più specificamente letterario-culturale di cui Jameson e Eagleton sono tra i portavoce. Si direbbe quasi che alla minaccia della 'bomba' che ha animato critica, romanzo e teatro britannici negli anni cinquanta e sessanta si sia ora sostituita quella del postmoderno. Un discorso diverso andrebbe fatto per la critica letteraria e più precisamente narratologica che ha volto la sua attenzione al postmoderno sin dagli anni settanta, e con aperture maggiori. Tuttavia anche in questo ambito è stato notevole l'influsso di altri paesi di lingua inglese, principalmente quello americano.

Converrà a questo punto entrare brevemente all'interno del dibattito, in particolare riferendosi alle voci apparse sulle pagine di *New Left Review*. Perry Anderson (« *Modernity and Revolution* », *NLR* n.144, 1984) prende lo spunto per il suo discorso dal libro di Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (N.Y., Simon and Schuster, 1982) che si propone di esaminare la dialettica del modernismo, e i suoi effetti nella vita e nell'arte d'oggi. Anderson, pur ammirando questa lettura rigorosamente marxista del fenomeno, critica la sua visione della modernizzazione come processo rivoluzionario. Anderson, nel nome di un concetto strettamente leninista di rivoluzione, condanna sia il modernismo che il postmodernismo come termini vuoti e futili, « *one void chasing another, in a serial regression of self-congratulatory chronology* » (p. 113) e vede il secondo come tentativo del primo di aggrapparsi

ai propri relitti. Egli include ambedue tra quei 'sintomi morbosi' che secondo Gramsci appaiono nell'interregno tra il vecchio e il nuovo, un nuovo che non si è ancora realizzato. Gramsci appare qui per la prima volta e sarà invocato a più riprese sia per il carattere pragmatico e concreto delle sue analisi, lontane dalle odiate teorizzazioni, che per la sua pura integra fede politica. Questa lettura di Gramsci, che mi pare estremamente riduttiva, non è la sola (cfr. il lavoro interessante di Stuart Hall da un lato e di Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe dall'altro) ma è certo la prevalente nella gran voga gramsciana in Gran Bretagna.

« *Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism* » di Terry Eagleton (*NLR*, n. 152, 1985) è una risposta al saggio di Jameson sopra citato. Eagleton, che in seguito ha assunto posizioni più sfumate e compromissorie, vede nella cultura postmodernista il tradimento dei valori rivoluzionari delle avanguardie novecentesche e l'abbandono del progetto politico fondato sull'ideale dell'emancipazione umana insito in una parte di quel movimento. Di questa parte Brecht e Benjamin, nella lettura che Eagleton ne dà, sono gli esponenti piuttosto isolati poiché il modernismo — e qui le posizioni di Eagleton convergono con quelle di Anderson — è attraversato da 'impulsi antipolitici' (cfr. p. 72). L'abbandono delle distinzioni di valore (« *the postmodernism which celebrates kitsch and camp caricatures the Brechtian slogan by proclaiming not that the bad contains the good, but that the bad is good* », p. 68) e l'opera d'arte come merce (« *in a sardonic commentary on the avant-garde work, postmodernist culture will dissolve its own boundaries and become coextensive with ordinary commodified life itself* », *ibid.*) sono tra i caratteri pericolosi di questo momento post-metafisico. Eagleton conclude negando l'equazione politica = razionalità tradizionale in favore di una razionalità trasformata che deve essere il progetto da opporre al postmoderno.

Per Jameson invece il postmodernismo non è un -ismo né una teoria ma piuttosto una dominante culturale (l'antica egemonia?) con cui egli si confronta nella volontà di descriverla sia pure criticamente. In un contrappunto tra le Scarpe da contadino di Van Gogh e le Diamond Dust Shoes di

Warhol, tra la Marilyn Monroe di quest'ultimo e Il grido di Munch, vede il passaggio da un'arte che esprime l'alienazione del soggetto a una che ne esprime la frammentazione: da quella che si oppone alla mercificazione dell'oggetto d'arte all'altra che la corteggia e vi si identifica. È tramontata la dialettica tra essere e apparire, tra latente e manifesto (nel passaggio da Freud a Foucault), tra autentico e inautentico, e così la grande opposizione semiotica tra significante e significato. Al loro posto superfici fatte di pratiche, discorsi, giochi testuali di cui egli vede esempi nel pastiche, nella rivisitazione del passato, nel collage metropolitano. Il Bonaventura Hotel di Los Angeles, progettato da John Portman, è un iperspazio per una iperfolla. Come altri edifici di questo genere, il Beaubourg ad esempio, vuole essere una città del tutto autoreferenziale dove il movimento è l'emblema del movimento, dove i percorsi sono intrecci narrativi già tracciati in cui il visitatore si inserisce. « Here the narrative stroll has been underscored, symbolized, reified and replaced by a transportation machine, which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own ... » (p. 82). Questa limitazione individuale, la mancanza di distanza in generale, e in particolare nel discorso critico, sono punti su cui uno sguardo politico al postmodernismo deve esercitare la propria critica, uno sguardo che non potrà però più ignorare l'enorme complessità di questa mappa della conoscenza.

Questo numero di *Anglistica* vuole riportare, nella prima sezione, alcune fasi del dibattito, presentando delle voci che si sono aggiunte in un momento successivo a quelle sopra citate. « *The Bottom Line on Planet One* » di Dick Hebdige è un saggio che ha fornito al linguaggio della polemica una metafora fantascientifica, da allora ripresa molte volte. Uno è il pianeta del modernismo, due il pianeta delle superfici, dei simulacri, delle simulazioni, tre quello della realtà, o più precisamente il mondo dell'impegno sociale diretto, del terzo mondo sottosviluppato e affamato. Il pianeta uno è il luogo della nostalgia, il secondo è il luogo dell'evasione, della fuga dall'impegno politico. La rivista londinese di moda e attualità, *The Face*, prediletta dagli studenti di Hebdige che la

considerano « *the Ur Text for Magazine construction* » (p. 29), è l'emblema di tale fuga.

Questo cenno non rende giustizia alla complessità del saggio, echeggiato infatti sin troppo semplicisticamente dall'articolo di Bill Schwarz (« *Grammschi goes to Disneyland* »). Nell'esaminare i recenti sviluppi del postmoderno negli studi sulla cultura popolare, egli lamenta l'accento anti-razionalistico e di rifiuto dei 'grandi racconti' che il postmoderno vi ha impresso, pur riconoscendo la pertinenza del legame: « ... it was within popular culture itself, not within the academy, that the postmodern sensibility first appeared, as joke, fashion, parody and pastiche » (p. 82). Egli contrasta due recenti studi (*Popular Culture and Social Relations* a cura di T. Bennett et al., per il pianeta uno; e *Popular Culture. The metropolitan experience* di I. Chambers, per il pianeta due) che rappresentano il passaggio da una teoria del sapere integrata e totalizzante a un'altra informale e ispirata al quotidiano e all'immediato, da Gramsci a Disneyland. La discussione critica del 'Grammschi' britannico, nella grafia anglicizzata adottata dal Partito Comunista Britannico nel 1956 e che, per mia esperienza, è ancor oggi ripresa polemicamente nei confronti degli studiosi esterofili, è la base per un'analisi dei pregi del primo studio e dei difetti del secondo. Schwarz vede Gramsci in chiave anti-americana, anti-metropolitana e in opposizione alla cultura popolare, « *poor old Bolshevik that he was* » (p. 104), lui che bolscevico non è mai stato. Il rimprovero che l'autore muove al libro di Chambers è che non offre grandi risposte dimenticando che l'autore parte dal riconoscimento dell'impossibilità di darle. Io aggiungerei che il rifiuto di dare risposte è la sostanza del postmoderno, l'impossibilità la sua base.

Lo scritto di Hebdige è più problematico per vari motivi: il primo è che emerge dalla sua scrittura un quadro del postmoderno tra i più completi e interessanti, e, come già in Jameson, attraversato da una fascinazione che non so fino a che punto si può dire involontaria. Un altro è che il suo libro *Subculture. The Meaning of Style*, London, Methuen, 1979 (trad. it. *Sottocultura. Il fascino di uno stile innaturale*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1983) aveva offerto, tra i primi, un'analisi dell'importanza dello stile e delle superfici sia nella rappresen-

tazione che nella realtà, nella cultura alta come in quella popolare. Per questo motivo era stato attaccato come uno dei rappresentanti inglesi del postmoderno. Egli si difende dall'appellativo come da una macchia, sottolineando indirettamente l'alone di colpevolezza che aleggia su di esso. D'altro canto che Hebdige lo faccia richiamandosi alla sua biografia, a una sua crisi esistenziale e di isolamento (cfr. « Some Sons and Their Fathers », Ten. 8, n. 17, 1985, di prossima pubblicazione in Italia su Linea d'ombra) lo pone in una posizione interessante come voce critica che si caratterizza per la caduta della barriera pubblico/privato, teoria/prassi cui il postmoderno si richiama. Pone anche l'accento sulla carica emotiva che investe questa particolare querelle intellettuale e dalla quale quasi nessuno dei partecipanti può dirsi esente.

Gli altri due articoli sono dall'altra parte: Iain Chambers — che nei suoi studi sulla cultura metropolitana adotta una visione diversa, di accettazione della sfida della complessità — in « A Handful of Sand ...? », si riferisce alla polemica solo indirettamente, analizzando l'influsso di Benjamin e Nietzsche sul mondo anti-metafisico dominato dalla 'mobilità dei segni dei suoni delle sensazioni' (cfr. p. 26) che fa parte della condizione contemporanea. Il suo è un viaggio nel deserto del reale che va nella direzione opposta a quella di Baudrillard. Angela McRobbie rispondendo più concretamente al saggio di Hebdige sostiene che il postmodernismo ha portato un soffio di aria in Gran Bretagna, con la sua attenzione all'importanza della rappresentazione, alla 'istantaneità della comunicazione', alla frammentazione dell'esperienza che è più vicina al vissuto dei giovani e delle donne di quella visione unitaria oggetto di tanta nostalgia. McRobbie si richiama a de Beauvoir e a Sontag, per il riferimento a una dimensione in cui pubblico e privato sono uniti e dove pastiche, parodia e camp hanno un potenziale sovversivo.

Sia il saggio di Hebdige che quello di Schwarz terminano affermando il principio di realtà attraverso l'importanza dei sentimenti: l'odio e l'amore per il primo, il sentimento-passione di memoria gramsciana per il secondo. Ambedue esprimono una disperata nostalgia di semplificazione, la nostalgia per il mondo in cui nominare è significare, con trasparenza

inequivocabile e corrispondenza univoca tra segno e realtà; parlano in nome della riconquista di un soggetto unitario e privo di ambiguità; definiscono il sentire e l'irrazionale in nome della ragione forte. Comprendere che questo paradigma non è più il nostro, che non ci rappresenta è un'ambizione minima del postmoderno, e una che secondo me — persino posta così in termini di estrema genericità — non va sottovalutata.

Gli altri saggi di questo numero sono dedicati ad illustrare pratiche e aspetti del postmoderno e si pongono fuori dal dibattito pur non essendone del tutto lontani, così come non lo è Paola Splendore nella sua recensione di alcuni lavori recenti di critica narratologica. Maria Del Sapio, in « The Question is whether You can make Words Mean so Many Different Things », dà una lettura, in chiave diversa da quella di Hebdige, di i-D, una rivista londinese non troppo dissimile da The Face, esprimendo una volontà teorica di viaggiare e di perdersi nell'impero dei segni. Il suo discorso — che lega arte e vita, letteratura e cultura popolare — parte da Alice's Adventures in Wonderland come premessa all'esplorazione del gioco flessibile tra segno e referente nelle avanguardie storiche fino a toccare gli stili spettacolari della cultura contemporanea.

C. Pagetti e O. Palusci, in « 'SF' e post-moderno », vedono nel romanzo di fantascienza un modello narrativo che ha preparato fin dagli anni cinquanta quello postmoderno. L'assenza di messaggio, il recupero e il riciclaggio ironico dell'arte modernista, la parodia delle convenzioni del genere stesso, la dissacrazione della letteratura alta sono i caratteri di alcuni romanzi di Dick e di Vonnegut, e in particolare di The Sirens of Titan di quest'ultimo; inoltre il romanzo femminista fantascientifico (qui viene esaminato in particolare The Female Man di Joanna Russ) insiste sul potenziale sovversivo del genere, sul continuo ribaltamento delle prospettive, sulla frammentazione delle strutture narrative e del personaggio femminile, che contribuiscono a costruire un 'corpo femminile testuale'. Elizabeth Wilson nel breve scritto autobiografico Living Dolls osserva, in luoghi e spazi diversi, un esempio di arte metropolitana che cancella la distinzione tra animato e inanimato e tra realtà e artificio.

incontri e confronti

## A HANDFUL OF SAND ... ?

by  
Iain Chambers

*We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world (Pirsig 1981, p. 61) ... Perhaps we need to try and redefine ourselves in a landscape where it is possible to encounter more extensive, lateral truths — What for other are deviations are for me the data that define my route (Benjamin 1986, p. 591). Therefore to drift ... across Nietzsche's 'open sea': at last the horizon seems to us again free, even if it is not bright, at last our ships can put out again, no matter what the danger, every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted, the sea, our sea lies there open before us, perhaps there has never been such an « open sea » (The Gay Science, in Nietzsche 1977, pp. 209-10).*

We live in a deeply schizophrenic world, constructed according to unstable equations. Some talk enthusiastically of the future, of a real-time, info-tech, computerized environment that sweeps away the old tyrannies of physical labour, famine and want. Others talk in *fin-de-siècle* accents of the dusk of our world, of its very END. This mixture of change and crisis, of a simultaneous opening and closure, is found everywhere. Previously solid referents have been replaced by a disorientating flux, calculated risks by terror, known dangers by the invisible reign of the unknown ... the stakes seem to have been dramatically raised: Chernobyl, terrorism, Reagan, Gheddafi, the Persian Gulf, Trident ... In a world that could literally disappear tomorrow, where Third World guerrillas wreak their anger and



revenge in the cities and airports of the First, where famine and genocide is no longer the news that belatedly arrives from the far reaches of the Empire but is a live, television event, the globe contracts, time dilutes.

Speed in the movement, translation and execution of projects, business and bodies is not only the goal of transnational corporations, military strategists and dictatorships, it also marks the increasing obliteration of a politics of geography and space by a politics of time and speed. This is Paul Virilio's 'dromosphere', the world of chronopolitics. The proposed 'star wars' scenario of the Reagan administration is not based on a military occupation of (empty) space but on the colonization of time: the time involved in anticipating, apprehending and annihilating an aggression. But, of course, its own attack on time, further reducing the margin of decision and augmenting the chances of nuclear holocaust, is already an act of aggression; a further reduction in *our* time.

The fast, shiny world of advertising; the rapid circulation of news, television and cinema; the seasonal logic of throwaway paperbacks, throwaway sounds and throwaway aesthetics, like nuclear war and televised terrorism, is also part of the same world of velocity and rapid effects. Contemporary experiences are translated into temporal signals, electronic signifiers released by the screen, the tape head and the pick-up. Sense is connected to speed: messages are threatened by obsolescence and meaning becomes movement.

We live in a world whose velocity and complexity finds us with earlier explanations that frequently no longer coincide with our physical, emotional, intellectual, moral and aesthetic experiences of it. These previous guides now become significant bits of a particular archive (of Western Europe, of the white male voice, of a certain epistemology and its social sciences), part of a local history that once involved the presumption (and power) to speak in the name of the 'world'. This is not simply a belated recognition of other realities that we are now hastily recognizing in a rush of liberal guilt; it is also the wider acknowledge-

ment of the extensive remaking of the very conditions of experience, knowledge and power in the present period.

We have a problem: how can we interpret these conditions, what sense can be drawn from this situation, how can we dialogue with it, find a bearing, set ourselves a direction?

The following discussion of postmodernism and the 'return' of Nietzsche tries to suggest one perspective. It is not offered as a solution or an explanation. Neither postmodernism nor Nietzsche can be said to represent an exit from the contemporary critical condition, on the contrary they represent a further tarrying in it. It is simply, and more modestly, a possible journey in the face of this question; a journey undertaken not in order to abandon the present but rather to extend our *dialogue* with it.

#### MAKING CONTACT

... these philosophers of the future might rightly, but perhaps also wrongly, be described as attempters. This name itself is in the end only an attempt and, if you will, a temptation.

(*Beyond Good and Evil*, in Nietzsche 1977, pp. 39-40)

In order to change things it is necessary to establish a relationship with them. And it is here that today we begin to break with the rigid mould of 'modernism'; it is at this point that criticisms of formalist impositions, and their abstract presentation of the relations and movement of the world, is mounted in order to regain contact with the heterogeneous textures and micro-solutions of everyday life.

The hermeneutic drive in postmodernism, although the actual terminology is frankly of minor importance, can be understood as an attempt to overcome the bifurcation between practice and perspective:

the interpretation is not a description carried out by a 'neutral' observer, but an event based on dialogue in which the interlocutors are

equally set in play and from which they both emerge modified; they understand one another to the degree in which they are understood within a third horizon, which is not available to them but in which they are given. While structuralist thought had as its *telos* the rendering explicit, and the appropriation of law-governed arrangements on the part of the conscious observer, hermeneutic thought puts the accent on the position of the observer and the observed within a common horizon, and on the truth as an event that, in the dialogue between the interlocutors, 'is put to work' and, at the same time, modifies this horizon (Vattimo 1987, p. 6, my translation).

Perceived in this manner postmodernism does not necessarily have to involve, as its critics usually insist, a deliberately kitsch æsthetics or decadent ethics constructed on pastiche and parody, revival and restoration, but rather proposes a profane re-visiting and re-elaboration of the elements, the histories and the memories that surround us. This 'eternal recurrence', as Nietzsche would put it, expresses the continuing possibility to re-shuffle the cards in play in order to find another chance, another prospect, in our daily lives.

#### WELCOME TO THE DESERT

Spring 1987. In the company of Jean Baudrillard (*Amérique*) and Talking Heads (*Little Creatures, True Stories*) I am crossing the 'desert of the now', driving aimlessly — 'life as a *drive-in*' (Baudrillard) — along the 'road to nowhere' that promises me anywhere. The desert — the emptiness that each of us can fill with our own desires, where the number of possible routes knows no limit — is the *tabula rasa* of a wild realism, 'a wild, wild life' as the Talking Heads' song on the car cassette reminds me. Here we can confront our 'selves'. In the bright light of the desert, where our actions are over-exposed, where among the fragments of our histories time and space dissolve into one another and the wind of the past deposits patterns in the sand of our lives, we find ourselves in a landscape where there is no interpretation powerful

enough to present itself as the unique truth. For the moment, the only truth on which we can rely is the asphalt under the wheels of our car that carries us along the road that runs between what has already occurred and the possible ...

Over twenty years ago a solitary motorcyclist set out on a journey across America following the map of a troubled rationality. In the testament-novel of Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, driving from the Mid-West to the West coast, through the Dakotas, Montana, Idaho, and Oregon, we find ourselves involved in a pilgrimage across the continent of western philosophy, travelling down the metaphorical roads — « The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called 'yourself' » — of a contemporary condition that can be diagnosed as the critique of reason. Although he is never mentioned, it is the ghost of Friedrich Nietzsche, as Christopher Norris has subsequently noted, who accompanies us on this two-wheeled journey among the high plains of modern thought (Norris 1982). We are drawn along the road in a quest for 'Quality', searching for a rationale that refuses the abstract and metaphysical logic (that 'handful of sand') of 'classical reason'. This philosophical *Easy Rider* argues that our sense of the present is not to be located in some higher truth but has rather to be confirmed in the daily realities and extensive complexity of the immediate world. Abandoning by the side of the road the protection of a metaphysical explanation (the God Rationality) we now have to confront by ourselves the languages in which knowledge, truth and morality acquire sense and power in our lives using the only means possible: the language themselves. Pure logic, dialectics, mental models, the 'truth', are subordinated to rhetoric to social exchange, to the 'good'.

#### PARIS, TEXAS - PARIS, FRANCE

Let's return to the desert. Cruising in automatic drive we can take a glance at Baudrillard's latest book: *Amé-*

*rique*. In the past Baudrillard, associating the infinity of signs in the contemporary world with the disappearance of sense, spoke of the 'desert of the real' where the signifieds disappear in the transparency of a perpetual semiosis; what Paul Virilio has termed the 'aesthetics of disappearance' (Virilio 1986). Despite his own hyper-rationalism, according to which the world has become so alienated that it can only manage to be a simulacrum of itself, Baudrillard remains fascinated, seduced. He continues to drive his red Chevrolet across the American desert even if this eventually involves arriving at the end of a particular intellectual highway. « We criticize the Americans for not being able to analyze and conceptualize. But these are false processes. It is we who imagine that everything culminates in transcendence, that nothing exists which has not first been conceptualized » (Baudrillard 1987, p. 70).

But what does America represent to those of us who consider ourselves to be elsewhere? — the laboratory of our immediate future, or the incubator of our nightmares? Perhaps it is neither the one nor the other but more significantly our Other, that is sometimes repressed, sometimes misrecognized, sometimes refused. America offers us life lived in the third person, as myth, as a dream, as cinema. To actually go to the United States, and not only to those places privileged by our imagination (New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, California ...) but anywhere, is to experience the sensation of stepping into an endless film — it lasts as long as your stay there — given that everyone talks, walks and lives in houses, offices and cars just like in the CINEMA.

But if our imaginary has been conquered by the hyper-realism of Hollywood the exchange remains subtle. The pleasure, that *frisson* which emerges in the continual movement between images and the imaginary — between 'Action!' and the awareness of montage — that we construct through the signs and sensations absorbed by *our* individual bodies, brings to the surface that the image, that 'America', is also us.

## SCREENS, SURFACES AND SENSE

Surface and depth are not simply metaphors. Three presences — the opaque, the luminous, and their meeting — make up our world; like the past, the actual and the possible. These differences speak to us all, not only to philosophers: the calm abstraction of the heights, the terrible peace of the abyss, the agitation of the surfaces. There on the surface, movement, waves and horizons are delineated. The superficial is freedom. Even if we suppose that in the depths there exists a monster, Leviathan or Moby Dick, if he never rises to the surface we could never meet him. The depths hides themselves, the heights are beyond us. There remains the surface, infinite and finite. Whatever emerges, whatever rises from the depths, or descends from the heights, that is all that counts ... Between everything and nothing there is something.

(Lefebvre 1980, pp. 84-5, my translation)

Setting off once again from the desert, and heading towards the open sea, we can follow the indications on the 'substantial surfaces' (Siegfried Kracauer) of the everyday: those *true stories* lived by 'little creatures' (David Byrne/Talking Heads). We find in our hands a map where the distinction between popular and 'élite' culture is continually unclear, where genres are confused and languages incessantly contaminated. Through the windscreen of our car and the other screens — those of television, cinema, the personal computer — the thickness of things is replaced by a horizontal extension; the perspective becomes bi-dimensional, flat: the third dimension ('depth') is missing. The premises of a realist epistemology elaborated in three-dimensional space are transformed into the rapid codes of electronic signifiers. Their 'sense' is not to be found elsewhere, in a presumed and immobile 'depth', but arises in the continual and immediate exchange of multiple surfaces and signs: after all, it is not merely facitions to remind ourselves that they, too, are 'real'.

With this shift in perspective the traditional critique of mass or popular culture begins to come undone. If, instead

of beginning from the 'outside' and looking down into popular culture, we commence on the 'inside', in front of the screen, we find ourselves with a very different view. We also arrive at a different history, a history in which the debate on culture, in both its élite and popular forms, is finally inserted in altogether wider networks of sense: that of the overall formation of contemporary tastes, aesthetics and culture *tout court*.

Looking into the depths encourages us to search under the buoys for the cables and their anchors that establish the theoretical positions and the empirical connections which explain the movement on the surface: to harpoon the whale and strike through the mask of appearances. This approach respects the principle of an explanatory structure and in the end seeks to establish a hierarchy of causality. Choosing instead to follow the sense of objects and their relationships as they float on the surface is like casting a net over a transitory zone, while simultaneously being aware of the continual fluidity of the situation. In the first case we are dealing with a homogenizing point of view where it is presumed that all the diverse threads, angles and prospects run back to arrive at a single, expressive unity: that of a *Weltanschauung*, a class, a mode of production, a political system, a semiotic generator. Such explanations clearly follow the logic of their own discourse and have concrete effects in our everyday world; they are certainly not false, they are extremely real. But our world is composed of these *and* other discourses which in their continual social combinations constitute the challenge of complexity.

#### NIETZSCHE'S 'RETURN'

The contemporary 'return' of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche indicates one of the possible roads towards this complexity of the 'real'. The French thinker Henri Lefebvre presents him like this: « With respect to 'theoretical man', to classical philosophy,

to thought which privileges 'pure' knowledge in an authoritarian manner, Nietzsche *decentres* thought. He does not abandon knowledge; he discovers *multiple centres* of knowledge » (Lefebvre 1980, p. 49, my translation).

In the opening pages of the *Grundrisse* Marx had carefully distinguished between the 'concrete' and the 'concrete in thought'. However, Marx remained a convinced rationalist. Like Captain Ahab, he believed that history was fought out between the True and the False, that critical work involved the labour of tearing away the mask that hide the true conditions of the world. He never asked himself whether the concept of 'truth' exists; a significant omission « given that it had been elaborated by philosophers, and given that he placed philosophy among the ideologies » (Lefebvre 1972, pp. 94-5, my translation).

As Lefebvre goes on to point out, although Hegel and Marx broke from classical philosophy by introducing the concept of difference through their mental deployment of dialectics, they both continued to privilege theoretical consciousness and a metaphysics of truth: the domination of nature through thought rather than through desire or pleasure. For Marx, as for Hegel, theoretical reason defined the essence of 'being'. From this privileging of 'pure' consciousness derives the non-recognition of what it differs from: joy, pleasure, ecstasy, anguish, pain, death. This centrality of abstract thought perpetuates, in a refashioned discourse, classical philosophy and ignores other 'sensible fields' that we find continually articulated in the immediate touch and feel of our world.

Nietzsche's reason — *Beyond Good And Evil. A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* — was « in all essentials a critique of modernity » (*Ecce Homo*). Nietzsche attacked the homogeneous structure of thought that lay behind the nineteenth-century faith in 'progress' and 'rational' development. Such a philosophy, together with its aesthetics, morals and politics, was, he argued, based on the abstract Platonic metaphysics of Western rationalism where the ideal is considered to be more real, hence truer, than the immediate and the concrete. Nietzsche's proposed move

beyond metaphysics represents a break with an abstract theory of being, time, space and identity. He argued that the concrete world had been translated into a mental schema, subject to an intellectual positivism and the uni-dimensional rules of logic and dialectics ... « more useless even than knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in danger of shipwreck » (*Human, All Too Human*, in Nietzsche 1977, p. 55). Such an abstract logic was challenged in the name of the tragic: the immediate world of pain, joy, death, pleasure and suffering whose wordly insistence exposes the fundamental nihilism of metaphysics, busy constructing a model of sense *elsewhere*.

The Nietzschean attack on the assumption of a metaphysical truth rests on a fundamental drive towards the secularization of knowledge and power. The notorious Nietzschean concept of the 'will to power' is finally the will to fully enter the everyday world in its own right. In the end, of course, Nietzsche is only suggestion, an instrument of sense, of the possible, not a prophet to be blindly followed or a demon to be angrily expurged. His own excessive language sought to avoid any pretensions to philosophical and political finality, « ... everything has become: there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths. Consequently what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing, and with it the virtues of modesty » (*Human, All Too Human*, in Nietzsche 1977, pp. 29-30).

Nietzsche's proposal for a more complex intellectuality where reason and consciousness intermix, further means that the philosophical displacement of the body is restored to reasoning: « if health involves the existence of a 'pure subject without will, pain or time' then Nietzsche preferred illness ... the 'pressure of evil' »: the pressure of the body that has been displaced because it is a source of evil (Rella 1984, p. 88). This produces a subject who is no longer pure, deprived of will and atemporal, but a « plural and complex subject, who feels and wants: who is immersed in time and in history ... » (*ibid.*, p. 89). As Walter Benjamin once put it, this « state of emergency in which we live is the rule ».

Marx put Hegelian metaphysics back on its feet by insisting that the mental world rests on the material world, Nietzsche went one step further and, subtracting the whole discussion from the context of dialectics, argued that the world in which we are immersed cannot be reduced to the rule of thought. There is no guarantee that our thought *per se* offers us a superior 'truth'. The world — « all things are chained and entwined together ... » (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Nietzsche 1977, p. 257) — can only be measured against itself. There is no superior order — God, Nature, History — to whom we can appeal. In the end, with our reason, our languages, our histories, our societies, we are alone. In this dramatic secularization of knowledge, where the veil is torn away from the mystery to reveal that ... there is no mystery, only a complex web of *our* making whose understanding cannot be postponed to another lifetime or another place as suggested by the abstract rationale of a nihilist metaphysics.

#### A LIBERATION OF VALUES

As Gianni Vattimo has pointed out, today we live in a world where value emerges only in the transitory moments of exchange. The metaphysics of fixed values existing elsewhere, unsoiled by the dirty traffic of the everyday world, that 'pathos of authenticity' so dear to the marxian concepts of 'false consciousness' and 'alienation', for instance, collapses under the cultural pragmatics that accompany the real business of making sense of *our* experiences in *this* world. There are no longer overriding values that control and direct the situation, which does not mean that there is no longer value in the world; far from it. There is a vertiginous liberation of values: « ... only where there is no longer the terminal instance of the 'interruption', the blockage, of the supreme value-God can values find their own nature, that is their uninterrupted conversion in a process of continual transformation » (Vattimo 1985, p. 29, my translation).

Previous blocs of knowledge (and their powers) are fragmented in a process of extreme secularization where knowledge, social life and institutions can no longer run to a higher authority; there is nowhere to go to except to the histories out of which they emerged: histories that are 'human, all too human'. In the moment that we recognize this perspective (which, as Nietzsche insisted, does not represent an individual aspiration but a 'will to power', that is historical and social) the metaphysical scaffolding of our world is stripped of the possibility of appealing to another source of authority. The world simultaneously becomes more lonely and potentially more accessible. These are the 'good tidings' announced by Nietzsche, the beginning of a '*grand politics* on earth' (Nietzsche 1979, p. 127).

For all this does not automatically imply a 'going beyond' (the Hegelian and Marxian supersession or *Aufhebung*), a concept that is easily prey to assumptions of linearity and 'progress'. On the contrary, it suggests a radicalization of already existing tendencies: a return to and re-discovery of what has already occurred in order to redraw the contours of our experience and provide a map more adequate to the detailed changes in play.

We move from a monumental and epistemologically stabile landscape governed by the metaphysics of Reason and its subordinate logics (the dialectic, the historical destiny of the class, the inevitability of 'progress, and 'revolution') to the mobility of signs, sounds and sensations that nakedly circulate before the infinite horizons of the semiotic desert. It is now up to us, as Walter Benjamin suggested half a century ago, to become the experts, capable of choosing a passage.

The cassette — *We live in a city of dreams / We travel on this highway of fire* — has now finished; outside the night is falling while our car continues to follow the asphalt snaking across the desert under the first stars of the evening: « Whither does this mighty longing draw us, this longing that is worth more to us than any pleasure? Why just in this direction, thither where all the sums of humanity have hitherto *gone down*? Will it perhaps be said

of us one day that we too, *steering westward, hoped to reach an India* — but that it was our fate to be wrecked against infinity? » (*Daybreak*, in Nietzsche 1977, p. 205).

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THE BOTTOM LINE ON PLANET ONE.  
SQUARING UP TO *THE FACE*

by  
Dick Hebdige

« It was quite self indulgent. I wanted it to be monthly so that you were out of that weekly rut; on glossy paper so that it would look good; and with very few ads — at *New Musical Express* the awful shapes of ads often meant that you couldn't do what you wanted with the design » (Nick Logan, publisher of *THE FACE* interviewed in the *Observer Colour Supplement*, Jan 1985).

Last Autumn Alan Hughes, a former member of the *Ten. 8* editorial board, came to West Midlands College to give a talk on magazine design to students on a Visual Communications course. During his lecture, Alan asked how many of his audience read *Ten. 8*. The response was muted and unenthusiastic. Alan's question prompted the following exchange:

A. H.: What's wrong with *Ten. 8*, then?

Students: It's not like *THE FACE* ... It's too political ... It looks too heavy ... They've got the ratio of image to text all wrong ... I don't like the layout ... It depresses me ... You never see it anywhere ... It doesn't relate to anything I know or anything I'm interested in ... It's too left wing ... What use is it to someone like me? (Approximate not verbatim transcriptions).

Clearly, for many of the students *THE FACE* was the epitome of good design. It was the primary exemplar, the Ur Text for magazine construction — the standard against

which every other magazine was judged. The position it appeared to occupy in the world view of some of my students recalled — in a disconcertingly upside down kind of way — Northrop Frye's thesis on the centrality of the Bible and of Biblically derived archetypes in the West<sup>1</sup>. Frye argues that for the past two thousand years, the Bible has acted as what William Blake called the « Great Code of Art » in Western culture supplying artists and writers not only with a fertile body of myth and metaphor but also with the fundamental epistemological categories, the basic modes of classification and typology which structure Western thought. In the Bible, Frye sees the bones of thinking in the West — the essential framework within which a literate culture has unfolded, understood and named itself.

In the pagan, postmodern world in which some of my students live, *THE FACE* appears to perform a similar function. For them, *Ten. 8* is the profane text — its subject matter dull, verbose and prolix; its tone earnest and teacherly; its contributors obsessed with arcane genealogies and inflated theoretical concerns. This judgement probably owes more to the conservative format; to the appearance of the typeface, the solid blocks of print in three columns, and to the lingering commitment to the strict rectangular frame than any more substantial rapport with the content. I suspect it's not so much that they can't understand it. It's that they think they know what they are going to 'learn' before they encounter it on the printed page and they calculate that the energy expended on the *style* of understanding offered in *Ten. 8* in relation to the gain made in « really useful knowledge » is just not worth the effort (or the cover price).

They are not alone in this if the circulation figures are anything to go by (*Ten. 8*: 1,500 — 2,500; *THE FACE*: 52,000 — 90,000). *THE FACE* has, in addition, been feted in

<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Harcourt & Brace, 1981).

publishing circles. In 1983, it was voted Magazine of the Year in the annual Magazine Publishing Awards, and the consistently high standard and originality of its design receive regular accolades in the professional journals. *Design and Art Direction* claimed that « from a design viewpoint [*THE FACE*] is probably the most influential magazine of the 1980's » whilst the *Creative Review* singled out the work of Neville Brody, who designs unique 'trademark' typefaces for the magazine for special praise, suggesting that « every typographer should have a copy ».

Long after the seminar with Alan was over, I found myself asking whether it was possible to trace the essential difference which I imagined dividing *Ten. 8* from *THE FACE* back to a single determining factor? Did it reside in the form or the content, in both or neither, in the size and composition of the readership, in the style or the tone, in the mode of address, in the proportion of available space devoted to advertising, to the type of advertising, the mode of financing, the marketing or distribution or editorial policy? Did it stem from the intrinsic ties that bind the magazines to different institutions (education and the arts for *Ten. 8*; the pop and fashion industries for *THE FACE*)? Or did it derive from some more fundamental ideological or ethical polarity between, say, the carnal pursuit of profit and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, the private and the public sectors?

This last distinction does not stand up to too close an inspection. It is true that the two magazines emerged under different circumstances as the result of quite different initiatives. The *Ten. 8* editorial group was formed in 1979, was, and still is financed by an Arts Council grant whereas the £ 4,000 which was used, one year later, to launch *THE FACE* was raised by Nick Logan, former editor of *Smash Hits* and the *New Musical Express*, from personal savings and by taking out a second mortgage on his flat. However, if it is tempting to regard *THE FACE* as the embodiment of entrepreneurial Thatcherite drive, it should also be remembered that in a world dominated by mas-



sive publishing oligopolies, both *Ten. 8* and *THE FACE* remain relatively marginal and independent and are staffed by a small team of dedicated people.

On the other hand, both magazines could be said to offer their readers quite specific forms of cultural capital: from *THE FACE* 'street credibility', 'nous', image and style tips for those operating within the highly competitive milieux of fashion, music and design whilst *Ten. 8* offers knowledge of debates on the history, theory, politics and practice of photography and supplies educationalists with source material for teaching.

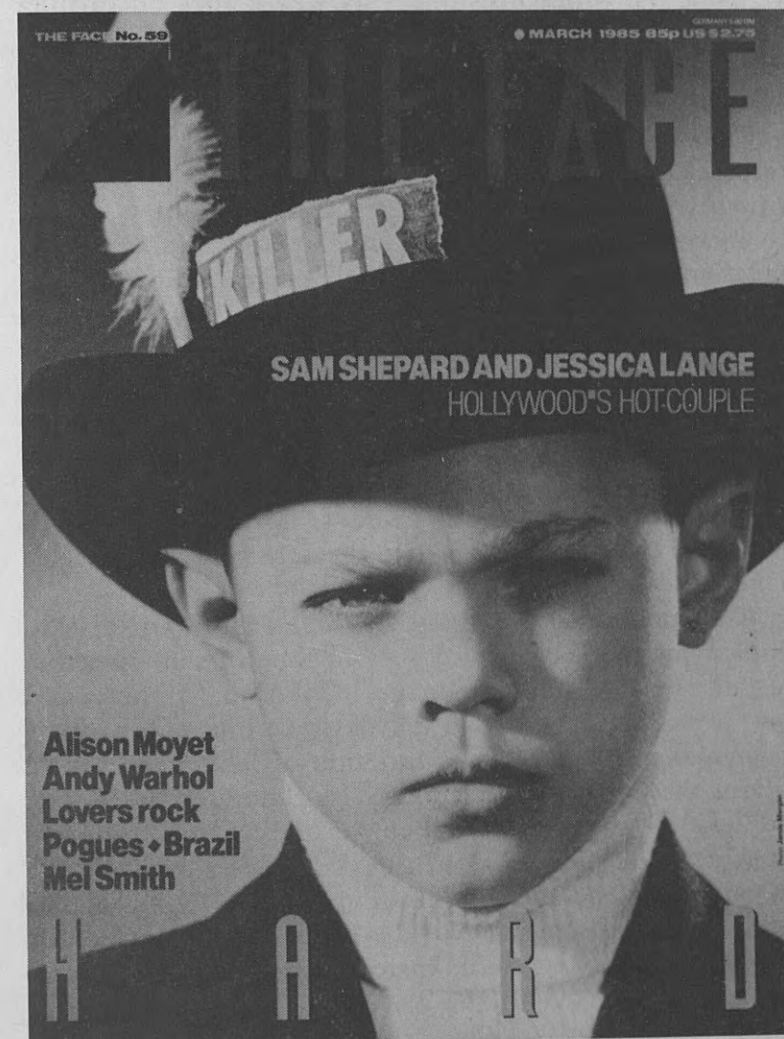
But none of this serves to close the distance between *Ten. 8* and *THE FACE*. The chasm that divides them remains as absolute and as inaccessible to concise description as the gulf that separates one element from another. It goes right to the core of things. It has to be approached from a different angle ...

#### WAR OF THE WORLDS

Imagine a galaxy containing two quite different worlds. In the first, the relations of power and knowledge are so ordered that priority and precedence are given to written and spoken language over « mere (idolatrous) imagery ». A priestly caste of scribes — guardians of the great traditions of knowledge — determine the rules of rhetoric and grammar, draw the lines between disciplines, proscribe the form and content of all (legitimate) discourse and control the flow of knowledge to the People. These priests and priestesses are served by a subordinate caste of technical operatives equipped with a rudimentary training in physics and chemistry. The technicians' job consists in the engraving of images to illustrate, verify or otherwise supplement the texts produced by the scribes.

More recently, a progressive faction within the priesthood has granted a provisional autonomy to pictures and has — informally and unofficially — adjusted the working relationship between scribes and engravers. These scribes

[4]



[5]

now endeavour to 'situate' the images produced by the engravers within an explanatory historical or theoretical framework. But despite this modification in the rules, the same old order prevails. This world goes on turning and, as it turns, its single Essence is unfolded in time. Each moment — watched, argued over and recorded by the scribes — is a point on a line that links a past which is either known or potentially knowable to a future which is eternally uncertain. Each moment is like a word in a sentence and this sentence is called History.

In the second world — a much larger planet — the hierarchical ranking of word and image has been abolished. Truth — insofar as it exists at all — is first and foremost pictured: embodied in images which have their own power and effects. Looking takes precedence over seeing ('sensing' over 'knowing'). Words are pale ('speculative') facsimiles of an original reality which is directly apprehensible through Image. This reality is as thin as the paper it is printed on. There is nothing underneath or behind the Image and hence there is no hidden Truth to be revealed.

The function of language in this second world is to supplement the Image by describing the instant it embodies in order to put the Image in play in the here and now — to turn it into a physical resource for other image-makers. It is not the function of language here to explain the origins of the Image, its functions or effects, still less its meaning(s) (which, as they are plural, are not worth talking about). In this world, the vertical axis has collapsed and the organisation of sense is horizontal (i.e. this world is a flat world). There are no scribes or priests or engravers here. Instead, knowledge is assembled and dispensed to the Public by a motley gang of bricoleurs, ironists, designers, publicists, Image consultants, hommes et femmes fatales, market researchers, pirates, adventurers, flâneurs and dandies.

Roles are flexible and as there are no stable systems, categories or laws beyond the doctrine of the primacy and precedence of the Image, there is no Higher Good

to be served outside the winning of the game. The name of this game which takes the place occupied in the first world by religion and politics, is the Renewal of the Now (a.k.a. Survival): i.e. the conversion of the Now into the New. Because images are primary and multiple, there is, in this second world, a plurality of gods, and space and time are discontinuous so that, in a sense, neither time nor space exist: both have been dissolved into an eternal present (the present of the image). Because there is no history, there is no contradiction, — just random clashes and equally random conjunctions of semantic particles (images and words).

Sense — insofar as it exists at all — resides at the level of the atom. No larger unities are possible beyond the single image, the isolated statement, the individual body, the individual 'trend'. But this world, too, goes on turning. It turns like a kaleidoscope: each month as the cycle is completed, a new, intensely, vivid, configuration of the same old elements is produced. Each month witnesses a miracle: the New becomes the Now.

For the sake of argument, let's call the First World, *Ten. 8* and the Second, *THE FACE*. Imagine a war between these two worlds ...

#### JUST A MAGAZINE

When Jean-Luc Godard in his Dziga-Vertov phase coined his famous maxim « This is not a just image. This is just an image », he struck a blow for the Second World. In one brief, memorable formula, he managed to do three things: (1) he drove a wedge into the word 'good' so that you had to think twice before you said « This is a good image » when confronted by a photograph by, say, Weegee or Eugene Smith: (2) he problematised the link between, on the one hand, an abstract commitment to ideal categories like Justice and, on the other, the 'politics of representation'; and (3) he made the future safe for *THE FACE*,

the political, ideological and aesthetic roots of which lie as much in the 60s, in mod, Pop Art, the myth of the metropolis and Situationism as in Mrs Thatcher's 80s.

*THE FACE* follows directly in Godard's footsteps. It is not a 'just' magazine (in the depths of the recession, it renounces social realism, liberation theology and the moralists' mission to expose and combat social ills and promotes instead consumer aesthetics and multiple style élités). It is just a magazine which claims more or less explicitly that it is out to supersede most prevailing orthodox, 'alternative', scholarly and common-sense constructions of the relationship between cultural politics, the Image and the 'popular'. It's just a short step, in fact it's hardly a step at all, from Godard and 1968 to 1985 and two Second World veterans like Paul Virilio and Felix Guattari, both of whom were quoted in the Disinformation Special entitled « The End Of Politics » in the Fifth Anniversary issue of *THE FACE*:

Classless society, social justice — no-one believes in them any more. We're in the age of micro-narratives, the art of the fragment.

(Paul Virilio quoted in *THE FACE* no. 61).

To find artful fragments from leading Left Bank theorists like Virilio, Guattari, Meaghan Morris, André Gorz and Rudolf Bahro<sup>2</sup> jostling alongside photographic portraits of the « style-shapers of the late 80's »; an interview with Bodymap, the clothes designers; a Robert Elms' dissection of the Soul Boys; an article by Don Macpherson

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Paul Virilio & Sylvere Lotringer, *Pure War* (Semiotext(e), Foreign Agents series, 1983); Felix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution, Psychiatry and Politics* (Penguin, 1984); Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Meaghan Morris, « Room 101 or a few worst things in the world », in André Frankovits (ed.), *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene* (Stonemoss Services, 1984); Meaghan Morris, « des Epaves Jetsam », in *On the Beach 1* (Autumn, 1983); André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (Pluto, 1983); André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise* (Pluto, 1985); Rudolf Bahro, *From Red to Green* (New Left Books, 1982).



**YOUTH** pictured for left looking like a casualty from a psychedelic spy thriller, Youth has been taking dancing lessons. Together with June Montana and Jimi Cauty they are the new **BRILLIANT** and the results of their efforts at the bar can be seen in the video accompanying their version of James Brown's 'It's A Man's World'. Shot on a smokey London rooftop, it features Youth and Cauty in a marvellously deadpan Red Indian style stomp. Hardy the Royal Ballet, but riveting nonetheless.

**IN HER** adopted Manhattan, where she needs no introduction, **Diane Brill** has been known to wonder aloud why it is that eyes on stalks accompany her every appearance. We can't imagine. Designer, party-giver and all-round fabulous Downtown socialite, here she is as photographed in Bobi Carlos Clarke's latest book of gothic smut, *The Dark Summer* (Quartet).



## QUESTION

When is it so remarkable that an artist paints a painting by hand?  
ANSWER When that artist is Andy Warhol.



It's been more than two decades since the grim reaper of modernism picked up a paintbrush. This month, both the earliest and latest chapters in the story of Warhol's brushes with paint are on view, albeit at extreme ends of the world. In Melbourne, at the National Gallery of Victoria's *Pop Art 1955-70* (curated by Henry Geldzahler), Warhol's great early *Popeye* (1961) is delivering a swift blow to those in Australia who insisted that Pop Art was a cheap offshoot of American culture and wouldn't last. Simultaneously, at the Tony Shafrazi gallery in New York until Oct 20, Warhol's newest paintings — collaborations with his protege **Jean-Michel**

**Basquiat** — show that the old master still has a few tricks up his smock. Warhol and Basquiat have made art out of what few others would dare — a delocement of each other's painting. In each of these enormous neo-pop apics Warhol begins with his choice corporate logos with large, enter Basquiat who blocks out the boss's images or scribbles all over them. And so the beat goes on with continuous erasures and superimpositions on top of Warhol's eternal premise — the passive canvas. They're proud of Warhol's unabated nihilism and Basquiat's breath egalism, paintings that *Popeye* himself might have dubbed "art with muscles". *Paul Taylor*

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on contemporary architecture; a hatchet job by Julie Burchill on Amockalyptic posturing; a profile of Morrissey, « the image-bloated clone-zone of pop » by Nick Kent; a photo-spread on how the latest digital video techniques were used to identify a Japanese poisoner of supermarket goods; and a portrait of the « Sex Object of the Decade », a Transmission Electron Micrograph of stages in the growth of the AIDS virus; all this is only to be expected in a magazine which sets out to confound all expectations. *THE FACE* a magazine which goes out of its way every month to blur the line between politics and parody and pastiche; the street, the stage, the screen; between purity and danger; the mainstream and the 'margins': to flatten out the world.

For flatness is corrosive and infectious. Who, after all, is Paul Virilio anyway? Even the name sounds as if it belongs to a B movie actor, a member of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, a contestant in a body-building competition. I know that « he » writes books but does such a person actually exist? In the land of the gentrified cut-up, as in the place of dreams, anything imaginable can happen, anything at all. The permutations are unlimited: high/low/folk/popular culture: pop music/opera; street fashion/advertising/haute couture; journalism/science fiction/critical theory; advertising/critical theory/haute couture ...

With the sudden loss of gravity, the lines that hold these terms apart waver and collapse. Such combinations are as fragile, as impermanent as the categories of which they are composed: the entire structure is a house made of cards. It's difficult to retain a faith in anything much at all when absolutely *everything* moves with the market. In the words of the old Kurt Weil song, recorded in the 50s by Peggy Lee and re-recorded in the late 70s in a New Wave version by the New York club queen, Christina:

« Is *that* all there is? Is that *all* there is?  
If that's all there is then let's keep dancing,  
Let's break out the booze,  
Let's have a ball.  
If that's all there is ».

To stare into the blank, flat Face is to look into a world where your actual Presence is unnecessary, where nothing adds up to much *anything* any more, where you live to be alive. Because flatness is the friend of death and Death is the Great Leveller. That's the bottom line on Planet Two.

#### LIVING IN THE WAKE OF THE WITHERING SIGNIFIED

The public does not want to know what Napoleon III said to William of Prussia. He wants to know whether he wore beige or red trousers and whether he smoked a cigar. (An Italian newspaper editor quoted by Pope John Paul I in D. Yallop, *In God's Name*, Corgi 1985).

From 19th April to 18 May, the Photographer's Gallery near Leicester Square in London was occupied by Second World forces. The Bill Brandt room was converted — to quote from the Press handout — into a « walk-in magazine »: a three-dimensional version of *THE FACE*.

The exhibition area was divided into five categories corresponding to the regular sections around which the magazine itself is structured: Intro, Features, Style, Expo and Disinformation. In this way it was possible to 'read' *THE FACE* with your feet. This is entirely appropriate. Since the first issue in 1980, *THE FACE* has always been a totally designed environment: an integrated package of graphic, typographic and photographic (dis)information laid out in such a way as to facilitate the restless passage of what Benjamin called the « distracted gaze » of the urban consumer (of looks, object, ideas, values). (It may be useful at this point to recall that *everything without exception* in the Second World is a commodity, a potential commodity, or has commodity-aspects).

*THE FACE* is not read so much as wandered through. It is first and foremost a text to be 'cruised', as Barthes — a leading Second World spokesperson in his *Tel Quel* phase — used to say. The 'reader' is invited to wander

through this environment picking up whatever s/he finds attractive, useful or appealing. Incidentally, use-value and desire — needs and wants — are interchangeable on Planet 2. Scarcity has been banished to another, less fortunate planet called the Third world which exists on the galaxy's (southern) frontier.

The 'reader' is licensed to use whatever has been appropriated in whatever way and in whatever combination proves most useful and most satisfying. (There can be no 'promiscuity' in a world without monogamy/monotheism/monadic subjects; there can be no 'perversion' in a world without norms).

Cruising was originally introduced as a post-structuralist strategy for going beyond the 'puritanical' confinement of critical activity to the pursuit and taming (i.e. naming) of the ideological signified<sup>3</sup>. By cruising, the 'reader' can take pleasure in a text without being obliged at the same time to take marriage vows and a mortgage on a house. And this separation of pleasure/use value from any pledge/commitment to « love, honour and obey » the diktats of the text constitutes the « epistemological break » which divides Planet 1. from Planet 2. and which sets up a field of alternating currents of attraction and repulsion between them.

The difficulties facing anyone who tries to negotiate the gap between these two intrinsically opposed models of what photography and writing on photography are and should be doing can be loosely gauged by contrasting the different positions on photography taken by a First World critic like John Berger and the Second World People of the Post (post structuralism, post modernism). For more than a decade, in his work with Jean Mohr, Berger has been seeking to bind the photograph back to its originary

<sup>3</sup> See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Jonathan Cape, 1976). For a more condensed, programmatic manifesto of post-structuralist aims and objectives, see R. Barthes, « Change the Object itself », in S. Heath (ed.), *Image-Music-Text* (Penguin, 1977).

context. In a series of books — *A Seventh Man*, *Pig Earth*, *Another Way of Telling*, *On Looking*, *Their Faces Brief as Photographs* — Berger has, amongst other things, attempted to place the photograph within a web of narratives which are designed to authenticate its substance (i.e. that which is depicted) in order to make image 'tell' its true story.

On the other hand, and during the same period, the disciples of the Post have been working in the opposite direction. They do not seek to recover or retrieve the Truth captured in the Image but rather to liberate the signifier from the constraints imposed upon it by the rationalist theology of 'representation'.

To recapitulate an argument which will already be familiar to many readers, this is a theology which assumes a Real existing prior to signification which is accessible to analysis and transparent description by 'finished', fully centred human subjects — that is by men and women sufficiently in possession of themselves to 'see through' appearance to the essential truths and ideal forms 'behind those appearance. By retaining a faith in a beyond and a beneath, the members of the First World are thus seen by Second World critics to be perpetuating submission to an outmoded and disabling metaphysic.

Instead of trying to restore the image to its 'authentic' context, the People of the Post have set out to undermine the validity of the distinction between for instance, good and bad, legitimate and illegitimate, style and substance by challenging the authority of any distinction which is not alert to its own partial and provisional status and aware, too, of its own impermanence. This then is the project of the Post: to replace the dominant (Platonic) regime of meaning — that is, representation — by a radical anti-system which promotes the articulation of difference as an end in itself. It is sometimes argued that this involves the multiplication of those transitory points from which a divinely underwritten authority can be eroded and questioned.

The diverse factions which gather in the Post identify the centralised source of this oppressive power variou-

sly as the Word/the Enlightenment Project/European Rationalism/the Party/the Law of the Father/the Phallus as (absent) guarantor of imaginary coherence. In other words, the project is a multi-faceted attack on the authority/authorship diad which is seen to hover like the ghost of the Father behind all First World discourse guaranteeing Truth, hierarchy and Order of Things.

There are, amongst Second World forces, bands of anarchists and mystics who believe that all local political objectives should be bracketed within this larger, longer term project. Born again in the demolition of the diad, they form an « impossible class »<sup>4</sup> refusing all law and demanding a subjectivity without guarantees.

However, the consequences of the assault on representation for ecrivains and image makers are, on the whole, rather more mundane. First the referent (the world outside the text) disappears. Then the signified, and we are left in a world of radically 'empty' signifiers. No meaning. No classes. No History. Just a ceaseless procession of simulacra<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase the « impossible class » was originally coined by Nietzsche in *The Dawn of the Day* (1881; Gordon Press, 1974): « ... the workers of Europe should declare that henceforth as a class they are a human impossibility and not only, as is customary, a harsh and purposeless establishment ... [They must] protest against the machine, against capital and against the choice with which they are now threatened, of becoming, of necessity either slaves of the State or slaves of a revolutionary party ... » The phrase has since been appropriated as a self-description by certain anarchist groups, by situationists, urban Red Indians, radical autonomists etc (see, for instance, the anarchist pamphlet *Riot not to Work* on the 1981 riots).

<sup>5</sup> This is a mutated echo of the title of an article by Jean Baudrillard (see note 6 below): « The Procession of Simulacra » in which he postulates that the 'social body' is being mutated by the 'genetic code' of TV in such a way that psychotic planar states of drift and fascination emerge to supplant social and psychic space (the space of the subject). In this way, reality is supposedly replaced by a 'hyperreality' (an eventless Imaginary). See « The Procession of Simulacra », in *Art & Text*, 11 (Spring 1983).

Released from the old bourgeois obligation to 'speak for' Truth and Liberty or to 'represent' the oppressed, the Third World, the 'downtrodden masses' or the marginaux — represent in the sense in which a member of Parliament is supposed to 'represent' her/his constituency — we are free to serve whatever gods we choose, to celebrate artifice, to construct our 'selves' in fiction and phantasy, to play in the blank, empty spaces of the Now.

One of the most currently influential of Second World strategists, Jean Baudrillard has gone further still declaring that appearances can no longer be said to mask, conceal, distort or falsify reality<sup>6</sup>. He claims that reality is nothing more than the never knowable sum of all appearance. For Baudrillard, 'reality' flickers. It will not stay still. Tossed about like Rimbaud's 'drunken boat' on a heaving sea of surfaces, we cease to exist as rational cogitos capable of standing back and totalising on the basis of our experience.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent introduction, summary and critique of Baudrillard's work read André Frankovits (ed.) *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene* (Stonemoss Services, 1984). To retrace Baudrillard's trajectory (for given his flatness it can hardly be a descent) from a semiotic analysis of consumption to flat earth science fiction read *For a Political Economy of the Sign* (Telos, 1981); *The Mirror of Production* (Telos, 1981); *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1984); « The Ecstasy of Communication », in Hal Foster (ed.), *Post-modern Culture* (Pluto Press, 1985). This is the kind of thing that 'happens' in the Baudrillard scene: « ... There's no longer any transcendence in the gaze. There's no longer any transcendence of judgement. There's a kind of participation, coagulation, proliferation, of messages and signs etc. ... And one is no longer in a state to judge, one no longer has the potential to reflect ... This is fascination. It is a form of ecstasy. Each event is immediately ecstatic and is pushed by the media to a degree of superlative existence. It invades everything ». (Baudrillard quoted in Frankovits (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1984). Confronted with the terminal condition of culture in the West, Baudrillard relinquishes the role of surgeon (radical, dissecting analyst) and tries homeopathy (paralogic) instead ... more decadent than the decadent ...

The implication is that 'we' never did exist like that anyway, that there never was a 'behind' where we could stand and speculate dispassionately on the meaning of it all. Thus the 'I' is nothing more than a fictive entity, an optical illusion, a hologram hanging in the air, created at the flickering point where the lazer beams of memory and desire intersect. The subject simply ceases ... this is the Post Modern Condition and it takes place in the present tense. Rimbaud's 'bateau ivre', in fact, is too ecstatic and too bohemian a metaphor to encapsulate the drift into autism that the Baudrillard scene<sup>7</sup> entails — end of judgement, value, meaning, politics, subject-object oppositions.

A more fitting analogy for what it's like to live through the « death of the subject » might involve a comparison with the new reproductive technology. Baudrillard's position on what life on Planet 2 is like amounts to this: like the heads on a video recorder, we merely translate audio and visual signals back and forth from one terminus (the tape) to another (the screen). The information that we 'handle' changes with each moment — all human life can pass across those heads — but we never own or store or 'know' or 'see' the material that we process. If we live in the Second World, then our lives get played out of us. Our lives get played out for us, played out in us, but never, ever *by* us. In Baudrillard's anti-system, 'by' is the unspeakable preposition because it suggests that there's still time for human agency, for positive action; still some space for intervention and somewhere left to intervene. But this is an inadmissible possibility in a world where politics — the art of the possible — has ceased to have meaning.

For Baudrillard, standing in the terminal, at the end of the weary European line, the music of the spheres has been replaced by the whirring of tape heads. As far as he is concerned, we are — all of us — merely stations

<sup>7</sup> See Frankovits, *op. cit.* (1984).

on the endless, mindless journey of the signifier: a journey made by nobody to nowhere ...

The suggestion that we are living in the wake of the withering signified may well sound like science fiction or intellectual sophistry but there are those who argue that all this is linked to actual changes in production<sup>8</sup> — that the flat earth thesis (what Frederick Jameson calls the « disappearance of the depth model »<sup>9</sup>) finds material support in the Post War shift from an industrial to « post industrial », « media » or « consumer » society. These terms have been coined by different writers to signal the perceived move from an industrial economy based on the production of three-dimensional goods by a proletariat that sells its labour power in the market into a new, qualitatively different era of multi-national capital, media conglomerates and computer science where the old base-superstructure division is annulled or up-ended and production in the West becomes progressively dehumanised and 'etherealised' — focussed round information-and-image-as-product and automation-as-productive-process.

According to some Post people, the tendency towards acceleration, and innovation, to programmed obsolescence and neophilia which Marx saw characterising societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production — where, to use his own words, « all that is solid melts into

<sup>8</sup> See for instance, Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society* (Wildwood House, 1974); A. Gorz (*op. cit.*, 1983, 1985); Daniel Bell, *The Coming Post Industrial Society* (Basic Books, 1973); Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (Bantam, 1981). For post-modernism, see Hal Foster (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1985; Jean-Francois Lyotard, « Answering the Question: what is Postmodernism? », in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 1984); Frederick Jameson, « Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism », in *New Left Review*, 146, 1984. For New Left and neo marxist critiques of postmodernism see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (New Left Books, 1976) and « Modernity and Revolution », in *New Left Review*, 144 (Mar-Apr 1984); Dan Latimer, « Jameson and Postmodernism », in *New Left Review* (Nov-Dec 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Jameson quoted in Latimer, *op. cit.*, 1984.

air »<sup>10</sup> — has been intensified under contemporary « hypercapitalism »<sup>11</sup> to such an extent that a kind of Rapturing has occurred which has 'abstracted' production to a point beyond anything Marx could have imagined possible. New commodities untouched by human hands circulate without any reference to vulgar « primary needs » in a stratosphere of pure exchange.

In such a world, so the argument goes, not only are signifiers material but a *proper* materialist (e.g. Marx himself were he alive today) would proclaim — even, some suggest, celebrate<sup>12</sup> — the triumph of the signifier. A materialist proper would welcome the coming of the flat, unbourgeois world: without distinction and hierarchy, a society, in which — although growing numbers of people are without permanent, paid employment — more and more (of not necessarily the same) people have access to the means of reproduction (TV, radio, stereo, hifi, audio and video cassette recorders, cheap and easy-to-use

<sup>10</sup> This phrase from *The Communist Manifesto* is taken by Marshall Berman as the title of his book. *All That is Solid melts into Air* (Simon & Schuster 1983). The book deals with the dialectics of modernisation — the process of social, demographic, economic and technological change associated with the rise of capitalism and modernism — the answering innovations in the arts. For a discussion of Berman's account of the « experience of modernity » see P. Anderson, *op. cit.* (1984) and M. Berman, « The Signs in the Street: A Response to Perry Anderson », in *NLR*, 144 (Mar-Apr 1984).

<sup>11</sup> This neologism is used by Jean-Francois Lyotard in « The Sublime and the Avant Garde », in *Art Forum* (April 1984).

<sup>12</sup> See Baudrillard, also Latimer, *op. cit.* (1984). Latimer suggests that Dick Hebdige adopts the celebratory stance in « In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop », in *Block 9* (1983). He writes: « We cannot afford, says Jameson, the comfort of 'absolute moralizing judgements' about Post modernism. We are within it. We are part of it whether we like it or not. To repudiate it is to be reactionary. On the other hand, to celebrate it unequivocally, complacently is to be Dick Hebdige ... » Whilst agreeing with Jameson on the facticity of certain aspects of the post modern condition, the present author would distinguish himself from the 'Dick Hebdige' referred to here.

cameras, Xerox machines if not, portable 'pirate' radio and TV transmitters, recording facilities, synthesisers, drum machines etc). A world where although many may be 'trained' and few educated, everyone — to adapt Benjamin again — can be an amateur film, TV, radio, record, fashion and photography critic.

Meanwhile, the relations of knowledge and the functions of education are transformed as models of knowledge based on linguistics and cybernetics move in to subvert the epistemological foundations of the Humanities, and the University faces a crisis as it is no longer capable of transmitting the appropriate cultural capital to emergent technocratic and bureaucratic elites. The proliferation of commercial laboratories, privately-funded research bases, of data banks and information storage system attached to multinational companies and Government agencies, amplifies this trend so that Higher Education can no longer be regarded — if it ever was — as the privileged site of research and the sole repository of 'advanced' knowledge<sup>13</sup>.

At the same time, recent refinements in telematics, satellite and cable television threaten to erode national cultural and ideological boundaries as local regulations governing what can and can't be broadcast become increasingly difficult to implement. As the related strands of social and aesthetic utopianism, the notions of the Radical Political Alternative and of radicalism in Art<sup>14</sup> are unravelled and revealed as untenable and obsolescent. Advertising takes over where the avant-garde left off and the picture of the Post is complete.

<sup>13</sup> See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 1984); Edward W. Said, « Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community », in Foster (ed.), *op. cit.* (1985); Herbert Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination* (Pantheon, 1978) and *Who Knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 400* (Ablex, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> See amongst many others, Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, 1966); Jean-Francois Lyotard, « The Sublime and the Avant garde », in *Art Forum* (April 1984).



According to this scenario absolutely nothing — production, consumption, subjectivity, knowledge, art, the experience of space and time — is what it was even 40 years ago. 'Experts' equipped with narrow professional and instrumental competences replace the totalising intellectual with *his* universal categories and high moral tone. « Weak thought »<sup>15</sup>, paradoxology and modest proposals in the arts replace the internally consistent global projections of Marxism and the romantic gestures or grand (architectural) plans of modernism (« ... we no longer believe in political or historical teleologies, or in the great 'actors' and 'subjects' of history — the nation — state, the proletariat, the party, the West etc. ... »<sup>16</sup>. The consumer (for Alvin Toffler, the « prosumer »<sup>17</sup>) replaces the citizen. The pleasure-seeking bricoleur replaces the Truth-and-Justice seeking rational subject of the Enlightenment. The Now replaces History. Everywhere becomes absolutely different (doctrine of the diverse vs the Dictatorship of the Norm). Everywhere — from Abu Dhabi to Aberdeen — becomes more or less the same (first law of the level earth: lack of gravity = end of distinction *or* the whole world watches *Dallas* ergo the whole world is Dallas).

This is where *THE FACE* fits. This is the world where the ideal reader of *THE FACE* — stylepreneur, doleocrat, Buffalo Boy or Sloane — educated, street-wise but not

<sup>15</sup> The Italian school of 'weak thought' was invoked by Umberto Eco in conversation with Stuart Hall in the opening programme in the current series of *Voices* (Channel 4, 1985). Weak thought refers to new, more tentative and flexible styles of reasoning and argumentation developed to avoid the authoritarian and terroristic tendencies within 'classic' (social) scientific theorising.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Jameson, « Foreword » to Lyotard (1984).

<sup>17</sup> Alvin Toffler, *op. cit.* (1981). Toffler argues that information technology and home computing are rendering 'second wave' (i.e. industrial) patterns of work, leisure, family structure etc obsolete. Commuting electronically from her/his 'electronic cottage', the prosumer is the new (a)social subject, working, playing, and shopping by computer and thus synthesising in his/her person via her/his terminal the previously separate functions of production and consumption.

institutionalised — is learning how to dance in the dark, how to survive, how to stay on top (on the surface) of things. After all, in 1985 with the public sector, education, the welfare state — all the big, 'safe' institutions — up against the wall, there's nothing good or clever or heroic about going under. When all is said and done, why bother to think 'deeply' when you're not *paid* to think deeply?

#### SUR LE FACE

- SUR-FACE: 1. The outside of a body, (any of) the limits that terminate a solid, outward aspect of material or immaterial thing, what is apprehended of something upon a casual view or consideration.
2. (geom) that which has length and breadth but no thickness.  
(*The Concise English Dictionary*)

A young man with a haircut that is strongly marked as 'modern' (i.e. 1940s/50s short) is framed in a doorway surrounded by mist. He carries a battered suitcase. The collar of his coat is turned up against the cold, night air. He walks towards the camera and into a high-ceilinged building. A customs official in a Russian-style military uniform stops him, indicating that he intends searching the young man's bag. A shot-reverse-shot sequence establishes a tense, expectant mood as eyelines meet: the stylish boy confronts the older-man-in-uniform. One gaze, fearful and defiant, meets another diametrically opposed gaze which is authoritarian and sadistic. The bag is aggressively snapped open and the camera discloses its contents to the viewer: some clothes, a copy of *THE FACE*. The official tosses the magazine to one side in a gesture redolent of either disgust or mounting anger or a hardening of resolve. The implication is that his initial suspicions are confirmed by the discovery of this 'decadent' journal.

At this, the crucial moment, the official's attention is diverted as a VIP, an older, senior official dressed in a more imposing uniform marches past between a phalanx of severe, grim-faced guards. The customs man, eyes wide with terror, jerks to attention and salutes, indicating with a slight movement of the head, that the young man is dismissed. The sequence cuts to the young man, still in his coat, standing in a cramped, poorly furnished room. He opens the case, emptying the contents hurriedly onto a table or bed. The camera sweeps in as his trembling hands close around the forbidden article, the object of desire: a pair of Levi jeans.

The confrontation which provides the dramatic structure for the micro-narrative of this, the latest Levi jeans TV and cinema commercial, is the familiar one between, on the one hand, freedom, youth, beauty and the West and on the other, the cold, old, ugly, grey and unfree East. The commercial quotes visual and thematic elements from the spy thriller genre in order to sell a multiple package: idea of rebellious-youth-winning-through-against-all-odds; the more general myth of the young Siegfried slaying the dragon of constraint; *THE FACE*; Levi jeans: the image of the 'self-made man' constructing himself through consumption and thereby embodying the spirit of the West. The articulation of commodity consumption, personal identity and desire which characterises life under hypercapitalism has here been universalised. There is nowhere else to go but to the shops. For in a flat world there is an end, as well, to ideology. The only meaningful political struggle left is between the individual body and the impersonal, life-denying forces of the State (whether nominally capitalist or communist).

However, this is not just another bourgeois myth that can be turned inside out and demystified (and hence deactivated) by the methods proposed by the early Roland Barthes, because the fictional scenario upon which the commercial is based has, in its turn, some foundation in fact. Rumour has it that Levi jeans go for high sums on the Russian black market and, according to issue no 61,

[22]

« in Moscow old copies of *THE FACE* are reported to change hands for upwards of £80 ». On a flat world, a commercial becomes a social (if not a socialist) realist text. It documents the real conditions of desire in the East its claims to 'truth' are not challenged by the fact that the copy of *THE FACE* used in this ad is not, in a sense, 'real' either. It is, according to issue 61, just a mock-up, a cover, a ghost of a thing, a skin concealing absent flesh. Thus on the second world, a cover can stand in for a whole magazine (the face of *THE FACE* for the whole *FACE*). A magazine can stand in for a pair of jeans and the whole package can stand in for the lack of a « whole way of life » which on a flat earth is unrealisable anywhere under any system (capitalist or otherwise).

But even the shadow of a shadow has a value and a price:

The rarest issue of *THE FACE* consists of only one page — a cover designed at the request of Levis for use in a new TV and cinema commercial. There are only four copies in existence.

(*THE FACE*, no 61, May 1985)

Rarity guarantees collectibility and generates desire which promises an eventual return on the original investment. One day, one of the three copies of the copy that we saw all those years ago on our television screens may be auctioned off at Sotheby's and end up in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Tate or the Ghetty Collection ...

... Do you remember John Berger speaking from the heart of the First World in the TV version of *Ways of Seeing* in 1974 as he flicked through a copy of the *Sunday Times* color supplement moving from portraits of starving Bangla Deshi refugees to an advertisement for Badedas bath salts? « Between these images », he said and goes on saying on film and video tapes in complementary studies classes up and down the country, « there is such a gap, such a fissure that we can only say that the culture that produced these images is insane ». *THE FACE* is composed precisely on this fissure. It is the place of the nutty conjunction.

[23]

In the exhibition there is one panel of selected features from *THE FACE* presumably displaying the inventive layout and varied content. A photo-documentary account of a teenaged mod revivalist at a scooter rally entitled « The Resurrection of Chad » is placed alongside photographs of the Nuba of Southern Sudan above a portrait of Malcom McLaren, inventor of the Sex Pistols, and Duck Rock, a pirate of assorted black and Third World (Burundi, Zulu, New York rap) musical sounds against an article on Japanese fashion and an interview with Andy Warhol.

More facetious (a First World critic might say 'unwarranted' or 'offensive') juxtapositions occur elsewhere. A photograph by Derek Ridgers of the Pentecostal Choir of the First Born Church of the Living God shot outside a church (?) in a field in hallucinatory colour is placed next to a glowering black and white portrait of Genesis P. Orridge and friend of the occult/avant garde group, Psychic TV, after they had just signed a £1.000.000 contract. The malevolent duo are posed in front of a collection of metallic dildoes alongside the original caption: « Which are the two biggest pricks in this picture? » Insolent laughter is, of course, incompatible with a high moral tone. Where either everything or nothing is significant, everything threatens to become just a laugh and, as one look at *The Young Ones* will tell you, *that* kind of laughter is never just or kind ...

On a flat world, it is difficult to 'build' an argument or to move directly from one point to the next because surfaces can be very slippery. Glissage or sliding is the preferred mode of transport — sliding from a TV commercial to the end of ideology, from the Bill Brandt Room to a picture of the Post, from *THE FACE* exhibition to *THE FACE* itself ...

All statement made inside *THE FACE*, though necessarily brief are never straightforward. Irony and ambiguity predominate. They frame all reported utterances whether those utterances are reported photographically or in prose. A language is thus constructed without anybody in it (to question, converse or argue with). Where opinions are

expressed they occur in hyperbole so that a question is raised about how seriously they're meant to be taken. Thus the impression you gain as you glance through the magazine is that this is less an 'organ of opinion' than a wardrobe full of clothes (garments, ideas, values, arbitrary preferences: i.e. signifiers).

Thus, *THE FACE* can sometimes be a desert full of silent bodies to be looked at, of voices without body, to be listened to not heard. This is because of the terror of naming.

As the procession of subcultures, taste groups, fashions anti-fashions winds its way across the flat plateaux, new terms are coined to describe them: psychobillies, yuppies, casuals, scullies, Young Fogies, Sloane Rangers, the Doleocracy, the Butcheoise — and on a flat earth all terminology is fatal to the object it describes. Once 'developed' as a photographic image and as a sociological and marketing concept, each group fades out of the Now (i.e. ceases to exist).

The process is invariable: caption/capture/disappearance (i.e. naturalisation). (« ... information is, by definition, a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and shared it ceases to be information but has instead become an environmental given ...<sup>18</sup>). Once named, each group moves from the sublime (Absolute Now) to the ridiculous (the quaint, the obvious, the familiar). It becomes a special kind of joke. Every photograph an epitaph, every article an obituary. On both sides of the camera, and the typewriter, irony and ambiguity act as an armour to protect the wearer (writer/photographer; person/people written about/photographed) against the corrosive effects of the will to nomination. Being named (identified; categorised) is naff; on Planet 2 it is a form of living death. A terrifying sentence is imposed (terrifying for the dandy): exile from the Now.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard, *op. cit.*, 1984 (Art Forum).

And in the words of Baudelaire who preceded Godard in the Second World as Christ preceded Mohammed; as Hegel did Marx in the First:

The beauty of the dandy consists above all in his air of reserve, which in turn arises from his unshakable resolve not to feel any emotions<sup>19</sup>.

To live ironically is to live without decidable emotion; to be ambiguous is to refuse to 'come out' (of the Now). It is to maintain a delicate and impotent reserve<sup>20</sup> ...

... The aversion to direct speech is also apparent in the tendency to visual and verbal parody. At the exhibition, Robert Mapplethorpe contributes a self-portrait in which he masquerades as a psychotic, 1950s juvenile delinquent. The staring eyes, the bulging quiff, the erect collar, the flick knife laid against the face all suggest a mock heroic sado-masochistic fantasy directed at him 'self'. Here the

<sup>19</sup> Charles Baudelaire, « The Painter of Modern Life », in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, J. Mayne (ed.) (Phaidon Press, 1964).

<sup>20</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876; Penguin, 1967). This final note provides a late opportunity for me to point out that whilst this article is ostensibly about THE FACE and postmodernism, it is also in part an indirect critique of certain aspects of my own work. For instance, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Methuen, 1979) — especially the insistence in that book on ambiguity and irony both as subcultural and as critical strategies. This is not a retraction but rather a modification of an earlier position. This note may also explain the subtitle of the present article: « Squaring up to THE FACE ». By squaring the circular logic of those hermeneutic analyses which concentrate exclusively on the world of the (photographic, written, cultural) 'text' I have sought to find a bottom line — a point of departure and return — from which it becomes possible to draw on some post-structuralist, post-modernist work without at the same time being drawn into the maelstrom (male strom?) of nihilism, epicureanism and Absurd Planer 'logic' associated with some Post strands. After the ironic modes of 'cool' and 'hip', and studied self-effacement, a speaking from the heart: squarer than the square ...

camera discloses no personal details as the body becomes the blank site or screen for the convocation of purely referential signs: *West Side Story*, doowop, 'New York'-as-generalised-dangerous-place, the 'Puerto Rican type': the banal and flattened forms of homoerotic kitsch ... Annabella, singer with Bow Wow Wow sitting on the grass in the nude surrounded by the other (clothed) male members of the group glumly contemplates the camera and us in an exact reconstruction of Manet's « Dejeuner sur l'herbe » ... Marilyn and Boy George stand outside the Carburton Street squat where they once lived, the mundane context and milk bottles in ironic counterpoint to their exotic, camp appearance: Hollywood and The Mikado come to Coronation Street ... The high-key lighting, the braces, suits and picture ties, Duke Ellington moustaches and cigarette smoke in a black and white studio shot of Lynx are direct quotations from film noir and from 30s/40s promotional pics for black American jazz artists.

The past is played and replayed as an amusing range of styles, genres, signifying practices to be combined and recombined at will. The then (and the there) are subsumed in the Now. The only history that exists here is the history of the signifier and that is no history at all ...

... I open a copy of *THE FACE*. The magazine carries its own miniature simulacrum: a glossy five page supplement commissioned by Swatch, the Swiss watch company which is aiming its product at the young, professional, style and design conscious markets. Like a Russian doll, the hollow *FACE* opens to reveal a smaller, even emptier version of itself: *INTERNATIONAL FREE MAGAZINE NO 2*. The black and red *FACE* logo box is reproduced in the top left hand corner with the words *SWATCH O'CLOCK* in white sans serif caps across it. The host magazine is mimicked and parodied by its guest. A photograph of a model wearing watch earrings — her face reduced to a cartoon with a few strokes in 'wild style' with a felt tip pen — pouts out above a caption reading *ART O'CLOCK, LOOK CHIC BUT RARE*. A double page spread reveals a 'hunky' man in leather posing with a bow and arrows in a wood. The captions read: *HOMME SWATCH*,

*OUTDOOR, TON CORPS, TA SWATCH.* The *SWATCH* mock-editorial 'explains':

Parles vous Swatch? To look or not to look? That is the question. Sommaire. Summer 85: let's go, l'ete, come on in Swatch, aujourd'hui la mode o'clock est entree dans ma tete ... etc. ».

This is a parody of a parody as the primary objection to advertising on Planet 2 is aesthetic rather than ideological — a matter of the signifier and not the signified — potential advertisers can be educated to commission designs compatible with editorial preferences ...

Advertising — the eidon of the market-place — is pressed into the very pores of *THE FACE*. For advertisers as for *THE FACE*, sophists and lawyers, rhetoric is all there is: the seizure of attention, the refinement of technique, the design, promotion, marketing of product (ideas, styles; for lawyers innocence or guilt depending on who pays). *THE FACE* habitually employs the rhetoric of advertising: the witty one-liner, the keyword, the aphorism, the extractable (i.e. quotable) image are favoured over more sustained, sequential modes of sense-making. Each line or image quoted in another published context acts like a corporate logo inviting us to recognise its source — the corporation — and to acknowledge the corporation's power.

The urge to compress and condense — to create an absolute homology of form and meaning which cannot be assimilated but can only be copied — is most pronounced in Neville Brody's sometimes barely legible typefaces. It is as if we were witnessing in the various trademark scripts and symbols he devises, a graphic depiction of the power shift from Europe to Japan as the phonetic alphabet takes on before our eyes a more iconic character. The occidental equivalent of Japanese or Chinese script is to be found here in *THE FACE* in the semiogram: a self-enclosed semantic unit — a word, graphic image, photograph, the layout of a page — which cannot be referred to anything outside itself. In the semiogram, *THE FACE* capitulates symbolically

to the Empire of Signs, robots, computers, miniaturisation and automobiles — to Japan, which has served as the First Home of flatness for a long line of Second World orientalist including Roland Barthes, Noel Birch, Chris Marker, David Bowie and, of course, the group Japan. The pages of *THE FACE* like a series of masks in an occidental Noh play act out a farce on the decline of the British Empire. The name of this production: « (I think) I'm going Japanese » ...

Renouncing the possibility of challenging the Game, Baudrillard has formulated a series of what he calls « decadent » or « fatal » strategies (where decadence and fatalism are seen as positive virtues). One of these he names « hyperconformism ». *THE FACE* is hyperconformist: more commercial than the commercial, more banal than the banal ...

#### BEHIND THE FACE: THE BOTTOM LINE ON PLANET I

« Vietnam was first and foremost a war in representation » — Jean Luc Godard.

« WHAT ARE CHILE, BIAFRA, THE 'BOAT PEOPLE', BOLOGNA OR POLAND TO US? » — Jean Baudrillard, *Sur le nihilisme*.

« *THE TATLER*: the magazine for the other Boat People » — Advertising slogan for *THE TATLER* accompanying an image of a group of the « beautiful rich » aboard a yacht.

Many people of my generation and my parents' generation retain a sentimental attachment — in itself understandable enough — to a particular construction of the 'popular' — a construction which was specific to the period from the inter-War to the immediate post-War years and which found its most profound, its most progressive and mature articulation in the film of Humphrey Jennings and on the pages of *The Picture Post*. We hardly need reminding that that moment has now passed.

The community addressed by and in part formed out of the national-popular discourses of the late 30s and 40s — discourses which were focussed round notions of fair play, decency, egalitarianism and natural justice now no longer exists as an affective and effective social unit.

Forty years of relative affluence, and regional (if not global) peace; five years of Thatcherite New Realism and go-gettery, of enemies within and without, and of the dream of the property-owning democracy, have gradually worn down and depleted the actual and symbolic materials out of which that earlier construction was made.

At the same time, the popular can no longer be hived off from Higher Education as its absolute Other ('innocent', 'spontaneous' 'untutored') because those same 40 years have seen more and more ordinary people gaining some admittedly restricted (and increasingly endangered) access to secondary, further, higher and continuing education. It is neither useful nor accurate to think about the 'masses' as if they were wrapped in clingfilm against all but the most unsavoury of new ideas.

There have, of course, been positive material advances. To take the most important example, feminist concerns, idioms and issues have become lodged in the very fabric of popular culture even in those areas from television sit-com to working mens' clubs where the implications of feminist critique have been most actively and hysterically resisted. It's also clear that the mass media — whatever other role(s) they may play in social reproduction — have served to democratise, at least to circulate on an unprecedented scale, forms and kinds of knowledge which had previously been the exclusive property of privileged élites.

*THE FACE* should be seen as functioning within this transfigured social and ideological field. Whilst I would not suggest that *THE FACE* is the *Picture Post* of the 80s, I would go along with the claim asserted in the accompanying notes that the *FACE* exhibition « is about looking at popular social history in the making ». *THE FACE* has

exerted an enormous influence on the look and flavour of many magazines available in newsagents up and down the country and has spawned countless imitations: *i-D*, *Blitz*, *Tomorrow*, *Etcetera* etc. The repertoire and rhetoric of photographic mannerisms, devices, techniques and styles in the fashion and music press have been fruitfully expanded and the studio has been rediscovered, in a sense, reinvented as a fabulous space — a space where every day the incredible becomes the possible. But *THE FACE*'s impact has gone far beyond the relatively narrow sphere of pop and fashion journalism dictating an approach to the visible world that has become synonymous with what it means for a magazine today to be — at least to look — contemporary. The gentrified cut-up has found its way into the inaptly named *Observer* « living » supplement and the *Sunday Times* has followed *THE FACE* into the continental 30.1 cm × 25.3 cm format.

Amongst its other services, *THE FACE* provides a set of physical cultural resources that young people can use in order to make some sense and get some pleasure out of growing up in an increasingly daunting and complex environment. It has been instrumental in shaping an emergent structure of feeling, an 80s sensibility as distinctive in its own way as that of the late 60s (though how resilient that structure will prove remains to be seen). But in any case, it does no good to consider the readers of *THE FACE* as victims, culprits, dupes or dopes, as 'kids' or *tabulae rasae* or potential converts. Their world is real already even when the sensibility which *THE FACE* supports and fosters seems to bear a much closer and more vital relationship to the anomic *Picture of the Post* that I outlined earlier than it does to the « social democratic eye » of Hulton's classic photojournal weekly.

*THE FACE* reflects, defines and focusses the concerns of a significant minority of style and image conscious people who are not, on the whole, much interested in party politics, authorised versions of the past and outmoded notions of community. The popular and the job of

pictur-ing the popular has changed irrevocably out of all recognition ever since the 50s.

It should also be borne in mind that Nick Logan is not Jean Baudrillard and that *THE FACE* is infinitely better, more popular, significant, influential and socially plugged in than *The Tatler* is or ever could be. It's also clear that the photography, design, and a lot of the writing are, by any standards, good and on occasion attain levels of excellence which are still rare in British pop journalism. And finally, it is as well to remember that a text is, of course, *not* the world, that no one *has* to live there, that it is not a compulsory purchase, that no one has to pay, that no one has to even pay a visit.

I'm well aware that only a gossip columnist, a fool or an academic could find the time to undertake a close analysis of such self-confessed ephemera or would set aside sufficient energy to go chasing round those circles where, as George Eliot puts it, « the lack of grave emotion passes for wit ». Yet, despite such reservations, I cannot escape the conviction that something else, something deeper is at stake not just here in this talk of signifiers, surfaces, postmodernism but in the broader streams of social life and practice, and in all personal and political struggle irrespective of where it takes place and irrespective, too, of how these terms and the relations between them get defined.

Something that really matters is at stake in this debate. At the risk of alienating the reader with an analogy already stretched to breaking point, one last battle in the War of the worlds may help to clarify the issue ...

... I was about to leave *THE FACE* exhibition feeling vaguely uneasy about the ambivalence of my response when — not for the first time — the beautiful, clear, soulful voice of Chrissie Hynde came drifting across from the video installation in the corner of the room. The promo tapes were on some kind of a loop so that I had heard her sing the same song at least three times as I meandered round the photographs, the layout and typography

panels, the cases containing Crolla and Bodymap clothes. As I moved towards the door, that voice rose once more singing over and over the same agonised refrain: « It's a bitter line between love and hate ... ».

And words like 'love' and 'hate' and 'faith' and 'history', 'pain' and 'joy', 'passion' and 'compassion' — the depth words drawn up like ghosts from a different dimension will always come back in the 11th hour to haunt the Second World and those who try to live there in the Now. This is not just pious sentiment. It is, quite simply, in the very nature of the human project that those words and what they stand for will never go away they seem lost and forgotten, they can be found again even in — especially in — the most inhospitable, the flattest of environments. John Cowper Powys once wrote:

We can all love, we can all hate, we can all possess, we can all pity ourselves, we can all condemn ourselves, we can all admire ourselves, we can all be selfish, we can all be unselfish. But below all these things there is something else. There is a deep, strange, unaccountable response within us to the mystery of the life and the mystery of death: and this response subsists below grief and pain and misery and disappointment, below all care and all futility.

That something else will still be there when all the noise and the chatter have died away. And it is perhaps significant that the quotation came to me courtesy of one on my students who included it in a deeply moving essay on how the experience of personal loss had transformed his response to photos of his family. He in his turn had found it in an advertisement for a group called The Art of Noise designed by Paul Morley, arch bricoleur and publicist, the mastermind at ZTT behind the Frankie Goes to Hollywood phenomenon last year.

Whatever Baudrillard or *The Tatler* or Saatchi, and Swatch have to say about it, I shall go on reminding myself that this earth is round not flat, that there will never be an end to judgement, that the ghosts will go on gathering at the bitter line which separates truth from lies,

justice from injustice, Chile, Biafra and all the other avoidable disasters from all of us, whose order is built upon their chaos. And that, I suppose, is the bottom line on Planet 1.

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The student's essay referred to in the text is *Paper Ghosts - a phenomenology of photography* by Steve Evans.

## POSTMODERNISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

by  
Angela McRobbie

### THE 'SOWETO DASH'

Rather than starting with a definition of postmodernism as referring either to a condition of contemporary life, or a textual, aesthetic practice, I want to begin by suggesting that the recent debates on postmodernism possess both a positive attraction and a usefulness to the analyst of popular culture. This is because they offer a wider, and more dynamic, understanding of contemporary representation than other accounts to date. Unlike the various strands of structuralist criticism, postmodernism considers images as they relate to and across each other. Postmodernism deflects attention away from the singular scrutinizing gaze of the semiologist, and asks that this be replaced by a multiplicity of fragmented, and frequently interrupted, « looks ».

The exemplary text or the single, richly coded, image, gives way to the textual *thickness* and the visual *density* of everyday life, as though the slow, even languid « look » of the semiologist is, by the 1980's, out of tempo with the times. The field of postmodernism certainly expresses a frustration, not merely with this seemingly languid pace, but with its increasing inability to make tangible connections between the general conditions of life today and the practice of cultural analysis.

Structuralism has also replaced old orthodoxies with new ones. This is apparent in its re-reading of texts highly



placed within an already existing literary or aesthetic hierarchy. Elsewhere it constructs a new hierarchy, with Hollywood classics at the top, followed by selected advertising images, and girl's and women's magazines rounding it off. Other forms of representation, particularly music and dance, are missing altogether. Andreas Huyssen (1984) in his recent introduction of postmodernism draws attention to this « high » structuralist preference for the works of high modernism, especially the writing of James Joyce or Mallarmé. « There is no doubt that center stage in critical theory is held by the classical modernists: Flaubert ... in Barthes ... Mallarmé and Artaud in Derrida, Magritte ... in Foucault; ... Joyce and Artaud in Kristeva ... and so on *ad infinitum* » (p. 39). He argues that this reproduces unhelpfully the old distinction between the high arts and the « low », less serious, popular arts. He goes on to comment, « Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape, ... and the most significant trends within postmodernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture » (p.16). High theory was simply not equipped to deal with multi-layered pop. Nor did it ever show much enthusiasm about this set of forms, perhaps because pop has never signified within one discrete discourse, but instead combines images with performance, music with film, or video, and pin ups with the magazine form itself. As a *Guardian* journalist recently (3-1-86) put it, « Rock and pop performers today have to speak in multi-media tongues ».

With the exception of Barthes, « heavy weight » criticism has been focussed towards memorable texts, while light-weight cultural analysis is given over to the more forgettable images of everyday life. And the « purity » of the about-to-be-decoded-image is reflected in the pivotal position occupied by semiology and structuralist criticism in media courses up and down the country. Despite gestures towards intertextuality and interdisciplinarity, this centrality given to *the structuralisms* in effect squeezes all the other complex relations which locate the text, or the image, and allow it to produce meaning, out of the picture.

[2]

These relations include those which mark out its physical place within the world of commodities, its sequencing, and its audience as well as consumers. Such issues are frequently relegated, with some disregard, to the realm of sociology or « empiricism » as though these were the same thing. And while critics argue that this outside reality is really nothing more than a series of other texts, they are in the meantime happy to treat questions about consumers, readers, audience, and viewers, as intrinsically uninteresting, as though this entails hanging about street corners with a questionnaire and clipboard.

Postmodernism allows what were respectable sociological issues to reappear on the intellectual agenda. It implicitly challenges the narrowness of structuralist vision, by taking the deep interrogation of every breathing aspect of lived experience by media imagery as a starting point. So extensive and inescapable is this process that it becomes conceptually impossible to privilege one simple moment. So far only Dick Hebdige's (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* has broken out of this inadvertent reproduction of the old divide between high culture and the pop arts, as well as between representation and reality. In *Subculture*, Hebdige recognises that familiar objects warrant analysis as signs and repositories of organised meaning, as much as linguistic or « pure » visual signs. Under the conceptual umbrella of subculture, he brings together art, literature, music, style, dress, and even attitude, and places these on the same analytical plane. Hebdige also brings a speed and urgency to the business of interpreting the familiar marks of contemporary life.

It's surprising, then, that in a more recent article, where he engages directly with the question of post modernism, Hebdige (1985) disavows the playful elements in *Subculture* ... and, more manifestly, in the new fashion and style magazines. In contrast with what he sees now as an *excess* of style, a celebration of artifice and a strong cultural preference of pastiche, Hebdige seeks out the reassuringly real. He suggests that the slick jokey tone of postmodernism, especially that found on the pages of *The*

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*Face* represents a disengagement with the real, and an evasion of social responsibility. He therefore insists on a return to the world of hunger, exploitation, and oppression and with it a resurrection of unfragmented, recognisable subjectivity. He only fleetingly engages with what Jameson (1983) has described as an important characteristic of the postmodern condition, that is the death of subjectivity and the emergence, in its place, of widespread social schizophrenia. Hebdige seems to be saying that if this rupturing of identity is what postmodernism is about, then he would rather turn his back on it. What I will be arguing here is that the terrain of all these surfaces Hebdige mentions — pop, music, style, and fashion — is neither as homogeneous nor as limited as he (or *The Face*) would have it. This landscape of the present, with its embracing of pastiche, its small defiant pleasure in being dressed up or « casual », its exploration of fragmented subjectivity — all of this articulates more precisely with the wider conditions of present « reality » — with unemployment, with education, with the « aestheticisation of culture », and with the coming into being of those whose voices were historically drowned out by the (modernist) metanarratives of mastery, which were in turn both patriarchal and imperialist.

Postmodernism has entered into a more diverse number of vocabularies more quickly than most other intellectual categories. It has spread outwards from the realms of art history into political theory and onto the pages of youth culture magazines, record sleeves, and the fashion pages of *Vogue*. This seems to me to indicate something more than the mere vagaries of taste. More also, than the old Marcusean notion of recuperation, where a radical concept which once had purchase, rapidly becomes a commodity, and in the process is washed, laundered, and left out to dry. Later on in this paper I will locate this coming together of the worlds of intellectual analysis and pop journalism (as well as pop production) around postmodernism, by considering the role of education, and in particular « cultural studies ».

Here it is sufficient to point to the extensiveness and flexibility of the term.

Postmodernism certainly appeared in the UK like a breath of fresh air. It captured in a word, a multitude of experiences, particularly what Baudrillard (1983) has called the « instantaneity of communication ». This refers to the incursion of imagery and communication into those spaces that once were private — where the psyche previously had the chance to at least explore the « other », to explore, for example, alienation. Baudrillard claims this space now to be penetrated by the predatory and globally colonialist media. But as the frontiers of the self are effaced and transformed, so too are the boundaries which mark out separate discourses and separate politics. Baudrillard interprets the new associative possibilities thrown up by « instantaneity » gloomily. « Everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication » (1983, p. 130), which in turn generates only an « ecstasy of communication » ... But need Baudrillard be quite so pessimistic? Why must this speeding-up process, this intensification or exchange be greeted with such foreboding?

The remainder of this paper will be given over to arguing the case for postmodernism. It will suggest that the frenzied expansion of the mass media has political consequences which are not so wholly negative. This becomes most apparent when we look at representations of the Third World. No longer can this be confined to the realist documentary, or the exotic televisual voyage. The Third World refuses now, to « us », in the West, to be reassuringly out of sight. It is as adept at using the global media as the old colonialist powers. Equally the « we » of the British nation no longer possesses any reliable reality. That spurious unity has been decisively shattered. New alliances and solidarities emerge from within and alongside media imagery. A disenchanted black, inner city population in Britain, can look in an « ecstasy of communication » as black South Africans use every available resource at hand to put apartheid into crisis. Jokily, and within

a kind of postmodern language Dick Hebdige wrote, in *Subculture*, that TV images of Soweto in 1976 taught British youth « the Soweto dash ». Ten years later this connection has amplified. The image is the trigger and the mechanism for this new identification.

#### IMPLOSION

Of course it's not quite so simple. The South African government has recently banned journalists from the black townships. And in less politically sensitive arenas, the media continues, relentlessly, to hijack events and offer in their place a series of theatrical spectacles whose points of relevance are only tangentially on what is going on, and whose formal cues come from other, frequently televisual, forms of representation. 1985 was rich in examples. Reagan's illness was relayed to the public, overwhelmingly in the language of soap opera. A *Guardian* correspondent pointed out that nobody would have been convinced if his doctors had not appeared at the press conferences dressed in white coats. A few weeks earlier Shi'ite militiamen took over a TWA airline in Athens. In what was largely a bid for space on Western prime-time television, the captors could afford to appear smiling and jubilant as they offered their victims a Lebanese banquet, against a backdrop of random gunfire at the ceiling, before packing them off to the United States.

This easing out of the real in favour of its most appropriate representation makes it more difficult to talk about the media and society today. It creates even greater difficulties in assessing the relationship between images, or between popular cultural forms, and their consumers. The consciousness industries have changed remarkably over the last ten years, but so have the outlook and the expectations of their audiences.

Against a backdrop of severe economic decline, the mass media continue to capture new outlets, creating fresh markets to absorb its hi-tech commodities. Symbol-

ically the image has assumed a contemporary dominance. It is no longer possible to talk about the image and reality, media and society. Each has become so deeply intertwined that it is difficult to draw the line between the two. Instead of referring to the real world, much media output devotes itself to referring to other images, other narratives. Self-referentiality is all-embracing, although it is rarely taken account of. The Italian critic and writer, Umberto Eco, recently (1984) contrasted what TV was (paleo-TV) with what it now is (neo-TV). « Its prime characteristic is that it talks less and less about the external world. Whereas paleo-television talked about the external world, or pretended to, neo-television talks about itself and about the contacts it established with its own public » (p. 19).

Self-referentiality occurs within and across different media forms. One TV programme might be devoted to the production of another (Paul Gambaccino « on » the Tube), just as television films based on the making of other large-scale cinema productions are becoming increasingly common. There is a similar dependency for material and content, as well as a relatively recent redefinition of what is interesting, and what readers and viewers want, in the print media's use of *televisual stories*. *The Face* magazine ran a piece on The Tube, and more recently on Michelle, the pregnant schoolgirl, in East Enders ... The *NME* carried a major feature on Brookside, and *City Limits* sent two journalists to the Coronation Street set, for a week. It's not so much that fiction is being mistaken for fact; more that one set of textual practices (in this case British soap) has become the reference point for another (reading the newspaper or glancing at a headline).

Media interdependency is both an economic and a cultural imperative. Childrens' TV on a Saturday morning evolves entirely around the pop music industry, offering an exclusive showcase for new « promo » videos. The contents of these programmes are orchestrated around all the familiar pop business, phone-in to the stars, inter-

views, the new single, the talent competition for young hopefuls. This shows the feeding-off effect between mass media today. Where once the middle class world of Blue Peter documented childrens' initiatives for charity, now Capital, in the form of culture and visual communications, penetrates further into the youth market. In the *classless* world of these programmes this means pushing back the frontiers of young people as consumers by transforming children and even toddlers into fans and thus part of the record-buying public.

The implications of this endless cross-referencing are extensive. They create an ever-increasing, but less diverse verbal and visual landscape. It is these recurring fictions, and the characters who inhabit them which feed into the field of popular knowledge, and which in turn constitute a large part of popular culture. It would be difficult not to know about Victoria Principal, it would be impossible not to know about Dallas.

Texts have always alluded to or connected with others. Simone de Beauvoir's (1974) *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* gives up many pages to all the other books she read during her childhood, adolescence and early adult years. Indeed this critical bibliography forms a major strand of the work. The difference now is that the process is less restricted to literature, more widespread, and most apparent in the commercial mass media where there are more spaces to be filled. And such an opening up doesn't necessarily mean an extension of rights of access, only rights of consumption. More often it means a form of cosy, mutual congratulatory, cross-referencing and repetition. (Wogan in Denver, Clive James in Dallas). Baudrillard (1983) greets these recent changes with some cynicism. He claims that more media offers less meaning in the guise of more information. « All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information ». Eco (1984) follows this when he describes the scrambling effect of multi-channel choice on TV. « Switching channels reflects the brevity and speed of other visual forms. Like flicking through a magazine, or driving past a bill-

board. This means that 'our' TV evenings no longer tell us stories, it is all a trailer! ».

Images push their way into the fabric of our social lives. They enter into how we look, what we earn, and they are still with us when we worry about bills, housing and bringing up children. They compete for attention through shock tactics, reassurance, sex, mystery and by inviting viewers to participate in series of visual puzzles. Billboard advertisements showing an image without a code, impose themselves, infuriatingly, on the most recalcitrant passerby.

However what is often forgotten is that the media also enter the classroom. This remains an undocumented site in the history of the image. But in seminar rooms across the country, slides are projected and students prise open new readings. The educational incorporation of contemporary mass media represents something other than the simple consumption of images, but it is also part of the widening out process I mentioned earlier. People's usage of and experience of the media increases not just because there is more of it, but because it crops up in different places. Almost all the new disciplines in the arts and social sciences make use of pop imagery, whether in adult education, on degree courses, or on project work with unemployed young people. This gives rise to a rather more optimistic reading of the mass media than that offered by Baudrillard. The invasive impact of these new technologies, because they now occupy a place within these institutions provide a basis for the production of new meanings, new cultural expressions. There is a myth that radical or challenging media forms come « from the street ». In fact it is in the media workshops, in the creative writing classes and the college studios that such work emerges. Art students specialising in graphics and a dissertation on « left imagery » go on to work freelance for *The Face*; others opt for mainstream advertising agencies while working unpaid for the Labour Party, or the women's movement or for new black cultural groups. (This was certainly my experience teaching art students at St.

Martin's School of Art in London). And of course the history of British pop music is one which grew out of the expansion of the art schools in the 60's and the flooding into them of bright young working class boys.

It is not absolutely necessary for my argument that these new forms of pop culture are and have been of a homogenously high standard. It is much more important that the work itself is considered both in terms of where it comes from, who made it, and what groups have, in turn, taken it up.

Twenty years ago Susan Sontag (1966) offered an interesting perspective on those forms of popular culture which are good because they are so awful. This was reflective of a *camp* sensibility, the essence of which is « its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration ». Until then this was a widely felt, but as yet untheorised popular aesthetic. In her essay Sontag stressed the importance of the knowing audience, one which could allow itself absorption because it was equally capable of detachment. This is useful to us here because it offers a fruitful way forward in understanding the more combative side particularly to young people's engagement with culture. We can use both the notion of camp and that of the knowing audience to extend Jameson's (1983) recent attempt to make sense of the ever-accumulating and stultifyingly banal images which form such a staple part of the media output. He describes this as a new kind of depthlessness, a « waning in effect ». Jameson applies the term pastiche to describe these circulating forms. This certainly has an immediate resonance. In both pop music and in the popular soap operas, pastiche is a dominant motif. According to Jameson pastiche « without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated, is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody ... » (p. 114).

In Dallas and Dynasty this is the most appropriate way of describing the heightening of reality which becomes in turn a deadening unreality. These soaps signal a realism in which they have absolutely no investment.

The practiced sincerity of the pop performer, his or her anxiety to convey real, recognisable, and searing emotions, carries the same quality. In each case the reference back to real life or real emotions is purely formal or stylistic. A mannerism pointing nowhere. But Jameson's accurate account of this « speech in a dead language », fails to engage with its reception. Perhaps this is because the bulk of his analysis of the « postmodern condition » is focussed towards art rather than popular culture, and in this arena little academic concern has been shown for audiences or consumers. However in that field where Jameson's thesis is most markedly appropriate, in pop music and its subsidiaries, there is no question of denying the consumers or fans their place. But how this integration is understood conceptually remains more problematic. Sontag's linking pastiche with its favoured audience, gay men, is instructive because she shows how a relationship evolved around a social minority making a bid for a cultural form in which they felt they could stake some of their fragmented and sexually deviant identity. The insistence, on the way, on both style and pleasure made the product attractive to those outside as well as inside. The result was the absorption of camp style into the mainstream of popular taste. Sontag's approach is useful because she is talking not so much about pure or original « artistic » invention. Rather she is describing how forms can be taken over, and re-assembled so as to suit the requirements of the group in question. This often means outstripping their ostensible meaning and ostensible function. In this capacity male gay culture has in the last few years had a remarkable impact. It has been explicit and outspoken, while holding onto both an aesthetic and a political discourse. In pop music, groups like Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Bronski Beat as well as performers like Marc Almond and Boy George have utilised many of the pastiche elements which Sontag describes, achieving mainstream success without blunting the edges of a celebratory homosexuality.

The advantages of Sontag's comments are that they emphasise *agency*. She brings the audience, the consumers, the « camp followers » into the picture without sidetracking into « empiricism ». The same would have to be done with pop music and contemporary youth culture. It is impossible to understand Boy George and Culture Club's rise to prominence without considering the punk, art-school, London, « educated » subculture from which they emerged.

And, if media forms are so inescapable, « if unreality is now within everyone's grasp » (Eco, 1984), then there is no reason to assume that the consumption of pastiche, parody or high camp is, by definition, without subversive or critical potential. Glamour, glitter, and gloss, should not so easily be relegated to the insistently apolitical. For the left, necessarily committed to endorsing the real and the material conditions of peoples' lives, there remains still an (understandable) stiffness about Neil Kinnock's appearance in a Tracy Ullman video. This need not be the case.

If, as Jameson suggests, life has been dramatised to the level of soap, if love is always like a *Jackie* story, then yes, the sharp distinction between real life and fictional forms must give way to a deep intermingling, unmeasurable and so far captured most precisely in fictive or cinematic forms. Scorsese's *King of Comedy* traced this « overdetermination by the image », as did Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*, as well as his more recent *Zelig* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. But Gore Vidal's (1983) novel *Duluth* outstrips all of these. It is a model of postmodern writing. Gore Vidal has his tongue firmly in his cheek. *Duluth* is a witty multi-layered fiction which moves from the town of the title, to the soap series based on the place, outwards to the novel of the soap, backwards into the historical romances favoured by the town's top woman cop, and forwards into a science fiction setting where Roland Barthes makes a guest appearance. Obligingly Vidal ends the novel by handing it over to a word processor.

All of this comes close to what Baudrillard (1981) infuriatingly calls implosion. It's a vague but appropriate term. It implies an outburst of energy which is nonetheless controlled and inclining inwards. Baudrillard, Eco and Jameson all see this as a totalising and all-immersing process. But none of them consider the new associations and resistances which have come into prominence by way of these processes in the last fifteen years. Many of these share more in common with the shattered energy of implosion, with Jameson's fragmented schizophrenic consciousness, than with the great narratives of the old left.

It was especially the art, writing, film making and criticism of women and minority artists, with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture (Huyssen, 1984, p. 27).

In the British context one would want to append to this formidable production not just the proliferation of pop culture and the challenge it has mounted to the mainstream arts, but also the involvement of youth in the creation of an egalitarian avant-garde. Of course this is no longer an avant-garde proper, since the privileging of the forms have been abandoned in favour of a cross referencing between forms, and notably between pop music and « art », between aesthetics and commerce, between commitment and the need to make a living. This leads directly to a further failing in Jameson's account. There is no recognition that those elements contained within his diagnosis of postmodernism — including pastiche, the ransacking and recycling of culture, the direct invocation to other texts and other images — can create a vibrant critique rather than an inward-looking, second-hand aesthetics. What else has black urban culture in the last few years been, but an assertive re-assembling of bits and pieces, « whatever comes to hand », noises, debris, technology, tape, image, rapping, scratching, and other hand

me down? Black urban music has always thrived on fake, forged identities, creating a façade of grand-sounding titles which reflect both the « otherness » of black culture, the extent to which it is outside that which is legitimate, and the way in which white society has condemned it to be nameless. Who, after all, is Grandmaster Flash or Melle Mel? Or who was Sly and the Family Stone? Who mixed the speech by Malcolm X onto a haunting disco funk backing track? Reggae also parodies this enforced namelessness. Many of its best known musicians suggest a deep irony in their stagenames. Clint Eastwood, Charlie Chaplin, and so on.

In America graffiti remains the best example of fleeting, obsolescent urban aesthetics. It gives its creators fame once they get into the galleries but otherwise only faint notoriety.

It is a cultural identity which half mocks, half celebrates, the excesses of mainstream white culture. The graffiti painter is the Spiderman of the ghettos, projecting pure fantasy. A terminal vantage point on white consumer culture. Hip hop is a subculture which feeds for its material upon the alien culture which needs make no concession to blacks. The spray paints and comic book images of graffiti painting, to the disco beats and found sounds of rapping, are diverted from their mainstream domestic use and put out on the streets as celebration. For the white middle class kid, the comic heroes occupy a space of boredom. For the black ghetto kid they are transformed by graffiti art into fantastic visions invested with secret meanings (Atlanta and Alexander, 1981).

Alongside these largely male forms must be placed the writing of black women, the great explosion of the written word which writes a history otherwise condemned to remain only within popular memory. Toni Cade Bambara's (1983) prose is closest in rhythm to the jazz sounds of the city. It is breath-taking, agile writing, insisting on the pleasure, the wit and the idiosyncracies of a community more often characterised as monolithic and deprived. All of this is taking place within the cracks of a crumbling culture where progress is in question and society seems to be standing still.

There is no going back. For populations transfixed on images which are themselves a reality, there is no return to a mode of representation which politicizes in a kind of straightforward « worthwhile » way. Dallas is destined to sit alongside images of black revolt. And it is no longer possible, living within postmodernism, to talk about un-ambiguously negative or positive images. But this need not be seen as the end of the social, or the end of meaning, or for that matter the beginning of the new nihilism. Social agency is employed in the activation of *all* meanings. Audiences or viewers, lookers or users are not simple-minded multitudes. As the media extends its sphere of influence, so also does it come under the critical surveillance and usage of its subjects.

The reason why postmodernism appeals to a wider number of young people, and to what might be called the new generation of intellectuals (often black, female, or working class) is that they themselves are experiencing the enforced fragmentation of impermanent work, and low career opportunities. Far from being overwhelmed by media saturation, there is evidence to suggest that these social groups and minorities are putting it to work for them. This alone should prompt the respect and the attention of an older generation who seem at present too eager to embrace a sense of political hopelessness.

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GRAMMSCHI GOES TO DISNEYLAND  
POSTMODERNISM AND THE POPULAR

by  
Bill Schwarz

« Not Leavis, not Arnold: Walt Disney »  
John Caughie, *High Theory/Low Culture*

«... Disneyland more "real" than Los Angeles ...»  
Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture*

Not so long ago there used to be a vogue amongst cultural theorists for what was called mapping the field. The metaphor consciously evoked a pioneering spirit. New intellectual territories were charted, frontiers extended and the well-established boundaries of academic knowledge re-drawn. Determined generations of conquistadors hacked their way through the theoretical thickets and climbed the highest points where the air was bracing and the oxygen sparse. All kinds of rarefied ideas ensued, releasing a heady mixture of the banal and the outrageous, the exciting and the incomprehensible. Now such self-images have, for the most part, passed into desuetude. Cultural studies — now somewhat reified, identified as an academic discipline — has settled into institutional establishments where the frontiers seem only too fixed. But even then, imagining intellectual discovery in terms of the conquest of distant terrains, striding across new worlds in seven-league boots, all looks a bit suspect now giving free rein to imperious fantasies of omnipotence and — desperate to map, chart, fix — erring too much towards a rationalism which of late has not won many fans.

[1]



Yet every so often it's necessary to take new bearings. Now is perhaps such a time, with the fallout from the postmodernist moment upon us. The modernist revival has been gaining momentum for a long while, imperceptibly and without any apparent discontinuity mutating into postmodernism.

One of the great attractions of writing about postmodernism is that no-one can be sure what it is. « Postmodernism: does it exist at all, and if so what does it mean? » is the first sentence of a reader devoted to the subject<sup>1</sup>. The term has a multiplicity of meanings, describing the reconstruction of downtown areas of the modern city and the creation of new urban spaces; minimalist aesthetic strategies, pop art and the destruction of high art; fashion and popular fantasies; the schlock and kitsch of Las Vegas and Disneyland; the incorporation of older cultural forms as pastiche, signifying their capacity for rapid consumption; and so on. It can also signify the bleakness of a sensibility unable to imagine a future. Postmodernism is used too in a more restricted sense to describe those theories which attempt not only to understand such cultural changes as these but to express some kind of intellectual allegiance or affinity with them, particularly in opposition to conventional philosophical positions. But this too can be confusing for adherents to postmodernism generally stick to a determinedly allusive style, impossibly hoping to dodge the mind-bending vortex of signifiers to which they see themselves condemned from the moment they speak; familiar clues seized upon by antiquarian cartographers — programmes, critiques, manifestos — appear now as signposts which must inevitably send us scurrying in the wrong direction. The closest one can get to a definition is Lyotard's uncharacteristically curt assertion that the post-

<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, « Postmodernism: a preface », in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto Press, 1985, p. ix.

modern displays an « incredulity toward metanarrative », that is, toward the grand and generally rationalist Western philosophies which historically have been taken to legitimate specific bodies of knowledge (as theory or science) or particular forms of collective social action (as politics)<sup>2</sup>.

This is perhaps not too shocking a sentiment coming as it does from an old hand of the Socialism or Barbarism groupuscule, which alongside some really perceptive analysis was never slow to exult in the coming destruction of Western culture. Yet it operates at an astonishingly heady level of abstraction, where once more the air is dangerously thin. It is possible to accept, for it has been made abundantly clear from many different quarters, that inherited epistemologies and traditional ideologies of representation, including those previously believed to be unambiguously progressive, are in crisis of one sort or another, and that these crises touch every aspect of the modern world — aesthetics, language, sexual identity, politics and so on. Postmodernism is clearly one expression of this wider intellectual transformation.

But it's not with this level of abstraction that I'm concerned here, for I'm more interested in recent developments in popular culture, and how these have been conceptualized. One of the most striking features of postmodernism, so far as it's possible to speak of a single entity in this way, is that it claims to offer unique insights into contemporary popular culture — the schlock and the kitsch — unencumbered by the inherited, over-rationalistic

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. xxiv. A different way of seeing this has been put by Fredric Jameson who identifies in modernism four interpretative approaches which he calls depth models: « the dialectical model of essential and apparent, the Freudian model of latent and manifest, the existential model of authentic and inauthentic, the semiotic model of signifier and signified ». Postmodernism liquidates all these distinctions. See Dan Latimer, « Jameson and Postmodernism », *New Left Review*, 148, 1984, p. 119.

philosophical baggage which constraints alternative (academicized) approaches. These academic discourses, so the argument goes, constituted as they are by various meta-narratives, must remain external to the lived, subjective relations of popular culture. More provisional, relativist modes of inquiry are needed. The lived forms of popular culture themselves work against the grain of the contending logic of metanarrative which must, in turn, misread popular cultural forms. Indeed in some interpretations the ephemeral contemporaneity of popular narratives provides the only alternative to the totalitarian tyranny of metanarrative<sup>3</sup>. Knowledge is the next fashion, the next airport novel or promo, and no more can be said.

Just as it is clear that, in philosophy, traditional epistemologies or theories of representation are in trouble, so it is equally clear that *something* is up in the real world of popular culture. If this weren't so we could all carry on as before. The transformations of the past ten or twenty years have been spectacular, and of these the most readily apparent has been the whirlwind acceleration in the commodification of popular cultural forms. These historical changes, we should add, no doubt explain the impact of current postmodernist theorizations, for it was within popular culture itself, not within the academy, that the postmodernist sensibility first appeared, as joke, fashion, parody and pastiche.

So far as these theoretical issues have touched the parochial world of cultural studies they have brought back with them a tremor of excitement, reviving an earlier spirit of exploration. Indeed a fervour of manic forcefulness is evident. One of the sharpest proponents, who consistently upholds a rare degree of intellectual integrity

<sup>3</sup> Thus Lyotard's recuperation of the Nietzschean admiration for the 'strength' to forget the past. « A collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past. It finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of narratives, but also in the act of reciting them », *ibid.*, p. 22.

in a field of inquiry more often remarkable for the modish and the inconsequential, now writes of the distance between the conventional study of culture underway in the educational system and the actual expressions of a new popular cultural avant garde — *The Face* and so on — as akin to workings of different planets. Planet One-ers, the sort of people who read journals like this, relax on an evening in their Conranized sitting rooms decorated with stylish Edward Weston or Berenice Abbott monochrome prints, flipping through a few pages of Brecht perhaps or eagerly scrutinize *Ten. 8* or *Block* to keep up with new breakthroughs in visual communication. Planet Two-ers, a whole generation younger, reject such cerebral, contemplative enterprises and get on with it: they live for themselves the ephemeral fashions of the modern world, making an exuberant, dynamic modernity their own. Put like this, the possibilities for inter-planetary communication do not look promising. Yet even if one sets aside the modernist penchant for a joky, hyperbolic self-irony, anyone naive enough to end up *teaching* popular culture professionally — of all things — will immediately recognize that there is a deal of truth here<sup>4</sup>.

With these questions in mind we can turn to two new studies of popular culture. The first is *Popular Culture and Social Relations* edited by Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott, who all have their feet planted more or less firmly on Planet One<sup>5</sup>. This collection champions the cause of Gramsci who for a long period now has been very influential on cultural studies. However this broad Gramscian framework is now under explicit conceptual challenge, and one intellectual source for current redefinitions (although by no means the only one) comes from post-structuralism and postmodernism. To get

<sup>4</sup> Dick Hebdige, « The Bottom Line on Planet One », see above.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds.), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986.

a sense of the turn from Gramsci I'll look at Iain Chambers' *Popular Culture. The metropolitan experience*<sup>6</sup>. It should be said that Iain Chambers is no foursquare postmodernist, a dedicated follower of Lyotard and co., and indeed the interest in his work is the extent to which the traces of Gramsci are still present; but the theoretical renewal brought about by postmodernism has in his case been influential in providing the conceptual conditions for thinking beyond Gramsci and opening new ways of seeing popular culture.

It is precisely in the forms and extent of this transformation that everything is at stake. The issue is whether developments in popular culture have been so profound — planetary movements of such enormity — that older theories which seemed in the past to have at least been on the right track are now, by virtue of these historical transformations, at best severely limited, or at worst inhibiting and actively conservative. If the latter were the case then the only possibility would be to devise new ways of thinking about popular culture which would abolish not just this or that theory but received academic and critical objectives — the imperious, authoritarian gaze searching out explanation — and embrace fully all the protocols of postmodernism. Such a move would violently force the debate forward, leaving Gramsci and the rest forever interred in the lecture-room, and summoning new icons of the current pop imagination — of whom Walt Disney still remains for the cultural critics an alltime favourite. This would be less the logic of postmodernism than of futurism — Gramsci is dead! Long live Walt Disney! — were it not for the unavoidability of human mortality and the fact that Disney too, that venerable old Yanqui mythologizer, has for long been dead and buried.

<sup>6</sup> Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture. The Metropolitan Experience*, Methuen, London, 1986.

## GRAMSCI ARRIVES AT MILTON KEYNES

*Popular Culture and Social Relations*: the title is pure Planet One. The essays here all — or mostly — draw from and distil the mass of material which constituted the Open University Popular Culture Course. This course, organized between 1979 and 1982, admitting its first students in 1982, and currently in its final year, was a major innovation for an institution like the Open University, indeed for the higher education system as a whole, and it made a significant impact nationally<sup>7</sup>. Thousands of students were reached, many more than from the usual run of limited circulation journals and books. Due to force of circumstances, culminating in the termination of the course, this volume appears — sadly — as a retrospective of work completed, as if the authors had drafted their own collective *festschrift* before closing up shop and, in the case of the editors, quitting Milton Keynes for the call of more exotic locales. This isn't the place to pay tribute to the now defunct Open University Popular Culture team, but as recognition from other quarters probably won't be forthcoming we can perhaps legitimately slip in here a word of admiration.

In structure, and in many of the case-studies, the book follows the pattern of the course from which it evolved. New work appears on the formation of a sexually differentiated culture in the early nineteenth century, but even so the range of current work on sexuality and sexual difference remains poorly represented. The lack of attention to subordinate black cultures is surprising although this may simply indicate how swiftly things have moved since the Open University team first assembled. It might also suggest however that were these perspectives to be integrated further modification, or transformation of the

<sup>7</sup> Tony Bennett, « Popular Culture: 'a Teaching Object' », *Screen Education*, 34, 1980.

class model would necessarily follow. However in retrospect the most striking feature of the original Open University work is what now looks to have been its overly rationalistic ambition, a fact which registered both in the theoretical project itself and in its pedagogic effects. This was notable in a variety of form — the dedication to an integrated and totalizing theory, the attempts to conceptualize, in a hard, immediate sense, the relations between a particular popular form and the social totality, and it was manifest too, at a different level, in the great tracts of hypostatized theory with which students had to contend<sup>8</sup>. In these terms the course was a recognizable product of the predominant approaches of the time. Students found the work heavy going — often far removed from their own experiences of popular culture — and the perspectives encouraged were often overly scholastic. In the current volumes these scholastic and rationalistic imperatives have to a very large degree lessened.

An overarching model of Marx-through-Gramsci remains in place, not now so much as a taut rationalistic grid, but much more as a perspective in which a variety of positions can flourish. Of course there are now sufficient versions of Gramsci to stock a fair-sized Branson megastore, and some of these turn out to be more certifiably eccentric than others. The Open University version, if we can call it that, is distinctive but not eccentric. As Tony Bennett explains, the contributors to the current collection appropriated Gramsci to overcome the debilitating polarity in which popular culture is understood either as generated spontaneously — from below — creating an authentic people's culture which is, simply, resistance (the culturalist fallacy) or as culture imposed — from above — with such force and totality that the people, incorporated and supine, are deprived of all agency (the structur-

<sup>8</sup> See John O. Thompson, « Popular Culture: the Pleasure and the Pain », *Screen Education*, 41, 1982.

alist fallacy). This procedure is spelt out in an opening chapter which takes for its title « The turn to Gramsci ». It is about as open and deconstructionist a Gramsci as one could expect, a post-68 Gramsci reconstituted (indeed deconstituted) along the curious byway of cultural theory which leads from Saussure and Barthes via the historicist semiotics of Volosinov to the Mouffe/Laclau positions of a decade or so ago<sup>9</sup>.

Where this approach is fully appropriated fascinating work emerges. Thus for example in his account of Blackpool, Tony Bennett — having developed into an aficionado of the relative cardiac dangers of the city's white-knuckle rides — delivers an insightful essay which lifts itself entirely from earlier textual scholasticism. This is true too of Colin Mercer's contributions in which he explores the text-reader relationship and — in a provocative and intelligent piece, lifting off from Planet One — the categories of performance, entertainment and pleasure. His chapters indicate the extent to which the Open University authors have been able to move beyond the resumé of theoretical positions — the initial business of defining the field, the measured process of constructing positions from other people's theories — and think creatively and independently for themselves. The initial stages of this theoretical construction were necessarily lengthy and arduous, and this was the moment when the Open University work was most prominent. This moment of construction has now passed; from it, we can be sure, will come in the future work of the first significance.

The Gramsci which lies at the theoretical source of these studies is an appealing version, providing a sense of the *field* of social relations which constitute the popular, but without forcing a methodological reading of

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, « Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular' », in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

social totality onto each discrete study. Their deconstructionist edge is attractive and convincing, abolishing once and for all the fixed subject — either hero or villain — of popular culture. Abandoning the quest for a singular theory or subject of the popular has created a much greater potential for imaginative, less conceptually inhibited engagement which works *with* popular forms, valuing the subjective and undermining the externality between critic and object.

Yet one can imagine the objections to this from a post-structuralist, postmodernist avant-garde, from those who have been turning *from* Gramsci with some determination and to whom this approach remains too tightly organized within a theoretical system, wedded to the concept of totality — in sum, overly Gramscian. What, critics might justifiably ask, has Gramsci to offer? Now it would be possible to construct a kind of modernist Gramsci, just as Marx in his Promethean dimensions has sometimes been recruited to the modernist mainstream<sup>10</sup>. This would be a Gramsci based on his involvement in the popular cultural forms of his time, on his relationship to the European avant-garde during the First World War and the Russian Revolution, and on his migration to Turin, the city of futurism and Fiat. Such a reading would emphasize Gramsci's own engagement with metropolitan popular culture and its new, characteristically twentieth-century forms.

But such a reading would be a bit forced, and it would also highlight the differences between a modernist and postmodernist recuperation or reading of Gramsci. His own disinclination for huge parts of Americanized popular culture — for all his theoretical knowledge and assessment of them — went very deep. The overpowering

<sup>10</sup> S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976; Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, London, Verso, 1983.

misery of his life, even discounting the unimaginably painful and protracted decline into death of his prison years, combined with his subordination of self to politics would not make him a likely enthusiast for American popular culture of the Hollywood type, even less for the libidinal pleasures promised by contemporary postmodern culture. He paid little attention to the most advanced popular cultural forms of his time — cinema and radio; he had nothing interesting to say about the symbolic forms of popular cultures or their elements of fantasy; and he wrote incomprehensibly on psychoanalysis. To imagine Gramsci transported to a Mecca of postmodernism — let's make it Disneyland — I can only visualize him as excessively immigrant and impoverished, hunched-backed and myopic, the hard-bitten, grizzled old Bolshevik in him appalled at the spectacle spread before him. He is simply of a different epoch: when he first arrived in the North from Sardinia he couldn't walk through the city streets without suffering an enervating, nervous exhaustion. He is about as far removed from the dynamics of contemporary popular culture as one could imagine.

Moreover despite his advances in thinking of popular cultures as ideologically grounded, when he contemplated the conditions for the proletarian renewal of culture he still often thought more in terms of the appropriation of the traditions of bourgeois (intellectual and literary) culture than their popular transformations. This may be too strong a generalization; but at any rate it holds true for his understanding of the making of communist militants whom he believed and hoped, through the force of reason and appreciation of the political and philosophical necessities of transcending a provincial and partial world-view, would effortlessly drop inherited popular pleasures and immerse themselves in the most advanced, higher aspects of bourgeois culture. And, justifiably, he was immeasurably proud of the many working-class militants and the factory readership of *L'Ordine Nuovo* who did just that — as he too had done himself.

It was this Gramsci which in the first instance predominated in British intellectual life, easily accommodated to a fresh-faced culture of rambling and the Collected Works. The initial decision to make available Gramsci's writing in English was made by the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1956. « It was noted that arrangements were being made for the translation of the works of Grammschi »<sup>11</sup>. (For pedants with a curiosity for the paradoxes inherent in combined and uneven historical times this was one year after 160 acres of Anaheim, California had transmuted into Disneyland). This predominance continued at least until the more complete translation of selections from the *Prison Notebooks* were published in 1971, the characteristic, anti-modernist version of Gramsci being shaped by Communist and ex-Communist historians who, for various reasons, had determined to concentrate their professional work on constructions of the national past.

Now for the current theorists of popular culture Gramsci the Bolshevik and Comintern functionary is bad enough. But where the critique extends into an engagement of even more radical consequence is in the suggestion that theories which derive from this problematic induce a myopia, replicating Gramsci's own bewilderment, and actively inhibiting critics from understanding and learning from popular cultures. And at this point the challenge to Gramsci broadens into an attack on the institutionalization of knowledge and its intellectual and social effects. These theories of popular culture, we are told, weave together increasingly clever ideas, which circulate freely through the channels of the academic world and possess a life quite separate from that which they describe and analyse. It is this externality (so the critics continue) which condemns even the best theory of this type to a redundant academicism, trapped forever on Planet One,

<sup>11</sup> Communist Party Historians' Group, *Minutes*, 27 May 1956.

while the rest of the world, unseen to the cyclopean eye of the academic observer, is in the process of migrating to different galaxies where new existences are slowly unravelling.

#### ARRIVAL AT PLANET TWO

These critiques of Gramsci, of totality, and of academicization draw most readily today from various strands of post-structuralism. One current example of how these critiques can cohere can be found in Iain Chambers' *Popular Culture* which carries with it a flavour of Benjamin (aphoristic montage in place of super-rationalistic explanation) and Bréton (« the street is the only valid field of experience »). But the interest of the book, in this context, is that it still holds onto the idea of popular culture as a definable 'space' within the social system: the metaphors shift, but what is to be theorized remains recognizably the same.

The book opens in a style identifiably postmodernist. « Let us begin with some public signs; with that urban alphabet where contemporary sense is expressed » (p. 3). A number of visual images, their relationships and intertextuality, are discussed. Iain Chambers rejects cultural authenticity in favour of « the anonymous flux of consumerism »; the mods, he writes, « rendered consumption into a precise and imaginative conquest of their circumstances » (pp. 7-8). He contrasts a bricolage of popular signs, in which we can all claim expertise, to « the official culture, preserved in art galleries, museums, and university courses » which « demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge » (p. 12). He borrows, as he puts it, « from Benjamin the strategy of writing through quotations ». Empirical instances of popular culture « do not much 'verify' what I have to say as refer back to themselves; evocations, not explanations, of what passes through the channels of popular culture » (pp. 12-13). And he concludes the introduction by elaborating this theoretical strategy, voicing

precisely the suspicion of what we might broadly call an academic Gramscianism: « To attempt to explain these references fully would be to pull them back under a contemplative stare, adopting the authority of the academic mind that seeks to explain an experience that is rarely personal. The vanity of such a presumed knowledge runs against the grain of the popular epistemology I have tried to suggest: an informal knowledge of the everyday, based on the sensory, the immediate, the pleasurable and the concrete. Popular culture, through its social exercise of forms, taste and activities flexibly tuned to the present, rejects the narrow access to the cerebral world of official culture » (p. 13).

But as so often stated intentions can be deceptive. What follows are in fact three good but orthodox empirical narrative histories (in the old sense) of particular popular forms: the city, film and TV, and music. Indeed the switch from the introduction to the first case-study is achieved by use of that trope familiar in the nineteenth and twentieth century literature of exploration, the view from the train, echoing one of the most famous (but probably imagined) train-rides of all, described by Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (« The train bore me away, through the monstrous scenery of slag-heaps ... »).

There is no point, here, in taking issue with the substantive histories. They are short, each describes the period from the 1880s and not surprisingly there is plenty of room for contention. The one on the city is the most original but also the one most wayward in terms of the conventional protocols of historical explanation. The one on music, as we would expect from the author, the most informed and authoritative. The strength of the cumulative interpretation is not so much that it produces a new map of popular formations as it provides a more detailed picture than hitherto, with the boundaries redrawn and extended.

More generally we could ask why these particular case-studies were chosen. And there is also the very large question of all those excluded from this model of popular

culture — people, for example, who are no longer (or not yet) youthful, many of whom, for long phases of their lives, are systematically excluded from any consumption bar the minimum to survive, or for whom the city represents not the potential for the Americanized dream of a zapped-out exhilaration but a repetitious urban nightmare.

However there is something more surprising. The purpose of the introduction, as I read it, was to indicate the need to overcome the problem of an academicized and external view of popular culture — although the degree of the break with inherited methodologies and the convergence with post-structuralism are left open. Yet in the empirical case-studies the familiar problems recur. Virtually no popular voices are heard « speaking for themselves », nor is there any attempt to deal with the question of audience and reception as constitutive elements in the dynamic of popular forms, in their production and consumption. A striking indication of these difficulties lies in the choice of visual illustration: we see adverts and film and publicity stills but there are few hints as to how these might be read by popular audiences. In short, the externality is as strong here as in any more conventional study.

But in a curious loop the conclusion to the book takes us back to the positions advanced at the start. « If you live in a black-and-white world, and prefer the security of an abstract utopia to the potential of the present, then contemporary popular culture merely seems to be the predictable product of capitalism and consumerism ... » (pag. 190). It is, he continues, the transformation within popular culture itself which renders redundant any distinction between low and high culture, and which in turn inaugurates a new potential for the democratization of culture: « culture no longer appeals to a superior truth » (pag. 199), the hard logocentrism of metanarrative jettisoned once and for all.

This conceptual argument is pursued explicitly but it's not always easy to follow. Social totality, unitary subjects and the rest go out, but it is not entirely clear what composes the alternative, more indeterminate and rela-

tivist methodology. There is brief referencing to Gramsci, Lacan and Foucault. His conclusion is this: « If ideology is all around us ... then we can no longer measure resistance and the struggle for change along the yardstick of a non-ideological reality ... We need to disrupt the presumed coherence of ideology, texts and images ... That means living inside the signs ... the previous totality of sense offered by ideology (including Marxism) is 'deconstructed', and its elements relocated in a more detailed, more complex, more specific and more open (i.e. transforming and transformable) perspective » (pag. 212). And as he himself perceptively recognizes this paradoxically brings us all the way back to the hermeneutics of Hoggart's concern with « dense and concrete » cultural analysis.

The move beyond conventional marxism is unambiguously formulated; the allegiance to a postmodernism is more hazy despite style and tone. It seems as if Iain Chambers appropriates for himself the insights of post-structuralism in order to deconstruct and break with marxism and other totalizing theories, while reluctant to ally himself with the current crop of postmodernist cultural theorists (or at least with Baudrillard); but there is a wobble here, really leaving the text open-ended, and tantalizingly so. It is a wobble which exists in the structure of the book, oscillating between the conventional, descriptive accounts of the emergence of particular popular forms and the deconstructing tendencies of the introduction and conclusion. Theoretically, right to the end, he hedges his bets.

It seems that we are left with the big problems but with no big answers. At this point the image of Orwell recurs. He — or the figure could be almost any explorer of popular culture of the past hundred years or so — sits in his train, comfortably warm and insulated from the culture he watches, spying the young woman stick in hand and bent-double cleaning out the drain; the image remains a dispiriting evocation of the privileges of a particular social class and the powers conferred upon its members to observe and publically define, without them-

selves being objectified so powerfully by others. The image, and the text within which it appears, is consciously self-reflexive with Orwell at pains to uncover the concrete social relations from which he himself writes. But this careful, self-critical sub-text collapses before the book is through: it transpires that it isn't Orwell — now in the process of transmogrifying into the no-nonsense, plain-speaking pragmatist — who is caught up in all this after all, but *others*. The Orwell of the end of the book nimbly extricates himself from the complex of social relations vividly and concretely described in the early chapters and escapes scot-free, at loose to summon any number of half-baked abstractions and castigate the deluded, pistachio-shirted intellectuals all around him.

The purpose of introducing this battered old motif at this point is simply as a reminder of how recalcitrant are the old problems: even when the issues of externality, of rationalism and scholasticism are appreciated their transcendence, even in the most modest terms, is not easily achieved — or so we must conclude from a reading of Chambers' appropriation of postmodernism. In its pure form this can only propose one solution to the study of popular culture: the liquidation of all critical and intellectual work, all teaching and writing, into a popular epistemology. And indeed the paradox is that when he describes an unspecified part of the population living a monochrome existence, or others an intellectual lie, unable to see with the eyes of the youthful avant-garde which lives its life, supposedly, in the streets, he in fact operates with a rather heavy-handed metanarrative, and one which may not be so universalizing in its scope and democratic in its objectives as many first appear. By aligning himself with the avant-garde and the colourful, with the flow of the street, he can make it appear as if all the problems of knowledge and pedagogy lie with others in this bi-polar world: the monochrome guardians of official culture. *This* is where deconstructionism tips into liquidationism and simply rediscovers old and inflated abstractions. Moreover in a curious convergence,



this polarizing view of the world, its forceful if thinly disguised metanarrative, enables him to perform a similar trick to Orwell, appearing to absolve himself from his own positions: only this time he champions the pistachio-shirts.

#### BACK TO EARTH

Chambers' critique of academicism is not new; it can take many forms (Gramscian ones too) which equally stress the determinancy of the bureaucratic relations of an institution, and the social location of those who staff it, on the various knowledges produced. But the idea he presents of different modes of thought in play, different and strikingly contrasting epistemologies — at one pole cerebral, rationalist and academic; at the other popular, ephemeral, materialist, organized in distinct narratives and pleasures which may often remain closed to the academic mind — although also not without precedent (despite the repetition, Gramsci amongst others) does in its *specification* begin to suggest new ways of thinking about popular pleasures and the converse estrangement involved in the contemplative pursuits of formal intellectual and political endeavour.

The declared incredulity toward metanarrative has been one way of voicing this epistemological division, and its peculiar pertinence for the study of popular culture is clear. However there is also much in postmodernist thinking which is banal beyond belief, and horrifying in its capacity to cast aside critical and utopian traditions which for whole epochs have posited alternatives to the experienced alienation of commodity or market relations. It would not be difficult to establish an elective affinity between some of the characteristic postmodernist positions and a broader historical conjuncture of political defeat. But it may also be wrong to see postmodernism exclusively as a collapse into reaction<sup>12</sup>. For some

<sup>12</sup> Perry Anderson, for one, has argued in these terms. Right as

strands within it do attempt to recover and value the specifics of popular experience, and this at least could be appropriated by those who, while unsympathetic to the full sweep of the philosophical project, could see this as a strategy for reconstituting and extending the received parameters of a fixed rationalism. Although postmodernism may, at its most extreme, revel in the absurd bluster of autodestructing its own metanarratives, there does exist a convergence here with other (less apocalyptic) voices pressing for a more democratic and pluralist development of contemporary popular culture.

However — put like this — it is not a question of starting from scratch. In Britain it is true that high literary modernism bequeathed a conception of popular culture which was largely hostile and conservative, in which valorization of the contemporary was hardly at a premium. The bad new days were continually kicked aside in an impatient, pathological desire to devise an alchemy which could reinvent the good old days. Confronted with this legacy it's precisely the contemporaneity of the postmodernist intervention which is so compelling, despite its principled incomprehension of anything which took place the day before yesterday. Postmodernism at least embraces the present *as* the present and not as a quirky historical deformity which refuses to measure up to a greater past or a greater future.

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he may be on some of the fundamentals, he remains incorrigibly unmoved even by the *question* of popular culture or the possible forms of popular epistemologies, ever content to think his marxism in terms exclusively of the great thinkers: *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism. The Wellek Library Lectures*, London, Verso, 1983; and « Modernity and revolution », *New Left Review*, 144, 1984. Hal Foster, on the other hand, has an altogether more open view on the matter: « In cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct and resist the status quo and a postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction », « Postmodernism: a preface », in Foster, *op. cit.*, pp. xi and xii.

But a speedy exhortation for modernity is not new, even in boring old England where the predominant legacy of literary modernism has been so staid. The emergence of *theories* of popular culture coincided with the modernist break, for modernism itself grew alongside a mass commodity popular culture. In part it was precisely as a reaction to that culture that the dominant, conservative strand of English modernism flourished, refusing to allow the easy exchange and commodification of its own artefacts — a struggle against the odds, as its reconstitution as pastiche, as postmodernism, was to show. Modernity, precisely because of the ethereal abstractness or distance of many of its literary forms from the vulgarity of a popular materialism, could still become a cultural currency. « All historical epochs are modern to themselves, but not all live this experience in this ideological mode »<sup>13</sup>. A simple way of understanding one of the dominant features of postmodern aesthetic strategies is to see it as the inversion of this earlier retreat from popular commodity relations; now, all abstract thought is deemed conservative, all the symbolic and narrative forms which accompany popular consumption taken to be — not progressive: too external and mechanistic, but — a particularly privileged site of a new form of knowledge. The incorporation in dominant cultural relations of this older literary modernism — Trilling's disturbed incomprehension at his students' disregard for the bleakness of *The Heart of Darkness* — allows the current avant-garde to embrace what earlier was spurned: the ever-renewable chain of commodity exchange. Or as Habermas puts it: « Modernism is dominant but dead »<sup>14</sup>. The modernist world is indeed turned upside down.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, « Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism », *New Left Review*, 152, 1985, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, « Modernity — an incomplete project », in Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

The difficulty with this however is that it works too closely inside the problematic of its own antagonists. And in the study of popular cultures it is important to be clear *which* world, exactly, has been turned upside down. If, in the field of cultural studies, one begins with Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* with its despairing polarity constituted by nostalgia on the one hand and condemnation of the new on the other then it's little surprise that celebration of the emergent commodity culture will sooner or later turn up. (Hunslet is bulldozed! Long live Fablon!) And this is precisely what has happened.

But if — still remaining within the field of cultural studies — one were to begin instead with a more nuanced, critical appreciation of the theoretical past, not being mesmerized by illusion of an overbearingly and unchallenged conservatism and disregard for the present, and not being so impatient to turn the tables on Hoggartian myths, then it would be apparent that there'd be less compulsion to come up with drastic, absolutist solutions. Even if one were to think only of the founding moment of what was eventually to become academic cultural studies, it's apparent that a very sharp depiction of popular culture springs to mind from the work of the troika — Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson — harnessed together by an indiscriminating historical memory. But there were strong alternative voices present which, although clearly not conforming to the project evolved in the postmodernist scheme of things, nonetheless did present the possibilities for constructing a more contemporary, more concrete conception of popular forms and popular knowledges. It's necessary only to read the early issues of *New Left Review*, or its student precursor, to see this. The inherited picture of the formation of cultural studies in the late fifties and early sixties alters dramatically if Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) were also perceived as one of the « founding texts ». Although not analyzing popular culture as such (but by any terms a popular novel) Lessing's feminism, her centring of a fractured, shifting subjectivity and her dialogue

between the personal and the political convey a radically different form of knowledge for understanding modernity than we might usually associate with these years. Even *The Jazz Scene* (1959) by Francis Newton (aka E. J. Hobsbawm), although from the current perspective still rather conventional in its methodology, nonetheless remains a fine historical study of popular music equalling the power of Hobsbawm's more professionally orthodox monographs.

Or we could take one further example. In the early 1960s it would have been unthinkable for the marxist intellectual milieu to have anything to do with *Encounter*, a redbaiting cultural guerrilla sponsored, as the euphemism always used to go, by the CIA. But there we can find an intriguing assessment of what can only be called an early manifestation of postmodern popular culture in a discussion by Richard Wollheim of the MacInnes novels. Wollheim considers Flaubert and the transformation of Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century (the extinction of taste; the shift of private life into public channels); draws from Kleinian and Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as the novels of Pasolini; investigates the imaginative and fantasy relations between the city and popular culture, identifying the pop culture of the time as composed of « missionaries of movement and disorder »; and remarks on the impossibility of politics, as constituted, to comprehend any of this. Wollheim himself was clearly fascinated by these novel expressions of popular culture, sympathetic to them, but also took his distance, concluding along fairly orthodox psychoanalytical grounds: « Freud has used the term 'feast' in connection with the manic ideal: wishing, amongst other things, to contrast the immense assiduousness and energy with which objects of pleasure are pursued and accumulated and the comparative indifference with which they are enjoyed, squandered, spoilt. When the Absolute Beginner expresses his desire to make a ball out of life, the kind of ball he has in mind, I suggest, is a feast »<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wollheim, « Babylon, Babylone », *Encounter*, May 1962,

This again suggests that although the conclusions drawn by current postmodernist theories are strikingly novel, their perceptions into the dynamics of popular culture, to which they claim unique insight, have appeared — although not quite in the same way — in previous, rather more conventional, theoretical discourses.

If this is right it would seem as if, even in England, theories of popular culture have always been constituted by a tension between the dialectic of the symbolic present (as contemporaneity) and the symbolic past (as the good old days). At the same time it would be possible to excavate, recover and extend *these* modernist traditions within cultural analysis — the oxymoron indicating the distance from current postmodernisms — back before the 1950s and forward through to our own times, taking in a wide variety of approaches to popular culture on the way, most especially feminist or gay perspectives with their commonly more engaged concern with the subjective dimensions of the popular<sup>16</sup>. Many of these approaches, laying claim to an array of *competing* logics and metanarratives, far removed from the conservative paradigms and often very far removed from Gramsci for that matter, have produced studies of popular culture which have been sufficiently open in their methodologies to

p. 36. The ostensible object of this review, Colin MacInnes, has now enjoyed his fleeting moment of recuperation in the 1980s. A surprisingly good empirical study of his place in late fifties London culture can be found in Tony Gould, *Inside Outsider. The life and times of Colin MacInnes*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986. Relevant to the discussion here is MacInnes' *England, Half English*, London, MacGibbon & Kee, 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Despite its recent bad press from cultural theorists, very early Mass Observation was extremely significant in diagnosing some of the epistemological effects of academicization, in attempting to furnish a genuine popular alternative, and (in this context) in assessing the varied conceptual co-ordinates of popular culture. See Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, *Twelfth of May*, London, Faber & Faber, 1937; and Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Britain by Mass Observation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1939.

reach and make sense of these popular epistemologies, the narratives and the material practices now so militantly pursued by the postmodernists.

It may be however that after the mid 1970s the divergence between the avant-garde and the mainstream within cultural studies intensified. One example would be the impact of punk, offering the proto-postmodernists an absolute field-day. An aspect of this divergence can be found in sub-cultural theory. An important moment in the sociology of sub-cultures was marked by the publication of *Resistance Through Rituals* in 1975, appearing on the very eve of punk. The great strength of the book was that it held together an appreciation of the symbolic relations of modern sub-cultures, making a significant advance in understanding the unspoken, lived narratives of fashion which constitute sub-cultural formations, yet at the same time situating this analysis in a broadly Gramscian theory of social totality. Subsequently, even in terms of the people involved in this original project, there has been a clear conceptual divergence: on the one hand the more orthodox Gramscians have taken up issues of the police, youth unemployment, the welfare state and so on, while those originally more committed to the symbolic forces in play (Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, Iain Chambers) have veered towards varieties of post-structuralism. The possibilities for a future theoretical reconvergence look slim but remain to be seen.

Problems of externality are still with us. In the study of popular culture the will to deconstruct can rearrange some of the questions, can limit imperiousness, but — *pace* Iain Chambers — does precious little to resolve many of the basic issues. At present we perhaps possess indications of how the experiential and lived might adequately be read and historicized — approaches which do indeed call for the 'contemplative stare' of other, non-popular discourses — but which do not flatten, dislocate or rationalize out of existence expressions of lived cultures. We are not faced with the choice between two planetary discourses — the one academic, totalizing and

external, the other lived and popular — but with a spectrum of knowledges and with the problem of how such discourses might more fruitfully, and more justly, be integrated. And this returns us to Gramsci. The problems posed by Iain Chambers — popular culture as a field of social relations, the centrality of popular epistemologies, the relations between accredited intellectuals and popular forms — are clearly those of Gramsci. And if ultimately it proves unsatisfactory to liquidate all these problems into the vaunted vernacular episteme, then it may be necessary — wizenèd, miserable old Bolshevik that he was — to go back to Gramsci, to read him anew, to imagine or invent a Gramsci for our own bleak times. « The popular element 'feels' but does not always know or understand », he wrote, elaborating an idea which is often treated anxiously, sceptically or with horror in current times. But no doubt many more would concur with the rest of the observation: « the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel ... The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned »<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 418.

articoli e saggi

THE QUESTION IS WHETHER YOU CAN MAKE WORDS  
MEAN SO MANY DIFFERENT THINGS:  
A PROPOSITO DI ARTE E LINGUAGGI METROPOLITANI

di  
Maria Del Sapio

EFFETTO ALICE

La contraddizione non è ancora che un'apparenza e probabilmente la più lusinghiera. Io parlo e non ho nulla da dire (DADA).

Alice non sprofonda per recuperare la profondità della terra ma per ascendere all'altro suo verso, per recuperare orizzontalmente il rovescio di una superficie dalla circolarità schiacciata: « I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards » (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, p. 11).

Alice immagina di passare attraverso lo specchio ma in effetti finché lo specchio non sarà soppiantato da un'altra superficie — la scacchiera — Alice rimane a camminarci sopra per il lungo, per il largo e intorno alla sua estensione rivoltata, svoltandola, poiché infatti il rovescio può ritornare a essere il posto di prima, la porta a cui Alice continuamente fa ritorno: « 'Well then, I'll try it the other way'. And so she did: wandering up and down, and trying turn after turn, but always coming back to the house, do what she would. Indeed, once, when she turned a corner rather more quickly than usual, she ran against it before she could stop herself » (*Through the Looking Glass*, p. 137).

« Versus » è in un certo senso l'avventura stessa di Alice perché è linea incurvata su se stessa, ripetizione capovolta, e perché è bordura ripiegata verso la materialità della propria superficie linguistica (lettera dell'espressione, fonicità, ecc.); linea cioè che prende la forma letterale delle parole e con esse può snodarsi e diramarsi secondo ripetizioni, tagli e combinazioni insoliti e sorprendenti. « Prorsus » non è perché ciò che accade non si pone in avanti, non si succede secondo una lineare progressione del senso.

Ciò che Alice effettivamente scopre nel paese delle meraviglie e lungo la superficie dello specchio e della scacchiera è uno strano transitare degli eventi: una loro mobilità assoluta (la loro facoltà di andare a ritroso, la loro libertà di scambiarsi di posto e di occupare insieme lo stesso posto, di crescere e di spostarsi secondo direzioni 'sbagliate', di coniugarsi secondo imprevisti e 'superficiali' rapporti di contiguità — per similarità fonica o onomatopeica ad esempio —); oppure un loro testardo e dispettoso incepparsi nell'ambiguità linguistica della propria espressione. « 'Take some more tea', the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly. 'I've had nothing yet', Alice replied in an offended tone: 'so I can't take more'. 'You mean you can't take less', said the Hatter: 'it's very easy to take more than nothing' » (Alice, p. 65).

È insomma secondo le spregiudicatezze di un'emancipata macchina della lingua che cammina l'evento e non viceversa. Ciò che accade in queste regioni delle superfici è infatti di una folle reversibilità, il senso essendo sempre costruito secondo quella logica del « contrariwise » tanto cara a Tweedledee.

Reversibili sono le strade che si biforcano, simultaneamente contenute nella stessa direzione. Reversibili sono i lati delle cose simultaneamente contenuti lungo lo stesso bordo:

« One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter ». « One side of *what?* The other side of *what?* » thought Alice to herself.

« Of the mushroom », said the Caterpillar, just as if she had asked aloud; and in another moment it was out of sight. Alice remained

looking thoughtfully at the mushroom for a minute, trying to make out which were the two sides of it; and as it was perfectly round, she found this a very difficult question (Alice, p. 46).

Reversibile è il tragitto del tempo e della memoria quando il ricordo può funzionare anche all'indietro, anticipare l'evento a ritroso, premettere il dopo al prima come si potrà fare più tardi con una pellicola fatta girare al contrario:

« Living backwards! » Alice repeated in great astonishment. « I never heard of such a thing! »

« — but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways ».

« I'm sure *mine* only works one way », Alice remarked. « I can't remember things before they happen ». ... « What sort of things do *you* remember best? » Alice ventured to ask.

« Oh, things that happened the week after next », the Queen replied in a careless tone (Through, p. 175).

Reversibile diventa l'azione dei verbi quando essa si sgancia dalla pragmatica e dal buon senso per obbedire ad astratte verosimiglianze grammaticali (« Do cats eat bats? ... Do bats eat cats? »). Reversibile è la funzione referenziale del linguaggio se le parole possono essere usate secondo un'exasperante letteralità senza rimandi extralinguistici, oppure se riconosciute per quello che sono — convenzioni arbitrarie — possono coniugarsi fra loro e indicare le cose in base alla legge del massimo arbitrio:

« When *I* use a word », Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, « it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less ». « The question is », said Alice, « whether you *can* make words mean so many different things ».

« The question is », said Humpty Dumpty, « which is to be master — that's all » (Through, p. 190).

Ciò che Carroll mette a sua disposizione, ciò di cui come Humpty Dumpty si fa padrone, è il grande archivio delle parole disancorate da pretese di verità e di trasparenza e il grande pannello delle possibilità di concatenazione logica della lingua disancorate dalle costrizioni contestuali.

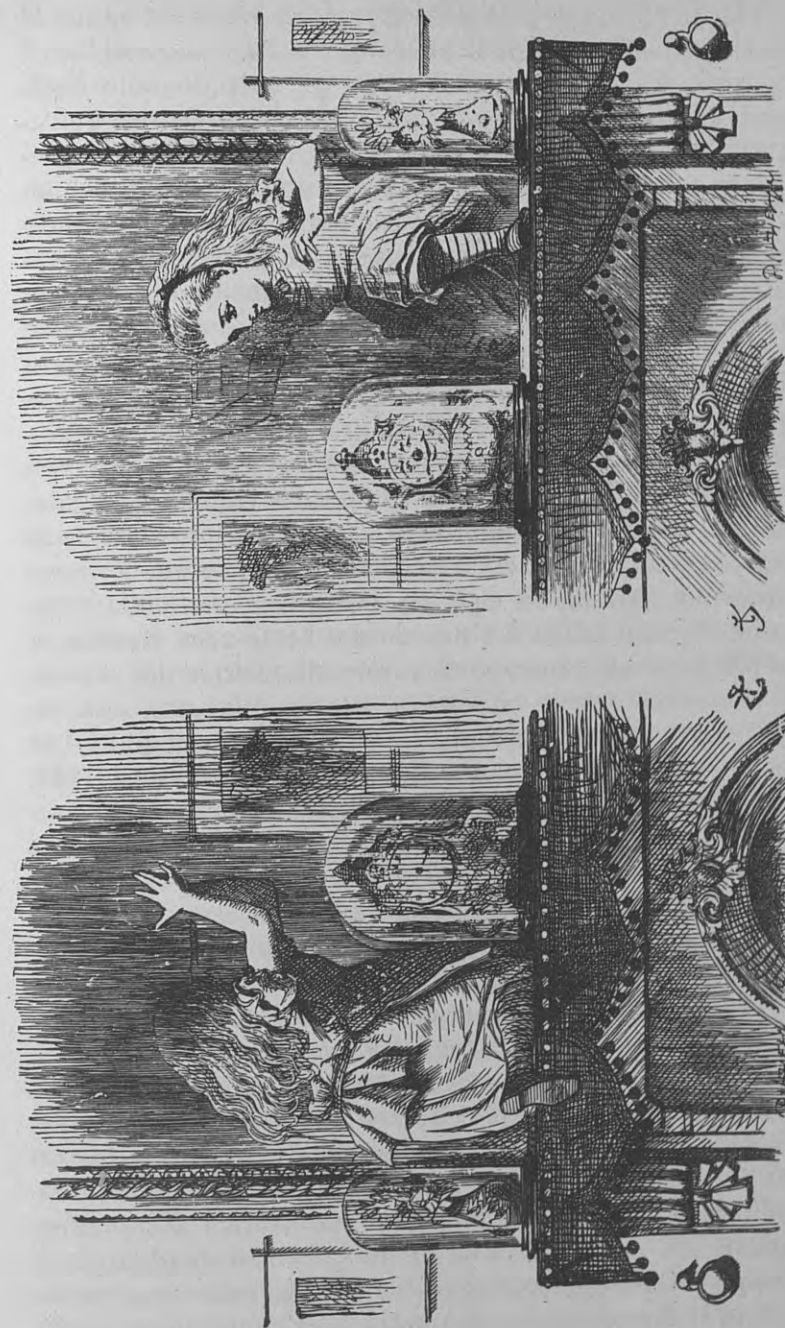
Le parole non hanno più storia nel reale e rimandano ad altre parole. La concatenazione logica opera per sconfinamenti, slittamenti laterali, similarità non contemplate dalla pragmatica. Può essere sequenziale, seriale, non necessariamente consequenziale.

Tutti i fili che legano la superficie linguistica delle cose al peso della referenza e del buon senso si sono insomma allentati ed esse galleggiano in assenza di gravità, coniugandosi vicendevolmente ai limiti estremi del linguaggio con esiti inediti e abbaglianti: l'irresponsabilità del nonsense illumina la produzione del senso e ce lo mostra falso rispecchiamento del vero.

Non è un caso che Gilles Deleuze nel suo libro *Logica del senso* abbia assunto l'avventura di Alice come occasione di riflessione privilegiata per un discorso sulla dimensione artificiale e superficiale della produzione del senso. « La superficie scoppia » avverte il filosofo (1984, p. 207). Lewis Carroll, dice Deleuze nel capitolo che egli intitola « Effetti di superficie », è colui che in letteratura effettua questa operazione inaugurata dagli stoici: una scoperta della superficie e critica della profondità che rappresenta una costante della letteratura moderna.

Man mano che si prosegue nel racconto di *Alice*, fa notare Deleuze, « i movimenti di sprofondamento e sotterramento fanno posto a movimenti laterali di slittamento, da sinistra a destra e da destra a sinistra [...] Si direbbe che l'antica profondità si sia dispiegata, sia diventata larghezza. Gli eventi sono come cristalli, diventano e crescono solo per i bordi, sui bordi [...]. È a forza di scivolare che si passerà dall'altro lato, perché quel lato non è altro che il senso inverso. E se non vi è nulla da vedere dietro il sipario è perché tutto il visibile, o piuttosto tutta la scienza possibile, si trova lungo il sipario, che è sufficiente seguire abbastanza lontano e abbastanza rasente, abbastanza superficialmente, per rovesciarne il dritto, per far sì che la destra diventi sinistra e viceversa. Quindi non le avventure di Alice, bensì un'avventura: la sua ascesa alla superficie, la sua sconfessione della falsa profondità, la sua scoperta che tutto accade alla frontiera » (*Idem*, p. 16).

[4]



[5]



Oggi questa ascesa alla superficie riguarda tanto le avventure dell'arte che le avventure della vita quotidiana, ma sono stati in particolar modo gli stili giovanili degli anni ottanta ad aver costituito l'istanza più vistosa dell'estetizzazione dello scenario metropolitano. Parlarne significa perciò affrontare i problemi di una pratica di decontestualizzazione sistematica del senso e di spericolato esercizio combinatorio con segni privi di profondità; pratica che se è facile ascrivere sbrigativamente alla dimensione edonistica del vivere metropolitano, diventa forse comprensibile solo all'interno di un quadro di riferimento che appartiene all'estetica; se se ne tenta cioè una descrizione per analogia con le procedure di quelle arti contemporanee che, sulla destituzione del mito della trasparenza e della verità e sulla qualità fittizia e seriale delle immagini del reale, così come delle proprie rappresentazioni, vanno da tempo riflettendo e costruendo una sorta di nuovo estetismo: consapevole cioè che il carattere artificiale, autonomo ma non unico dei mondi che l'arte crea è parte di un più generale processo di autonomizzazione dei sistemi di rappresentazione rispetto ai propri referenti; autonomizzazione che nell'attuale società delle immagini — la società dei simulacri come l'ha chiamata Perniola (1983) — fa saltare il concetto stesso di vero e con esso la demarcazione fra il vero e il falso, fra il reale e le sue molte e sempre arbitrarie maniere di produrlo (cfr. Ferraris, 1980).

Fra questo tipo di consapevolezza e le pratiche di spettacolarità non trasparente degli stili, nello scenario metropolitano, sembra oggi stabilirsi più di una concatenazione.

Se etica si può dire la pretesa di controllo del proprio linguaggio da parte del soggetto, etico forse si potrebbe definire il rapporto di coerenza simbolica che i segni delle sottoculture giovanili (dai Teddy Boys ai Flower People, dai Mods agli Skinheads) hanno sempre intrattenuto con una individuabile visione del mondo. Se etico è quel controllo dei propri segni che divenendo pratica di modellizzazione del mondo diviene anche garanzia di identità di gruppo e del soggetto, inizio di un nuovo estetismo invece è stato il dissolvimento di queste condizioni che almeno

fino alla stagione punk del 1976 si erano date per tutte le sottoculture giovanili fiorite in Inghilterra a partire dagli anni cinquanta.

Nel rapporto di negoziata e complessa omologia fra stile e formazione sociale di un gruppo i culturalisti inglesi — da Stuart Hall a Dick Hebdige (cfr. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 1975) — avevano ritenuto di poter indicare l'esistenza di una coerenza interna alle sottoculture giovanili, il posto dove un *senso* veniva simbolicamente prodotto e dove esso poteva venir cercato e interpretato: il senso della propria differenza, il senso della propria identità.

Questa visibile produzione di senso da parte dei gruppi giovanili era anche e soprattutto memoria dei propri segni e costituzione di una soggettività rispetto al tempo. In una società che ancora non aveva raggiunto gli attuali livelli di accelerazione elettronica nella circolazione dei segni, il rapporto di fede esclusivo e tassativo che i membri di un gruppo intrattenevano con i propri simboli vestimentari e comportamentali aveva infatti assicurato loro quel segmento di tempo su cui (sebbene con forme di coerenza in equilibrio molto precario) si era provata la loro capacità di controllo sul linguaggio, sul mondo e sulla storia: sette anni almeno per i Teds (dal 1955 al 1962), quattro per i Mods (dal 1962 al 1966), altrettanti circa per gli Hippies e i Flower Children (dal 1966 agli inizi degli anni settanta) con una progressiva intensificazione dei processi di obsolescenza, negli anni settanta, e corrispondente crescente frantumazione e diversificazione degli stili che porta all'intensa e breve stagione punk del 1976 (cfr. Hebdige, 1979).

A cominciare dai punks le sottoculture giovanili depongono la profondità della filosofia e dell'etica di gruppo per far propria l'estetica di una eclettica spettacolarità non trasparente. Il bricolage con i segni della cultura circostante (quelli della cultura di provenienza, quelli della città, dei mezzi di comunicazione di massa, ecc.) resiste oggi ad una interpretazione che tenti di vederlo come alternativo e non casuale processo di strutturazione simbolica di un'esperienza, per offrirsi piuttosto come esibito esercizio combinatorio attraverso l'accidentale colli(lu)sione di

significanti che caratterizza l'epoca contemporanea; esercizio che dissolve l'univocità di senso dei segni assunti poiché presuppone come attualizzabili al livello della contiguità sintagmatica tutte le virtualità contenute nell'asse paradigmatico.

Inizia insomma un confronto diverso con i segni della civiltà dell'immagine basato sull'implicito riconoscimento di una difficoltà: la difficoltà di poter aggirare, penetrare, scrostare la superficie dei molti specchi di seduzione del soggetto. Il bricolage, come nel paese di Alice, si fa allora slittamento da superficie a superficie, ma nel continuo e spregiudicato riassetto semiotico non è tanto un'identità di gruppo che si realizza, quanto piuttosto la risoluzione del soggetto nella nuova materialità delle pellicole linguistiche che lo ricoprono; una possibilità per il soggetto di essere la lettera e il contrario dei propri segni: tutto e niente e l'inverso di tutto sembra allora lasciarsi afferrare oltre la lettera e oltre il gioco del « viceversa ». I segni si sganciano dai vecchi dizionari delle sottoculture e mettono in moto una pluralità di significati: una folle reversibilità. Il loro senso si moltiplica e si pluralizza ma esso nasce, si cancella o si ripete, cresce e si rimpicciolisce come nei paesi delle meraviglie: come mobilità, estensione, sconfinamento, spregiudicata maniera di essere di superfici indifferenti alla produzione di significati univoci.

Uno stato di indeterminazione questo, che oggi è espresso appieno dalla dimensione della metropoli, luogo di concentrazione di un'infinità di segni e di strategie linguistiche e luogo di mille, incontrollabili e ingarbugliati movimenti del senso. Un senso cinetico, plurale e in movimento. Un senso in eccesso (Deleuze, 1984).

È la costituzione della plastica, così come l'ha descritta Barthes, che oggi forse meglio esprime questo modo di essere insieme forte, artificiale e indeterminato dei segni della città e dei segni più appariscenti, quelli dei giovani, che oggi la abitano. Fioccosa, cremosa, la plastica, dice Barthes, è l'idea stessa di una infinita trasformazione, « ubiquità resa visibile », « più che oggetto [...] traccia di movimento », più che sostanza, materia chimica neutra, più che colore, concetto aggressivo di colore, non

elemento minerale legato alla profondità della terra, non come la natura « sostanza da ritrovare o da imitare » ma artificialità senza fondamento, assorbita nella quotidianità, che sgancia il mito dell'imitazione dal mondo pretenzioso del raro e iscrive l'artificialità della copia nel mondo prosaico dell'uso (1974, pp. 169-171).

Se oggi questo modo di essere indeterminato e artificiale delle forme di superficie sembra investire il mondo prosaico del quotidiano, descrivere gli stili spettacolari giovanili significa confrontarsi con i processi attraverso cui le forme di questo immaginario proliferano e si differenziano in pratiche e variazioni estetiche particolari. Si tratta di affrontare i problemi e i processi di significanza di un'estetica: di un'estetica dello scenario metropolitano che con Alice ha scoperto l'immanenza delle superfici, la realtà del sipario, e di un'estetica dell'arte d'avanguardia e di neoavanguardia che a sua volta ha assunto dalle modalità di percezione della dimensione urbana i procedimenti del suo comporre. Riconoscendosi come uno fra i tanti linguaggi del comunicare metropolitano, l'arte dell'avanguardia e della neoavanguardia ha posto da tempo, infatti, la riflessione sugli effetti-di-realtà e sui processi casuali e 'superficiali' di produzione del senso al centro della propria creatività.

Basti pensare al *ready-made* e alla riabilitazione dell'incongruo nella scrittura automatica dei surrealisti, all'« oggettivismo » e al carattere fortuito di giochi combinatori e ricorrenze seriali nel *nouveau roman* o nella narrativa americana — da William Burroughs a Donald Barthelme — o nell'arte di Andy Warhol: riflessioni sul reale ricalcate su un tipo di casualità che appartiene alla percezione urbana e all'intersecarsi dei molti messaggi della civiltà delle immagini.

« Il tentativo di Robbe-Grillet », ha detto Barthes, « mira a fondare il romanzo in superficie: l'integrità è messa tra parentesi [...] insegna a guardare il mondo non più con gli occhi del confessore, del medico o di Dio [...] ma con quelli di un uomo che procede nella città senz'altro orizzonte che lo spettacolo, senz'altro potere che quello

dei suoi occhi » (1972, pp. 24-25). Analogamente William Burroughs cancellerà dal romanzo interiorità, totalità della coscienza e totalità narrative (o figurative) per accogliere gli effetti inconsueti del *cut-up* come nuova forma dell'essere contemporaneo. « Il montaggio », egli dice, « è davvero molto più vicino ai fatti della percezione, della percezione urbana almeno, che non la pittura figurativa. Fate una passeggiata per una strada di città e mettete giù, su una tela, quello che avete visto. Avete visto mezza persona tagliata in due da una macchina, pezzi e bocconi di cartelli stradali e pubblicità, riflessi da vetrine — un montaggio di frammenti. E la stessa cosa accade con le parole [...] La coscienza è un *cut-up* la vita è un *cut-up*. Ogni volta che andate giù per la strada e guardate fuori dalla finestra, il fluire della coscienza è tagliato da fattori a casaccio » (1981, pp. 32-33).

Nel romanzo *Snow White* di Donald Barthelme, metropolitana versione pop dell'antica fiaba, la questione viene posta nei termini di una impossibile autorità, sia autoriale che dei personaggi, sul mondo delle cose e degli eventi. Nessun punto di vista, nessuna *leadership* del soggetto riesce a tenere le cose al loro posto, a ordinare il modo insolito del loro apparire e così a possederne il senso: « It is unusual. It means something » [...] « No mother it does not mean more than that. Don't go reading things into things mother. Leave things alone. It means what it means. Content yourself with that mother » (1968, p. 107). A chi volesse scorgerne il retro, leggere fra le righe, insinuare interpretazioni fra gli spazi vuoti, le frasi così come le cose oppongono la superficie impenetrabile della loro letteralità: « This 'sense' is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves — looking at them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having 'completed' them (*Idem*, p. 106). Il nesso che esiste fra interiorità, percezioni e fantasie dei personaggi da una parte e segni, cibi in scatola, detriti, merci e etichette di merci di un affollato panorama urbano americano dall'altra,

sembra piuttosto poter essere solo quello della collisione; una collisione che si situa su un tempo della narrazione che è quello del loro semplice venire a contatto. Ne risulta una sorta di mobile convolume di cose e di discorsi, di fisicità del fuori e percezioni del dentro il cui collidere non disegna un senso ma le ingarbugliate tracce di un loro 'fiabesco' incontrarsi e tagliarsi a vicenda, esattamente come in quel collage di frammenti di pioggia e di etica che lo schermo riversa sui telespettatori: « Fragments kept flying off the screen into the audience, fragments of rain and ethics » (*Idem*, p. 105).

Arte e vita, e tanto più arte e stili spettacolari sono accomunati dunque da un analogo confronto con la dimensione metropolitana del vivere contemporaneo; una dimensione fatta di questa insolita, 'fiabesca' rete di rapporti che circola fra frammenti di vita riproposti in *gadgets*, riflessi di cose che ti muovono incontro dalle vetrine, spezzoni di immagini e spezzoni di testi che continuamente doppiano e riassemblano il reale in effetti-di-reale e in cui una continua messa in scena di tutti i sensi possibili fa sì che questi transitino e si incrocino con gli stessi movimenti laterali e con gli stessi esiti inconsueti di un paese delle meraviglie.

Li accomuna, in quest'epoca della registrazione, catalogazione, ripetizione e montaggio il fatto che il reale e l'immaginario sono allineati orizzontalmente e allo stesso titolo lungo la superficie finta e senza rimandi di un sipario, la consapevolezza che la natura seconda di gesti, parole e situazioni sussiste come nuova forma di profondità e di realtà a tutte le avventure dell'invenzione, dell'originalità e della differenza e che queste si vivono lungo il bordo estremo che segna un ripiegamento del linguaggio su se stesso: il gioco di parole, il paradosso, l'umorismo, il collage, l'ironia revivalistica, citazionale, parodistica. Forme, queste, di resistenza della superficie all'ancoraggio referenziale, alla solidificazione semantica, alla fissità di significato, alle successioni lineari, alle coerenze della pragmatica, che appartengono oggi tanto al bricolage dell'arte che al bricolage del poseur metropolitano. Lo stereotipo della

civiltà delle immagini è così accolto e allo stesso tempo distanziato da un sottolineato gioco combinatorio (cfr. Del Sapiro, 1986).

« Saccheggiate il Louvre », grida oggi lo scrittore contemporaneo. L'insegnamento di Burroughs è quello di fare della ripetizione capovolta una forma di singolarità, rubando le parole altrui, quelle dell'arte e quelle della strada, tagliandole e risistemandole:

Fuori dallo sgabuzzino e dentro nei musei, biblioteche, monumenti architettonici, sale da concerto, librerie, sale d'incisione e studi cinematografici di tutto il mondo. Tutto appartiene al ladro ispirato e devoto. Tutti gli artisti della storia, dai pittori delle caverne a Picasso, tutti i poeti e gli scrittori, i musicisti e gli architetti, offrono le loro merci, importunandolo come venditori ambulanti [...]. Parole, colori, luci, suoni, pietra, legno, bronzo appartengono all'artista vivente. Appartengono a chiunque sappia usarli. Saccheggiate il Louvre! *A bas l'originalité*, lo sterile assertivo ego che imprigiona mentre crea. *En haut le vol* — puro, sfrontato, totale. Non siamo responsabili. Rubate tutto quello che è in vista (1981, p. 83).

« Synthesize and survive, take elements from sub-cults you have been through and wear them together », scrive oggi *i-D*, nuova e già affermata rivista degli stili spettacolari degli anni ottanta. Collezionista e centrifugatore di segni già dati è diventato anche il poseur dei nostri giorni. Anche egli sembra aver scoperto le risorse ludiche dell'enciclopedia e dei repertori.

Se questo nuovo poseur vive ormai in una civiltà in cui l'esclusivo primato del reale sull'immaginario (il primato della natura, della realtà, dei referenti sul fittizio delle costruzioni linguistiche) sembra essere stato sconfessato e in molti casi ripudiato, egli, un po' come lo Humpty Dumpty di Lewis Carroll, si è fatto padrone di questo archivio di segni privi di genesi nel reale per scandagliare in proprio questa nuova libertà di transito eterogeneo (in avanti e all'indietro, nella direzione opposta e poi di nuovo al posto di prima) apertasi nella mappa dei circuiti della comunicazione.

Seguirlo in alcuni di questi percorsi, soprattutto negli snodi in cui i processi di significanza di un'estetica sem-

brano averne permeato le modalità di essere e di apparire, significa osservare il funzionamento di una modalità, il come di qualcosa che ancora non vuole rivelare i suoi fini. Non si tratta di osservare la collusione di sensi in rovina, ma di osservare l'intersecarsi di più complesse e segmentate tracce di eventi-narrazione che si allestiscono sul piano dell'apparire e che sembrano produrre senso in eccesso; in eccesso perché non omogeneo e perché non si lascia più disporre sull'asse lineare, consequenziale e gerarchico della causa e dell'effetto, del prima e del dopo, del significato e del significante, del reale e dell'immaginario. Si tratta di avventurarsi con Alice in una autonoma e mutevole costellazione di interazioni e giochi linguistici, tanto più fitti e tanto più deboli.

#### SULLA SCACCHIERA DI *I-D*

Noi non chiediamo di meglio che essere giudicati in base alle nostre apparenze. Dappertutto si racconta che io porto gli occhiali. Se vi confessassi perché, non mi credereste mai. È in ricordo d'un esempio di grammatica: « I nasi sono stati fatti per portare gli occhiali; dunque io ho gli occhiali » (DADA).

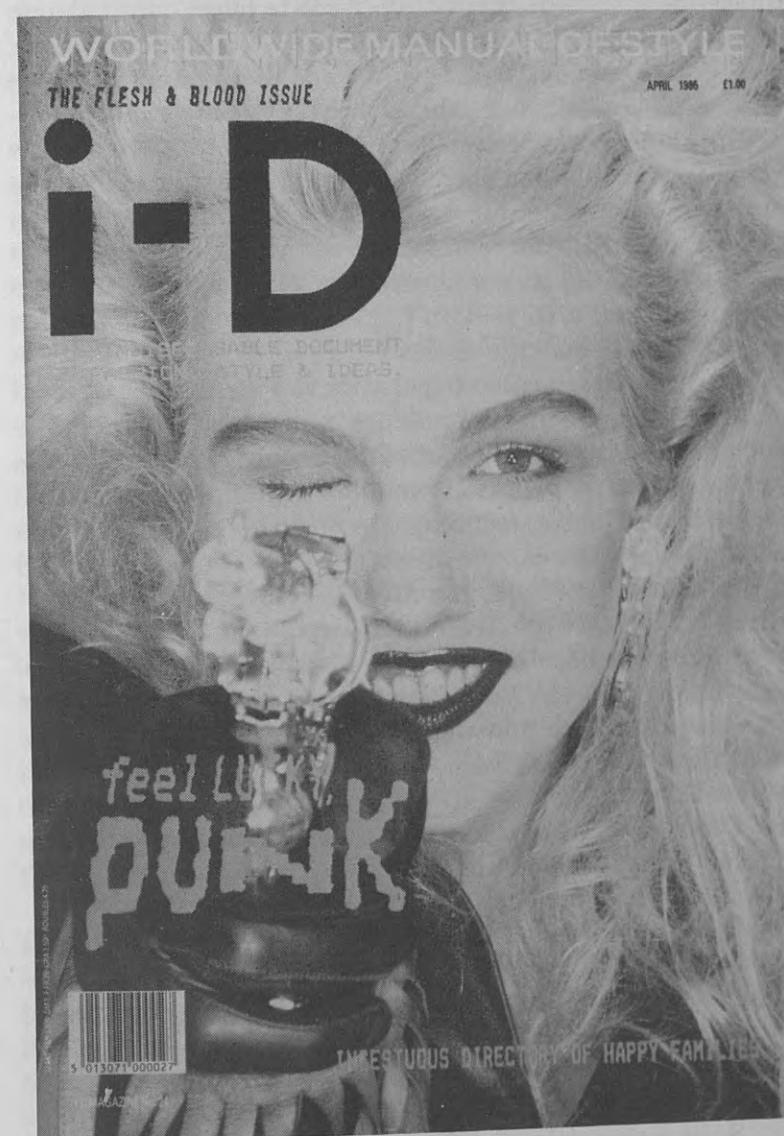
Nell'estate del 1980 dei fotografi si aggirano per le strade di Londra alla ricerca di « i-Deal people » da fotografare per il primo numero di *i-D*: « in-Dispensable manual of style, vehicle for i-Deas ». Con loro, da qualche anno, un pubblico di giovani in cospicua crescita (circa 40.000 le copie attualmente vendute per ciascuno dei sei numeri annuali della rivista) sta attraversando con l'occhio strizzato la giungla visiva del panorama urbano, l'occhio che compare su tutte le copertine della rivista: occhio da fotografo che guarda la strada immaginandola, che ritaglia il reale per immagini. E anche sguardo ammiccante, smalizato, distanziante, sguardo ambiguo e combinatorio, sghembo e capovolto (« I-destroy » / « I-deface »), che sa come incorniciare la posa con ironia differenziante, che

sa come sottoporre le cose alla torsione e all'incestuoso montaggio che si addicono ad una rivisitazione *camp* del *déjà vu*.

Moda, sapere, arte, consumi, i linguaggi e gli oggetti di una ineludibile cultura multimediale si allineano allo stesso titolo di icone di fronte allo sguardo nomade di un nuovo flâneur. Il quale vanta un'artistica versatilità consumistica e combinatoria (« By and where/Buy and wear »). Sa muoversi in un precario equilibrio fra un'ovvietà da supermercato e un'aristocratica resistenza alla decifrazione, fra la familiarità del catalogo (« in-Dex ») e una pratica del ragiro e dell'inganno: « Become a Performance - artist: Significance without the painful labour of rational exposition — wonderful. But *do* try to incorporate video into performance somewhere if you possibly can » (*i-D*, 11, 1983).

Dandy di una nuova e più democratica bohème ha deciso di salvarsi orientandosi nella fitta trama dei linguaggi metropolitani con autonoma e tecnologica competenza compositiva: una volontà di sopravvivenza: una politica del possibile (cfr. Chambers, 1986). « When people say that you are a jack of all trades and a master of none, this is a lie and a hoax because change can only increase your knowledge and perception of things. I've survived because I became a chameleon and I still try to wear as many hats as possible — it keeps you on your toes and keeps you on the move [...] if you specialise you become a stone. You've got to get up and do whatever you want to do *now* — you shouldn't necessarily accept the society you are born into — create your own opportunities and be damned » (*i-D*, 30, 1985).

Con video e computer, nel nome di Darwin e di una spensierata e divulgativa teoria della significanza, esplora percorsi già compiuti dall'arte d'avanguardia scavalcando in modo parassitario e irriverente il confine fra arte del museo e cultura di massa, trasferendone però il gioco dalla galleria d'arte alla passerella della strada. Annuncia anzi una nuova politica dell'arte, un'arte della vita, « art as an informational combat » (*i-D*, 16, 1984), una politica che riconosce come realtà l'attuale continua riscrittura mass-



mediale del passato da parte del presente e ne fa il campo di una individuale arte di adattamento e di esplorazione: intasando il sistema, sovraccaricando le linee, confondendo i codici, attivando attraverso una serie plurale di sensi, altri possibili sensi. « The multiverse theory suggests that we are part of a great sandwich of alternate realities co-existing side by side but vibrating on different wave lengths [...] keep your options open — don't form rigid conclusions or basis or information from only one source — absorb what you can for as many different views as you can — keep flexible [...] as circumstances change then RESPOND AND ADAPT. Learn to relearn [...] Scramble, put the system on over load, jam the codes » (*Idem*).

Pone se stesso come oggetto da rappresentare, oggetto di un protagonismo assemblato sulla base delle molte opzioni contenute nell'inesauribile archivio dei segni della città. Accorda la propria immagine ai tempi e ai processi di un immaginario tecnologico. Si affida infatti ad una memoria versatile capace di seguire le vicende di linguaggi che si ripetono e che incrociandosi si metamorfizzano. « Hey children of the hi-tech informational speed up your becoming wiseboys and wisegirls learning the new game. Synthesize and survive, take elements from sub-cults you have been through and wear them together. Like, tell me where are you going with your dusty spring-field collection tucked under your arm as you swagger along in half-mast skin keks, blue ted crepes, punk studded belt, gun-fighter waistcoat and shirt, and your granfathers top-hat covering your pet clark fringe » (*i-D*, 11, 1983).

È certamente una radicale emancipazione da soluzioni privilegiate, uno spregiudicato sottrarsi all'impegnata semantica delle sottoculture e delle controculture degli ultimi trenta anni, quello che ne permette la giocosa e eclettica rivisitazione, la rappresentazione 'in effigie', la riduzione e citazione.

Sulla passerella di *i-D* — « in-Dispensable document of fashion, style and Ideas » per le nuove generazioni degli anni ottanta — sfilava restituito in duplicato, e organizzato secondo la contiguità della sequenza fotografica, l'intero

pianeta degli stili: una scia di parole descrive facce vere cucite su versioni di punks e neoskins, neomods, neoromantici e neoteds. « DO-WHAT: *i-D*'s indispensable gui-De to leisure action. STRAIGHT-UP: *i-D*'s report from your open-air catwalk — selected from a cast of thousands — all in glorious monochrome ». Lo *script*, di immagini, di desideri, di comportamenti, contempla come suo modello l'enciclopedia.

Un po' come in *Esercizi di stile* di Raymond Queneau, nella vetrina di *i-D* sono praticabili infinite variazioni di stile ma nessun esercizio può ambire al privilegio del « a solo », così come nessun episodio può sfuggire ai suoi numerosi racconti. E questi non sembrano dire altro che le diverse *maniere* di raccontare.

È estranea a questa logica da comprimari l'ambizione a monopolizzare la scena. Sembra mancare a questa completa libertà di prodursi in tutte le parti la pretesa di fede autentica, difficile ancorare il tempo accelerato di questa spericolata scorribanda semiotica nell'enciclopedia degli stili alla produzione motivata di significato. « Stop thinking. Join/Start a cult », invita *i-D* con ironia compiacente (11, 1983), « there are a lot of excellent groups around already to join with a startling selection of new looks for this season ». Lo si fa assumendo un simbolo, un segno, giocando di ripetizioni e variazioni con forme già disponibili e che in questa epoca di usura accelerata nascono già segnate dal destino del bene inventariabile, della voce da repertorio.

Arbitrari esercizi di stile, dunque? Episodi che non sono una 'scelta di vita'? « The secret is to turn yourself from a person into an object — something glossy, synthetic, opaque » (*i-D*, 15, 1984). Forme eccentriche, volutamente svuotate che chiedono violentemente attenzione solo per dire il proprio statuto intransitivo, transitorio, insensuale? « Survival rules: 'I don't tell anyone, anything, anymore' » (*i-D*, 11, 1983).

Il senso contenuto nelle descrizioni delle immagini in *i-D* è estremamente povero, se non assente, e lo spazio lasciato vuoto dall'universo verbale che assimila organi-

camente il mondo delle cose e dei comportamenti all'identità del soggetto ha creato uno iato che è riempito da informazioni merceologiche e tecnologiche: tipo, qualità, provenienza, costo degli elementi che compongono l'immagine, modalità del suo allestimento, scenario della sua esibizione, ecc. Si tratta di un'immagine che nutre una forte sfiducia nell'universo verbale del senso e aspira a imporsi come effetto ottico, come qualcosa che, come ha osservato Barthes a proposito dello statuto dell'oggetto in Robbe-Grillet, « non esiste al di là del suo fenomeno » (Barthes, 1972, p. 15). Da questo punto di vista il nuovo flâneur è parte della progressiva visualizzazione della civiltà contemporanea, un'apparizione semioticamente forte dello scenario metropolitano la cui identità ci sfugge; *i-D* è solo una delle vetrine in cui — parafrasando Barthes — si può dire che egli è colto come in uno specchio e costituito davanti a noi come spettacolo (cfr. *Idem*, p.13).

Logoratosi il rapporto omologico fra segno e stile di vita, l'impegnata semantica delle controculture e sottoculture degli ultimi tre decenni è stata sostituita dunque da un'estetica della rappresentazione che è anche però drammatizzazione della fenomenologia del suo farsi. Non solo cioè esibizione di un effetto di superficie, ma anche esibizione del processo di creazione dell'immagine che richiama il gioco di manipolazione e giustapposizione dei segni, il modo di pensarli, di deformarli, di immaginarli; gioco che non rimanda più all'altrove dei significati, all'altrove del valore: bello/brutto, giusto/sbagliato, ecc. Lo stile « non esiste al di là del suo fenomeno ». Non esprime perché non riguarda più il valore ma è esercizio creativo sulle forme, sulla loro dimensione tecnologica, che si consuma all'interno della distanza che si è stabilita fra l'immagine e il soggetto, nello spazio cioè eroso ad una significazione lineare dall'intensificata circolazione dei segni nella civiltà dei mass-media.

Il nuovo poseur trasferisce dunque nella strada il gioco 'cool' con i segni, il trattamento indifferente delle forme (privo cioè di investimento passionale), ironico e anestetiz-

zato, nel senso di Duchamp e delle avanguardie artistiche: dada, surrealismo, nouveau roman, pop art.

Il gioco di giustapposizione dei segni a cui egli si abbandona è cedimento, direbbe Baudrillard (1980), al potere di seduzione delle cose, degli oggetti, degli stereotipi della civiltà dei mass-media — fino ad essere da essi pensato e costituito — ma nello stesso tempo è un modo per esplorare quei segni e le combinatorie, gli effetti di senso a sorpresa che l'esercizio associativo del collage consente; una possibilità questa esclusa nella deterministica logica del gioco casuale e totale dei modelli sostenuta da Baudrillard (cfr. *Idem*, pp. 189-214). E cioè quel gioco deformante con le cose che permette nell'accezione di Robbe-Grillet di reinventare il mondo senza però la pretesa di attribuirgli il Senso e la Verità, di immaginarlo senza però assoggettarlo:

Nel sogno, nel ricordo, come nello sguardo, la nostra immaginazione è la forza organizzatrice della nostra vita, del *nostro* mondo. Ogni uomo, a sua volta, deve reinventare le cose attorno a sé. Sono le vere cose, chiare, dure e brillanti, del mondo reale. Esse non rimandano a nessun altro mondo. Esse non sono il segno di nient'altro fuorché di se stesse. E il solo contatto che l'uomo può mantenere con esse, è quello di immaginarle (1965, p. 120).

È una competenza manipolatoria che egli (il poseur) esercita sulla tecnologia della propria immagine e sulla relazione mai fissa rispetto ad altre immagini; competenza nell'allestimento di crittogrammi che come nel *ready-made* inaugurato da Duchamp, adottato da dadaisti e surrealisti, e continuato poi in modi diversi dalla pop art, interviene sulla linea di confine fra automatismo e manualità, muovendosi fra la familiarità seducente dello stereotipo, del catalogo, dell'archivio e l'anarchia dell'esercizio associativo.

È un esercizio manipolatorio, di citazione, di scomposizione, di taglio e di permuta, un collage delle forme apparenti che come nei libri di William Burroughs vorrebbe strappare ad una parola registrata, disattivata e parassitaria un possibile senso nascosto:

To put it another way IBM machine controls thought feeling and *apparent* sensory impressions — subliminal lark [...] We fold writers of all time in together and record radio programs, movie sound-tracks, TV and juke box songs all the words of the world stirring around in a cement mixer and pour in the resistance message « Calling partisans of all nations — Cut word lines — Shift linguals — Free doorways — Vibrate 'tourists' — Word falling — Photo falling — Break through in Grey Room » (*The Soft Machine*, p. 140).

È l'esplosione della logica e della sintassi come nelle poesie dadaiste di Tzara costruite con ritagli di parole di giornale agitate in un sacchetto e scelte a caso; è la sfida all'involucro ottuso delle parole fatte stridere da Burroughs nell'automatismo di un magnetofono:

« Now listen to this ». The words were smudged together. They snarled and whined and barked. It was as if the words themselves were called into question and forced to give up their hidden meanings. « Inched tape .. the same recording you just heard pulled back and forth across the head .. You can get the same effect by switching a recording on and off at very short intervals. Listen carefully and you will hear words that were not in the original text » (*The Ticket that Exploded*, p. 18).

È la frizione anarchica dei ruoli, dei generi, dei livelli, dei discorsi:

Many applications of the spliced-tape principle will suggest themselves to the alert reader. Suppose [...] Or suppose you are a singer. Well splice your singing in with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Animals. Splice yourself in with newscasters, prime ministers, presidents. Why stop there? Why stop anywhere? Everybody splice himself in with everybody else. Communication must be made total. only way to stop it (*Idem*, pp. 165-66).

Come nei *ready-made* di Duchamp e di molte avanguardie artistiche del Novecento, il poseur pare poter riscattare dunque la parola e l'oggetto familiari dalla loro banalità quotidiana, promuovendoli a oggetti estetici e cercando nell'abbinamento incongruo il modo di sovvertirne la funzione. Ha scelto di camminare fra cose e parole fidando nel proprio sguardo; intessendo fra di esse trame segrete e partigiane che lo sguardo cerca di sottrarre ai raccordi ordinati dell'universo verbale, accendendo incroci

non espressivi ma creativi che si insinuano negli interstizi del senso sovraccaricandolo e disturbandolo. La funzione se non sovvertita è disturbata. « *i-D* is not for those who want the ins & outs. We're still reading between the lines, giving space to contradictory and contrary view-points » (16, 1984).

*i-D* (« infantile Disorder ») ha la pretesa 'infantile' di volerlo fare (e in modo eccessivo e spropositato) il senso più che possederlo o svelarlo. Una metafisica si trasforma così in una creativa manualità, una giocosa *techne* e la pagina diventa traccia di questa macchinazione: ritagli di immagini e di scrittura che sovrapponendosi e tagliandosi cancellano illusorie tridimensionalità e svelano l'unico spazio reale che li sostiene, la carta della pagina.

Non è un letale appiattimento del mondo che così si realizza — l'incontro con il vuoto e la morte (« the Great Leveller ») che Dick Hebdige pessimisticamente lamenta su queste pagine di *Anglistica* (cfr. « The Bottom Line on Planet One ») — quanto piuttosto una incontrollabile proliferazione di senso e una insolita familiarità con i dispositivi di produzione dei linguaggi della cultura di massa; che ne consente una frequentazione individuale anche, e schiude la possibilità di singolarità giocate su un immaginario tecnologico pirata, fatto di furto, pastiche e parodia. L'alienato rapporto fra il soggetto e il reale, fra il soggetto e l'origine dei linguaggi nella civiltà dei media sembra così poter essere sanato sulla base delle impensate possibilità creative che anche per l'uomo comune si aprono all'interno dell'intricata mappa di segni che caratterizzano la contemporaneità. Sono molti oggi gli spazi 'profani' in cui diventa possibile il progetto delle avanguardie artistiche, il superamento fra creatività ed esperienza.

Ma è proprio a causa dell'assenza del concetto stesso di alienazione nella cultura postmoderna, osserva Terry Eagleton (1985), che un tale progetto può realizzarsi solo come distorsione farsesca e caricaturale; un progetto che verrebbe ad essere solo mimato ma senza la carica politica eversiva delle avanguardie. Senza alienazione, senza il senso modernista della perdita e della mancanza (man-



canza dell'autentico, del reale) non può esserci, continua Eagleton, utopia e impulso rivoluzionario. « The traditional metaphysical mystery was a question of depths, absences, foundations, abysmal explorations; the mystery of some modernist art is just the mind-bending truth that things are what they are, intriguingly self-identical, utterly shorn of cause, motive or ratification; postmodernism preserves this self-identity, but erases its modernist scandalousness » (*Idem*, p. 61).

Se è vero però, come qui si sostiene, che la proposizione di una somiglianza del mondo con se stesso, la coincidenza delle cose con la propria superficie, non è più motivo di oltraggio per l'epoca capitalistica dei feticci e dell'autoreferenzialità delle merci, è anche vero che è lì, sulla pellicola delle cose, che si allestiscono i misteri del presente. Bisognerà forse volgere altrove lo sguardo: dai misteri delle profondità e delle origini verso i misteri di una dismisura, di una eccedenza dei linguaggi rispetto al mondo che è indice di autoreferenzialità e insieme di una nuova e incontrollabile ricchezza. Sarebbe come avventurarsi con Alice in un 'fiabesco' mondo di segni mutevoli.

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'SF' E POST-MODERNO:  
DUE MODELLI NARRATIVI \*

di  
Carlo Pagetti e Oriana Palusci

1. LE SIRENE DI TITANO NON CANTANO PER NOI

Nata come narrativa specializzata con intenzioni didascaliche e forti componenti formulaiche prese a prestito da altri generi di consumo più consolidati (il gotico e la *detective novel*, il romanzo di guerra e il *western*), la *science-fiction* si propone, fin dalla sua affermazione sulle riviste americane degli anni '20, come romanzo dell'ibrido e dell'alieno, in bilico tra l'esaltazione stupefatta del progresso tecnologico e l'angoscia quasi ancora decadente per apocalissi storiche o naturali, tra la riflessione utopica e il sensazionalismo orrifico<sup>1</sup>.

È soltanto negli anni '50, tuttavia, che la *science-fiction* americana comincia a riflettere sulla sua funzione e sui suoi codici narrativi, all'interno di un'area diversificata della cultura di massa che deve fare i conti con *mass-media*

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\* La prima parte di questo saggio è stata scritta da Carlo Pagetti. La seconda parte da Oriana Palusci.

<sup>1</sup> Poiché non pare opportuno un ennesimo riepilogo della produzione critica sulla storia e sull'estetica della *science fiction* (SF), di considerevoli proporzioni nell'uno e nell'altro caso, ci si limita a fare riferimento a due pubblicazioni miscellanee, *La fantascienza e la critica*, a cura di L. Russo, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1980, e *SFC: Fantascienza e critica*, a cura di C. Pagetti, numero monografico de *La città e le stelle*, 5, Autunno-Inverno 1986.

sempre più sofisticati, e che costituisce un polo anti-mimetico, entro cui confluiscono la tradizione *fantasy* rivitalizzata dalla pubblicazione di *The Lord of the Rings* di Tolkien e la diffusione in un vasto pubblico di lettori dei romanzi utopici e distopici di Orwell e C. S. Lewis, di Ayn Rand e di Skinner.

Se la SF acquista una sua dignità letteraria grazie all'opera di autori come Ray Bradbury, se essa imbocca la strada della satira e della polemica anti-industriale — più che anti-capitalistica — con i romanzi della cosiddetta *social science-fiction* (tra cui vanno ricordati almeno *The Space Merchants* di F. Pohl e C. M. Kornbluth, e *Player Piano* del giovane Vonnegut), verso la fine degli anni '50 cominciano a coagularsi segnali di una volontà narrativa ancora più complessa, non volta tanto al recupero di una tradizione nobilitante (quella del *romance* ottocentesco di Poe e di Hawthorne in Bradbury, quello della linea distopica inglese in Pohl), quanto alla contaminazione spregiudicata tra forme narrative alte e basse, tra istanze divulgativo-tecnologiche e pulsioni comiche e bizzarre, tra modelli ancora letterari e il nuovo universo espressivo rimodellato dai *mass-media* attraverso i *comics*, il cinema, la televisione. Con il realizzarsi dell'utopia tecnologica dei robot e delle navi spaziali, con la progressiva conquista dello spazio attorno alla Terra, culminata, nel decennio successivo, non solo nel primo sbarco umano sulla Luna, ma nella proposta del programma politico-culturale della « new frontier », l'America si prepara ad assumere i contorni di un enorme paese tracciato sulla mappa dell'immaginario. All'interno di un simile universo, in cui realtà storica e simulazione elettronica tendono a sovrapporsi e a saldarsi in un inestricabile *unicum*, le opere della SF assumono il ruolo di piccole Bibbie semiserie del nuovo mondo, di manuali popolari di astronavigazione con cui orientarsi per le rotte del cielo e anche per quelle della Terra, di trasmissioni radiofoniche da cui giungono direttamente (come accade in alcuni romanzi di P. K. Dick) i messaggi divini.

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I testimoni più sensibili non mancano di avvertire i segnali di una vasta metamorfosi culturale in atto. Nel 1965, nel suo fondamentale « The New Mutants », Leslie Fiedler sostiene che « the movement of futurist literature from the periphery to the center of culture provides a clue to certain essential meanings of our times and of the art which best reflects it » e individua un'area comune tra SF e post-moderno<sup>2</sup>. In *City of Words*, la cui prima edizione risale al 1971, Tony Tanner introduce il concetto di *entropic fiction*, sottolinea l'importanza di V di Pynchon, dedica un intero, seppur non particolarmente penetrante, capitolo a Kurt Vonnegut<sup>3</sup>, ricorda quanto certi modelli fantascientifici influenzino il gruppo stravagante dei Pranksters, che fanno capo a Ken Kesey, e che vengono collegati sia al mondo fantastico dei « Superheroes » prodotti dalla Marvel Comics, sia a due opere di SF: *Childhood's End* (1953) dell'inglese Arthur Clarke, e *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) dell'ex-ufficiale della Marina Americana Robert Heinlein<sup>4</sup>.

Non vi è alcun dubbio che certi aspetti della SF americana degli anni '50 abbiano contribuito a preparare quell'ondata culturale che viene identificata con il romanzo post-moderno<sup>5</sup>, una delle cui radici andrebbe, appunto, rintracciata nei racconti ai limiti dell'assurdo e di una biz-

<sup>2</sup> L. Fiedler, « The New Mutants », in *Collected Essays*, New York, Stein and Day, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 379-400. L'interesse di Fiedler per la SF — un interesse sempre vivo anche se di solito mai approfondito — suggerisce anche alcune delle considerazioni più interessanti di *The Return of Vanishing Indian* (1968).

<sup>3</sup> T. Tanner, « The Uncertain Messenger », in *City of Words*, London, Cape, 1976 (1971<sup>1</sup>), pp. 181-201.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, pp. 387-388.

<sup>5</sup> Sul romanzo post-moderno americano ci si limita ad alcune indicazioni sommarie e alla bibliografia ivi contenuta e discussa: C. Gorrillier, « Il cerchio magico della nuova narrativa americana », in *Alfabeta*, giugno 1979, pp. 7-9; G. Carboni, « La finzione necessaria: considerazioni sulla *postmodern fiction* negli USA », *Calibano*, 7, 1982, pp. 58-85; F. Garnerò, « Come scrivere un romanzo post-moderno », Torino, *Gli occhi dello stūpa*, 1984.

[3]

zarria quasi surreale che apparivano soprattutto sulla rivista *Galaxy* e di cui diede, anche alla nostra distratta cultura, qualche saggio brillante Sergio Solmi nelle inaudite *Meraviglie del possibile*, uscite nel '59. Tra le voci spesso ingiustamente sottovalutate (Cordwainer Smith, Farmer, Dick), si impone la figura più nota e riconosciuta tra gli ispiratori del post-moderno, quel Kurt Vonnegut, jr., già alla fine degli anni '60 oggetto di ampi riconoscimenti critici<sup>6</sup>, ma ridotto progressivamente al ruolo di stanco ripetitore di formule dopo la fioritura dei primi romanzi di SF, di *Mother Night* e di *Slaughterhouse 5*, che, appunto assieme a *The Sirens of Titan*, costituiscono un efficace trittico capace di sovrapporre, attraverso personaggi e situazioni ricorrenti, immaginario tecnologico, riflessione storica, preoccupazioni etico-sociali sull'America degli anni '50-'60. È pur vero che la critica maggiore, come è nel caso di Fiedler e di Tanner, continua a privilegiare scrittori che tendono ad accostarsi in modo provvisorio e, per così dire, strumentale, ai materiali più solidi della SF: William Burroughs, Barth, Pynchon<sup>7</sup>. Ma forse i risultati più interessanti nella direzione di una nuova sensibilità post-moderna capace di coinvolgere anche la cultura di massa e di recepirne certi fermenti innovativi vengono raggiunti quando romanzieri come Philip K. Dick e lo stesso Vonnegut si ricollegano in modo ironico e dissacratorio proprio alla tradizione fantascientifica, con i suoi diversi linguaggi specialistici, con la contaminazione dei codici dei *mass-media*,

<sup>6</sup> Basterà ricordare J. Klinkowitz and J. Somer, eds., *The Vonnegut Statement*, New York, Delacorte, 1973. Mi sia consentito ricordare anche un mio contributo, « Kurt Vonnegut tra fantascienza e utopia », apparso in *Studi Americani*, 12, 1966, pp. 301-322.

<sup>7</sup> V di Pynchon ha avuto comunque recentemente un significativo riconoscimento da parte dei cosiddetti « cyberpunks », che lavorano all'interno delle convenzioni SF: « And the cyberpunks treasure a special fondness for SF's native visionaries ... With a special admiration for a writer whose integration of technology and literature stands unsurpassed: Thomas Pynchon » (B. Sterling, « Preface » a *Mirror-shades. The Cyberpunk Anthology*, New York, Arbor House, 1966, p. VII).

con la voluta arbitrarietà di ogni messaggio futurologico. Allora la SF può liberare le energie contenute nel grande serbatoio dei miti futuristici ed esprimersi come il *philosophical romance* dei nostri tempi<sup>8</sup>.

*The Sirens of Titan* viene pubblicato nel 1959, nello stesso anno di *Time out of Joint* di Dick. Mentre Dick approfondisce la vena kafkiana e metafisica che prevale nelle successive opere degli anni '60, Vonnegut, abbandonando i troppo rigidi scenari distopici di *Player Piano* (dove pure si manifestava un intento satirico-clownesco di lontana matrice swiftiana), dà corpo a quella visione ludica e paradossale dell'immaginario tecnologico che è il contributo più efficace della SF al romanzo americano post-moderno. David Ketterer, a questo proposito, sostiene che « *The Sirens of Titan* provides the best examples of science-fiction irony » e li elenca come « satiric humor ... the *reductio ad absurdum* ... parody ... the humour of realization ... and the absurd »<sup>9</sup>. Del resto, fin dal 1965, nella prefazione alla prima edizione italiana del romanzo di Vonnegut, Umberto Eco aveva paragonato l'infundibolo di Rumfoord all'aleph di Borges<sup>10</sup>. Se i riferimenti a Borges, a Swift, a Voltaire, appaiono tutti legittimi, *The Sirens of Titan* nasce da un progetto narrativo che si radica nella realtà americana, dove la fantasia scientifica, alimentata dal suc-

<sup>8</sup> La definizione è di Northrop Frye, in « The Renaissance of Books » (1974), in *Spiritus Mundi*, Toronto, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1976, p. 56. Tra gli scrittori di SF che hanno dato un loro contributo al post-moderno vi è anche l'inglese J. G. Ballard, a cui non diamo, a causa dell'impostazione 'americana' del discorso, il dovuto spazio.

<sup>9</sup> D. Ketterer, « Take-Off to Cosmic Irony: Science-Fiction Humor and The Absurd », in S. Blacher Cohen, ed., *Comic Relief. Humor in Contemporary American Literature*, Urbana, University of Illinois P., 1978, p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> U. Eco, « Prefazione » a K. Vonnegut, *Le sirene di Titano*, trad. di R. Rambelli, Piacenza, sfbc, 1965, p. 6. Una successiva riedizione della stessa traduzione, per i tipi dell'Editrice Nord (Milano, 1981), si è avvalsa di una mia introduzione: « Un biglietto per Tralfamadore » (pp. I-VI), in parte ripresa anche in questo intervento.

cesso dei primi voli spaziali, diventa *folk* contemporaneo, apre un dialogo con quelle masse televisive che, qualche anno dopo, seguiranno le avventure cosmiche dell'astronave « Enterprise » di *Star Trek*, trasformandosi, nel processo, in un rituale stregonesco esorcizzato con le armi della parodia e del grottesco.

Il primo obiettivo delle *Sirens of Titan* è la decodificazione in chiave farsesca delle convenzioni favolistiche della SF come *space opera* nelle sue varie forme (romanzi, cinema, *comics*). Da ciò deriva anche l'accumulo stravagante degli intrecci e delle situazioni, che vengono quasi sprecati, come già notava Eco. La favola è una burla dichiarata, nella più sfacciata tradizione dello *hoax* scientifico ottocentesco caro anche a Poe, ed esemplificata attraverso la catena delle trame inserite l'una dentro l'altra, la cialtronesca inverosimiglianza delle trovate pseudo-scientifiche che distruggono qualsiasi *sense of wonder* e fanno il verso alla pomposità cosmica di autori come Asimov. Infatti, se la colossale trilogia asimoviana di *Foundation*, pubblicata all'inizio degli anni '50, poteva aprirsi con una citazione della 116esima edizione dell'*Encyclopedia Galactica*, di stapletoniana memoria, l'onnisciente narratore vonneguttiano ricorre alla quattordicesima edizione della *Child's Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do*, che spiega nel modo più idiota e melenso il concetto-chiave di infundibolo cronosinclastico. E tutto il romanzo sarà appunto il racconto di un'avventura cosmica ridotta a demenziale favola per bambini, fino agli episodi della guerra tra Marte e la Terra, e all'apparizione clownesca su Titano del robot tralfamadoriano Salo — una specie di angelo-pagliaccio, descritto come un grosso mandarino fornito di tre zampe dai piedi gonfiabili che producono molesti suoni risucchianti.

Le meraviglie del futuro, lungi dall'essere asettiche creazioni di plastica e metallo, assomigliano, se osservate con occhio attento, a baracconi da circo equestre. Così, l'astronave che dovrebbe portare il protagonista Malachi Constant e la sua strana famiglia su Titano pare nuova di zecca, ma al suo interno si rivela l'alcova un po' sporca di alcune coppiette clandestine. L'uso del dato scientifico

non è più mitico-favoloso o severamente didascalico, ma piuttosto volutamente capriccioso e arbitrario, sempre manipolabile come il corpo di gomma di Mr. Fantastic, l'Uomo Elastico capo dei Fantastic Four, creati in quegli anni assieme a Spider Man dalla Marvel Comics, e riconducibile a una umoristica realtà terrena.

Anche l'uso della letteratura 'alta' è significativo delle forme dissacratorie care al post-moderno. Se in *Time out of Joint* Dick colloca al centro di un artificiale paesaggio urbano un eroe paranoico, costretto suo malgrado a svolgere il ruolo già assunto dall'Amleto shakespeariano, la presenza fantasmatica e vagolante del miliardario Rumfoord (la cui moglie, appunto, il protagonista sposerà come un figlio incestuoso) ricorda parodisticamente le apparizioni del padre di Amleto.

Il procedimento narrativo impiegato da Vonnegut, analizzato in dettaglio da Christine Brooke-Rose<sup>11</sup>, si traduce in un linguaggio che assume tonalità epico-infantili, come se lo scrittore si rivolgesse, con sentenziosa grossolanità pseudo-intellettuale, a un pubblico sprovvisto, a cui vuole raccontare una favola bizzarra. Perciò la struttura del periodo, sia nei dialoghi che nelle descrizioni, deve essere piana, proprio come in una Enciclopedia per bambini, e la complessità di una situazione va smontata attraverso un mero elenco di dettagli, incapsulati in una sequenza di coordinate e di brevi frasi principali. A poco più di un innocuo balbettamento infantile si riducono le considerazioni di Rumfoord che ha elaborato la grottesca messinscena cosmica della guerra tra « Marziani » e Terrestri:

Rumfoord had that magnificently-led few on Mars — and he was their leader.

He had showmanship.

He was genially willing to shed the blood of others.

He had a plausible new religion to introduce at the war's end<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> C. Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Cambridge, Cambridge U. P., 1981, pp. 258-268.

<sup>12</sup> K. Vonnegut, jr., *The Sirens of Titan*, New York, Dell, 1959, p. 174.

Il massacro degli innocenti « Marziani », voluto da Rumfoord, prepara lo scenario per una religione del pentimento attraverso cui Vonnegut potrà nuovamente capovolgere le aspirazioni cosmico-teologiche della SF in parodia e simulazione. Infatti, anche Rumfoord è manovrato dalle super-intelligenze di Tralfamadore, che hanno creato la Terra e la sua storia per i propri fini, o, piuttosto, per il più banale e insignificante dei loro obiettivi — la consegna di un inutile messaggio di saluto a un'altra galassia. Le successive manipolazioni che, scendendo di livello in livello, fanno di Malachi Constant il centro negativo di tutto l'universo e il capro espiatorio di ogni peccato dell'umanità irredenta e irredimibile passa attraverso la mediazione parodistica del linguaggio e l'effetto di straniamento e de-familiarizzazione che tutto ciò provoca nel lettore. Su Marte, ad esempio, Malachi, che si chiama Unk, e il suo amico Boaz sono ridotti a due personaggi beckettiani di *Waiting for Godot* o di *Endgame*.

È vero che, nella parte conclusiva delle *Sirens*, Vonnegut sembra introdurre una componente di genuino e più tradizionale *pathos*, con la ribellione di Salo al suo destino di automa, la morte di Beatrice su Titano e quella di Malachi, solo in un paesaggio nevoso in cui si riassume e si spegne la sua vuota 'missione'. Ma anche nelle ultime pagine le lacrime sono finte — una beffa nei confronti del lettore disattento, pronto a dimenticare che l'estrema visione paradisiaca di Malachi è indotta in lui, mediante ipnotizzazione, dal pietoso Salo, simile al *deus-ex-machina* di uno zuccheroso film degli anni '50. La serena morte nell'ipnosi ribadisce la qualità aspramente ironica del romanzo, e conferma in modo definitivo l'incapacità umana (e americana) di possedere del reale una visione diretta e non manipolata dalle forze occulte dei *mass-media* e delle loro metaforiche proiezioni narrative. Il moralismo vonneguttiano, del resto, se tocca già nelle *Sirens* la corda dell'indignazione (come nella descrizione del massacro dei Marziani, controfigure capovolte dei mostri di Wells), è spesso oggetto della burla narrativa. A differenza che per

i *pamphleteers* settecenteschi, non c'è moralista che non si possa salvare dal suo stesso cinismo.

Come per Dick, è nel gioco, nella manipolazione, nel travestimento che va cercata una paradossale salvezza. Ciò riconduce alla funzione dello scrittore di SF (ma anche, nello stesso tempo, a quella del romanziere post-moderno), che da sentenzioso divulgatore o da profeta cosmico si è trasformato in un burlesco ideatore di giochi dell'immaginazione. Infatti, il gioco dei giochi è il romanzo stesso, nella sua unità e totalità di opera narrativa che interpreta se stessa come divertimento letterario tragicomico — parodia, come abbiamo visto, della *space opera*, parodia della scienza, parodia del linguaggio dei *comics*, parodia del *corpus* letterario americano, anche, che compare in alcuni suoi statuti e codici più significativi (il sermone, il romanzo di iniziazione alla vita, la ballata popolare)<sup>13</sup>, e parodia della letteratura come procedura comunicativa.

La tradizione letteraria ha valorizzato la funzione della scrittura come comunicazione di messaggi altamente significativi. Lo scrittore è in grado di comunicare un messaggio — che può essere anche un messaggio di morte, o di crisi, o di autodistruzione —, ma che si carica comunque di implicazioni universali. *The Sirens of Titan* è un romanzo attorno a un messaggio inesistente:

« Well » — murmured Malachi Constant, there in the chimneylike room under the staircase in Newport, « it looks like the messenger is finally going to be used ».

« What was that? » said Rumfoord.

« My name — it means *faithful messenger* », said Constant. « What's the message? »

« Sorry », said Rumfoord, « I know nothing about any message ». He cocked his head quizzically. « Somebody said something to you about a message? »<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Osserva la Brooke-Rose: « Four genres are thus blended in light-touch irony: science-fiction, the realistic novel, the children's story, the marvellous (but as anti-quest) » (*op. cit.*, p. 268).

<sup>14</sup> K. Vonnegut, Jr., *The Sirens of Titan*, cit., p. 35.

Alla fine, il 'messaggio' del romanzo starà essenzialmente nella scoperta, da parte del lettore come dei personaggi, che non esistono 'messaggi' nel senso tradizionale del termine, come non esiste più opera d'arte capace di rendere 'realisticamente' la realtà. Allo stesso modo, la SF post-moderna recupera, ma anche ricicla ironicamente, i motivi dell'arte modernista. Agli « uomini vuoti » che abitano la città-fantasma di Ragle Gumm, l'eroe di *Time out of Joint* di Dick, si affiancano le sirene di cartapesta di Titano, che non possono più cantare non solo per il Prufrock di T. S. Eliot, ma proprio per nessuno di noi, smaliziati lettori post-moderni.

Negli anni '80, dopo che al discorso di Vonnegut, Dick, Ballard, si è aggiunto il contributo in chiave femminista di scrittrici come Joanna Russ, il ciclo si chiude alla luce di una ricerca di valori tradizionali o « umanistici »<sup>15</sup>, che si colloca tutta nella dimensione dell'alieno e della cultura dei *mass-media*. I film tratti dalla serie televisiva americana *Star Trek* esaltano la saggezza e l'equilibrio spirituale del semi-umano Mr. Spock, interpretato da quella specie di ossuto e orecchiuto cadavere ambulante che è l'attore Leonard Nimoy, regista anche del secondo film di *Star Trek*, *The Wrath of Khan*, dove Spock-Nimoy diviene l'unico redentore accettabile in un universo ridotto alla caricatura di un dramma shakespeariano ambientato nello spazio. Cosicché, mentre Mr. Spock sacrifica eroicamente la sua vita (salvo a rinascere, come un nuovo Cristo, in *Star Trek III*) in nome della comunità rappresentata dall'equipaggio dell'« Enterprise », l'arci-nemico dotato di qualità superomistiche muore scagliandosi contro l'astronave di Spock come il Capitano Ahab contro Moby Dick o come Macbeth contro Macduff: « You can-

<sup>15</sup> F. La Polla, ad esempio, parla acutamente di « sostanza umanistica » nella sua brillante analisi del serial televisivo *Star Trek*, in « Star Trek: a casa dopo l'uragano (magnetico) », *Cinema e Cinema*, aprile-settembre 1983, p. 65.

not escape me ... Hades has taken me, but from this heart I stab thee ... For hate's sake ... I spit my last breath at thee ... »<sup>16</sup>.

La ricerca della divinità condotta da una personalità psicotica e allucinata riporta l'ultimo Dick di *Valis* (1981) a tracciare una sorta di angosciata autobiografia travestita da SF, dove Dio è diventato, appunto, un sistema di informazioni computerizzate, il cui criptico messaggio — decodificato in una canzone pop o in uno *short* pubblicitario televisivo — costituisce l'ultima speranza di sanità in un mondo devastato dalla droga e dalla violenza<sup>17</sup>.

L'ultimo effetto post-moderno della SF americana si può probabilmente rintracciare nella narrativa dei cosiddetti « cyberpunks ». L'intera tradizione della SF dei *pulp magazines*, con le sue ingenue descrizioni avveniristiche, le illustrazioni delle copertine, le vignette dei *comics* anni '30 di Flash Gordon e di Superman costituisce una dimensione immaginaria che si materializza con l'evidenza di un miraggio ricorrente nella California contemporanea (William Gibson, « The Gernsback Continuum », 1981).

Ancora una volta, come in *The Sirens of Titan*, le sirene sono assunte a metafora del totale rovesciamento dei valori legati alla tradizione letteraria. In « Till Human Voices Wake Us » di Lewis Shiner — un racconto il cui titolo sottolinea la volontà del recupero di un T. S. Eliot anche egli ormai assimilato tra le fonti e i riferimenti della cultura di massa — la violenza delle mutazioni

<sup>16</sup> V. Mc Intyre, *Star Trek. The Wrath of Khan*, London, Futura, 1982, p. 203. Si tratta di una rielaborazione in chiave narrativa (rispettosa di dialoghi e situazioni) della sceneggiatura cinematografica di Jack B. Howards.

<sup>17</sup> Su P. K. Dick esiste un'ampia e documentata bibliografia critica. Rinvio, comunque, a Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Novels of P. K. Dick*, Ann Arbor, Mich., UMI Research Press, 1984.

biologiche sperimentate dall'uomo ha generato nella sirena un aborto mostruoso, simbolo del degrado tecnologico e della fine di ogni utopia di cui la vecchia SF pensava di farsi carico: « Campbell took a longer look at the picture. No, not the romantic myth he had first imagined. The tale was waxy-looking in the harsh light of the strobe, the fins more clearly undeveloped legs ... »<sup>18</sup>.

Per rintracciare quella falsa Sirena — l'ambiguo soggetto del discorso post-moderno della SF — non resta allo scrittore, come al suo protagonista, che una cosa da fare: trasformarsi egli stesso in un grottesco, disumano mostro marino.

## 2. LA RISATA DELL'UOMO-DONNA

« I have a friend who has put together an anthology of feminist science fiction stories. Actually I have several friends who have done so, but the friend I am referring to here is an imaginary one »<sup>19</sup>. Così inizia il racconto SF di Joanna Russ, « The Clichés from Outer Space », in cui l'io narrante, l'alter-ego dell'autrice, vede la sua scrittura 'invasa' dalla lettura di storie scadenti su « weird ways of becoming pregnant ». La macchina da scrivere, impregnata da « clichés from outer space », riproduce all'impazzata frammenti di testi erotico-sadistici con al centro personaggi femminili. Questo racconto, pubblicato nel 1984, testimonia ed esemplifica il procedimento narrativo della Russ, continuamente alla ricerca di una scrittura dissacrante e dirompente, di una voce al femminile capace di

<sup>18</sup> L. Shiner, « Till Human Voices Wake Us » (1984), in B. Sterling, ed., *Mirrorshades*, cit., p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> J. Russ, « The Clichés from Outer Space », in J. Green e S. Le Fanu eds., *Despatches from the Female Mind*, London, The Women's Press, 1985, pp. 27-34.

infrangere i codici culturali maschili nell'ambito della SF, un genere narrativo nato ad uso e consumo degli uomini<sup>20</sup>.

Autobiografia e satira si mescolano qui nella 'generazione' di un collage di frammenti che sembrano estrapolati dalla *trash literature*. Tutti questi spezzoni 'copiano' i modelli narrativi di quegli autori SF che dagli anni '60 avevano 'scoperto' l'eros e, naturalmente, le eroine, trasformandole ora in promiscue e disponibili creature ora in autentiche protagoniste che gestiscono il loro corpo con intelligenza predatoria e lucidità tecnologica<sup>21</sup>. Ovviamente il riferimento non è certo alle *feminist science fiction stories* dell'incipit. Invece l'io narrante, violentata, per così dire, è costretta a produrre qualcosa di 'abominevole'.

La ricerca di immagini sgradevoli e traumatizzanti, spesso e volentieri legate al sesso, presentate, però, va sottolineate, sempre in una luce ironica, è una caratteristica saliente dei testi SF della Russ, fin dal suo primo romanzo *Picnic on Paradise* (1968).

Va ricordato, per capire la posizione della Russ sulla mappa della SF e del post-moderno, che, in più di una occasione, la scrittrice americana ha ribadito la dignità della SF in quanto genere ricco di potenzialità narrative, da non essere confusa o identificata, come spesso accade, con *escape literature*; infatti, la Russ insiste su « the subver-

<sup>20</sup> Per una mappa (anche statistica) dell' 'invasione' femminile della SF, si veda il recente W. S. Bainbridge, *Dimensions of Science Fiction* (soprattutto il capitolo « Women in Science Fiction »), Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1966; inoltre, si rinvia a B. Friend, « Virgin Territory: the Bonds and Boundaries of Women in Science Fiction », in T. D. Claeson (ed.), *Many Futures, Many Worlds*, Canterbury, Kent University Press, 1977, pp. 140-162 e J. Russ, « Amor Vincit Foeminam: the Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction », *Science-Fiction Studies*, 20, March 1980, pp. 2-15.

<sup>21</sup> Si veda J. Russ, « The Image of Women in Science Fiction », in S. K. Cornillion (ed.), *Image of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, Bowling Green (Ohio), Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972, pp. 79-94.



sive potential » della SF, mostrando come la rappresentazione di « alien landscapes and alien creatures »<sup>22</sup> sia congeniale all'investigazione, attraverso una nuova forma letteraria, della problematica femminista<sup>23</sup>.

La doppia sfida, quella che vuole invadere il territorio maschile della SF e quella che vuole agire all'interno di un genere considerato 'minore' rispetto alla letteratura, ha attirato molte scrittrici degli ultimi decenni. Ma la SF, in quanto genere narrativo in qualche modo marginale e pertanto alternativo, se ha consentito a molti scrittori di confermare la supremazia del modello patriarcale con la conseguente esaltazione di « He-Men » e con la quasi completa riduzione ai minimi termini del personaggio femminile, a sua volta ha spinto numerose scrittrici a infrangere quegli stessi stereotipi e luoghi comuni cari alla tradizione SF.

La SF e, soprattutto, alcuni suoi sotto-generi, influenzati direttamente da discipline come la biologia o l'antropologia, sono divenuti terreno fertile per la creazione di un immaginario femminile<sup>24</sup>.

Il sogno o l'incubo, il mondo utopico o quello distopico, saranno popolati, non tanto da scienziati o da astronauti, bensì prevalentemente da figure femminili come la strega, la maga, la madre. Non è un caso che scrittrici come Doris Lessing e, più recentemente, Margaret Atwood abbiano cercato nella SF un modello narrativo efficace e pregnante<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> J. Russ, « On the Fascination of Horror-Stories, Including Lovecraft's », *Science-Fiction Studies*, 22, novembre 1980, pp. 350-352.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. T. De Lauretis, « SF in USA: linguaggio e corpo », *Alfabeta*, luglio-agosto 1979, pp. 12-13, e L. Borghi, « Utopia e femminismo americano degli anni Settanta », in *L'Utopia e le sue forme*, a cura di N. Matteucci, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1982, pp. 291-307.

<sup>24</sup> Si legga, a questo proposito, P.J. Day, « Earthmother/Witchmother: Feminism and Ecology Renewed », *Extrapolation*, Spring 1982, pp. 12-21.

<sup>25</sup> Per Doris Lessing e la SF rinvio a O. Palusci, « Lungo viaggio di Doris Lessing dentro la fantascienza », *La Città e le stelle*, inverno-primavera 1982; mentre va menzionato che Margaret Atwood ha recentemente pubblicato il romanzo distopico *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

Il punto di vista dell'alieno è forse l'aspetto della SF che ha attratto maggiormente le scrittrici americane. L'equivalenza donna=aliena è alla base di molti racconti e romanzi di Judith Merrill, James Triptree, Ursula LeGuin. Ad esempio, in « When It Changed »<sup>26</sup> della Russ, primo nucleo di *The Female Man*, vengono considerate aliene le donne che gli uomini incontrano sul pianeta Whileaway, ma, dato che la Russ narra gli eventi dal punto di vista femminile, gli invasori dell'utopia matriarcale sono descritti come « apes with human faces ». Nel continuo gioco di ribaltamento delle prospettive culturali è la società delle donne a essere messa in crisi dalla presenza maschile: il sogno della supremazia femminile sta per essere infranto. L'utopia femminile deve confrontarsi con la distopia, con l'incubo di « a duel so big that I don't think I have the guts for it »<sup>27</sup>, come afferma una abitante di Whileaway.

Così il testo SF si carica di quel fervido dibattito sulla questione della donna che aveva trovato un terreno fertile nell'America degli anni '60. La domanda maliziosa sottintesa dai quattro scettici maschi visitatori-colonizzatori del pianeta delle donne — « Which of you plays the role of the man? » — trova una risposta dalla neo-femminista di Whileaway: « As if we had to produce a carbon copy of their mistakes! I doubt very much that sexual equality has been reestablished on Earth »<sup>28</sup>.

Nel processo di rielaborazione del proprio materiale, la Russ riprende il mondo di Whileaway per farne un segmento di *The Female Man*<sup>29</sup>. Oltre al grande successo di

<sup>26</sup> J. Russ, « When It Changed » (1972), ora in *The New Women of Wonder*, a cura di P. Sargent, New York, Vintage Books, 1978, pp. 227-239.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 239.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem*, p. 238.

<sup>29</sup> J. Russ, *The Female Man*, London, W. H. Allen, 1977. Tutte le citazioni sono tratte da questa edizione con le pagine indicate tra parentesi direttamente nel testo.

Va ricordato che vi sono molte scrittrici SF che da un racconto hanno poi ricavato un romanzo, ad esempio, Ursula LeGuin (« King

pubblico del romanzo, uscito direttamente in edizione paperback nel 1975 dopo essere stato rifiutato da alcune case editrici<sup>30</sup>, va ricordato che esso è stato riconosciuto dalla critica come un esempio di scrittura femminista e come testo significativo del post-modernismo<sup>31</sup>.

Il viaggio nel tempo è l'espedito fondamentale nella costruzione narrativa di *The Female Man* e permette alla lettrice di mettere a fuoco contemporaneamente quattro momenti sull'asse diacronico. Ma il *time traveller* di wellisiana memoria si sposta anche nello spazio, pur rimanendo sul pianeta Terra, in mondi paralleli dove la storia è stata manipolata, per cui la lettrice si trova di fronte contemporaneamente a una realtà del lontano futuro, agli Stati Uniti in un 1969 che non ha vissuto la seconda guerra mondiale, a un futuro prossimo e, infine, al momento della scrittura esplicitato dall'io narrante. Tutto ciò è reso possibile grazie all'invenzione fantascientifica del teletrasporto che abolisce le dimensioni spazio-temporali con un processo di smaterializzazione e materializzazione del corpo umano.

L'elenco degli artifici SF potrebbe continuare a lungo, ma ci fermiamo qui perché esso ci sembra sufficiente per contrastare l'opinione di quei critici che hanno affermato che la SF è soltanto una cornice o ancora un semplice pretesto nella stesura di *The Female Man*<sup>32</sup>. Certo è che

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Winter » poi elaborato in *The Left Hand of Darkness*) e Vonda McIntyre (« Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand », primo capitolo di *Dreamsnake*).

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. l'intervista alla Russ in *Dream Makers*, interviews by C. Platt, New York, Berkley Books, 1983, Vol. II, pp. 191-201.

<sup>31</sup> Per una lettura di *The Female Man* come romanzo post-moderno si veda R. Law, « Joanna Russ and the 'Literature of Exhaustion' », *Extrapolation*, Vol. 25, Summer 1984, pp. 146-156; mentre per un approccio al testo in chiave femminista si rinvia, tra gli altri, a M. Hacker, « Science Fiction and Feminism: the Work of Joanna Russ », *Chrysalis*, 4, 1977, e a N. Vallorani, « *The Female Man*: la fantascienza e il femminismo », in *L'androgino e l'uomo femminile*, Pescara, Pubblicazione dell'Istituto di Lingue e Letterature Germaniche, 1982, pp. 36-63.

<sup>32</sup> Basti citare la recensione di B. Searles, « Four Heroines in Search of a Novel », *Village Voice* (New York), 20 January 1975.

si dovrebbe far notare che la oggi cinquantenne docente universitaria, nota e stimata critica della letteratura femminile e, allo stesso tempo della SF, ha scritto un testo come *The Female Man* all'insegna del gioco e del *divertissement*<sup>33</sup>. Esperta conoscitrice della SF sia a livello teorico (si rinvia ai suoi numerosi interventi nel settore) che di pratica narrativa, ella gioca con i canoni del genere, come, dopo tutto, avevano fatto prima di lei sia Vonnegut che Dick. Ad esempio, nel capitolo VI della prima parte, la spiegazione scientifica o pseudoscientifica cara agli appassionati di SF sulla possibilità degli universi paralleli e sul viaggio nel tempo, viene ridotta a una riflessione sui lacci di scarpe e poi all'opposizione burlesca dei termini Past/Present:

Sometimes you bend down to tie your shoe, and then you either tie your shoe or you don't; you either straighten up instantly or maybe you don't. Every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility (p. 6).

.....  
 Thus the paradox of time travel ceases to exist, for the Past one visits is never one's own Past but always somebody else's; or rather, one's visit to the Past instantly creates another Present (one in which the visit has already happened) and what you visit is the Past belonging to that Present — an entirely different matter from your own Past (p. 7).

Nel suo gioco parodico la Russ non tralascia di coinvolgere autori noti come appunto Vonnegut o Dick. Se da una parte assorbe i modelli narrativi di *A Man in the High Castle* (i mondi alternativi e l'intreccio di diverse trame), la Russ si fa beffe della 'fantapolitica': se per Dick il Giappone ha vinto la seconda guerra mondiale, in *The Female Man*, nel mondo di Jeannine, « Herr Shicklgruber had died in 1936 » (p. 2), con

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<sup>33</sup> Sul postmoderno si rinvia a P. Carravetta e P. Spedicato (a cura di), *Postmoderno e Letteratura*, Milano, Bompiani, 1984, che contiene anche una attenta bibliografia sull'argomento. Per la lettura di *The Female Man*, molto stimolante è stata l'applicazione di alcuni punti dello schema ivi fornito da I. Hassan, in « La questione del Postmodernismo » (p. 103).

un rimando ironico al nome del padre del Führer prima di essere 'legittimato'. Invece, l'omaggio/satira a Vonnegut, — senza dubbio un autore che ha dettato nell'ambito della SF, le regole di una scrittura nervosa, frammentaria, all'insegna dello *humour noir*, affiancando abilmente i piani spazio-temporali come in *Slaughterhouse 5*, — può essere sintetizzato nella scena comica in cui la donna del lontano futuro, Janet, appare dal nulla, sulla scrivania di un ufficio e, in segno di pace, decide di giocare a « Cat's Cradle »:

The important thing in a new situation is not to frighten, and in my pockets was just the thing for such an emergency. I took out the piece of string and began playing Cat's Cradle (p. 23).

Il problema è certo alterato dal fatto che la voce narrante è femminile (come l'autrice) e che le storie narrate sono ben quattro e si intrecciano continuamente sulla variabile spazio-tempo. L'artista funge qui da *trickster* che gioca a suo piacimento con le sue marionette, tirando alla rinfusa i fili dei personaggi, velando e svelando qua e là i meccanismi narrativi di cui si serve<sup>34</sup>. Come in uno spettacolo da circo, la lettrice fa fatica a seguire le acrobazie formali collegate ad un punto di vista che, simile ad una palla magica, rimbalza da un personaggio all'altro. La lettrice è costretta a sopportare le dirette intrusioni del narratore — « Dear Reader » —, la frammentarietà dell'azione, l'organizzazione degli avvenimenti basata su un intreccio complicato e tortuoso con bruschi passaggi da un mondo all'altro, riconoscibili soltanto per mezzo di una attenta analisi dei codici semantici o ancora dall'impiego e dalle invenzioni di espedienti tecnici come il soggetto narrante indicante personaggi diversi:

I said goodbye and went off with Laur, I, Janet; I also watched them go, I, Joanna; moreover I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I Jael, I myself (p. 212).

<sup>34</sup> L'artista come *trickster* la ritroviamo in un altro romanzo postmoderno scritto da una donna, cioè *Lady Oracle* della Atwood (1976).

L'abuso del pronome di prima persona conduce all'ipotesi di una identificazione tra narratore e donna-scrittrice: non a caso una delle eroine si chiama Joanna — « I, the author » —, e, in seguito, la scrittrice si autocritica compiendo un'operazione di autoironia (« we 'dear ladies', whom Russ would do away with », p. 141). Inoltre, l'ultima delle nove parti in cui è strutturato il romanzo si intitola « the Book of Joanna ».

La disintegrazione dell'io in tanti frammenti diseguali porta alla scissione di quattro donne ben distinte, pur appartenendo allo stesso « genotype ». Assistiamo ad una sorta di parto mentale gemellare (i parti artificiali lo sono spesso) in cui dal fonema J (Jesus?) vengono generate, nell'ordine, Janet, Jeannine, Joanna e Jael, « four versions of the same woman » (p. 162). La scrittrice concepisce non una, ma quattro varianti (non tre) di donna al fine di ribadire come l'essere femminile, sostanzialmente vittima di immagini proiettate su di lei dall'universo maschile, è tuttavia capace di sopravvivere, di costruire a poco a poco il linguaggio di una complessa e frammentata esperienza: « I live between worlds ».

Lungi dal voler dare un ordine ad una forma volutamente disgiuntiva ed aperta, una forma esplosa, oppure, se vogliamo, malformata, non organizzata secondo i principi della linearità e della cronologia, la lettrice si sofferma sui personaggi femminili di questa *her-story*.

Le quattro eroine compongono le micro-trame del racconto mettendo a fuoco la realtà a cui appartengono. L'opposizione iniziale tra la spregiudicata aliena — la donna del lontano futuro — e la integrata bibliotecaria piccolo-borghese, Jeannine Dadier (*Dad here?*), consente alla Russ di cucire assieme, in modo ironico, una miriade di frammenti che de-costruiscono e de-formano l'universo femminile.

L'azione si svolge essenzialmente sulla Terra. L'evento eccezionale è rappresentato dall'improvvisa apparizione di una donna, appunto Janet, che proviene dal futuro femminista-utopico di *Whileaway*.

Oltre ai capitoli in cui viene narrata la vita su Whileaway, gli episodi principali riguardano da una parte le reazioni di Janet calata in un mondo bisessuale e patriarcale (il nostro) e, dall'altra, le delusioni di Jeannine nei suoi rapporti quotidiani. Le due storie parallele vengono imbastite assieme e intervallate dalle intrusioni di Joanna, la voce autoriale che interviene e commenta gli avvenimenti, spesso con espressioni villane (« I kicked her, I kicked her, I kicked her », p.43). La storia piatta e banale di Jeannine, del suo gatto e del suo impotente fidanzato, ripropone gli stereotipi della donna sottomessa, priva di iniziative, alla ricerca di marito. Allo stesso tempo si possono seguire le avventure di Janet, rappresentante di una cultura di sole donne che *non* ri-conosce l'uomo:

What a strange woman; thick and thin, dried up, hefty in the back, with a grandmotherly moustache, a little one. How withered away one can be from a life of unremitting toil.

*Aha! A man* (p. 22).

Nel frattempo, e in corsivo nel testo, si insinua nella narrazione un altro personaggio che solo più tardi si presenterà come Jael, « the spirit of the author ». Jael *alias* Alice Reasoner, è una accanita femminista negli Stati Uniti del vicino futuro, una impiegata del Dipartimento di Etnologia Comparata ed una specialista, come afferma, ammiccando alla lettrice, nei travestimenti. Vive in una Terra del prossimo futuro dove è in corso una vera e propria battaglia tra i sessi che ormai viene combattuta da 40 anni. In realtà Jael è una assassina, una creatura diabolica dalle mani meccaniche. Nell'ultima parte del romanzo usurpa la parola a Joanna e, dopo aver argomentato la possibilità del *time travel*, unisce in un incontro « the three J's » tracciando per loro, su una ipotetica mappa femminista, le valenze dell'essere donna.

La Russ pone però significativamente all'inizio del romanzo una scheda saliente e dettagliata tratta da quell'archivio dell'immaginario femminile che è l'utopia. L'incipit di *The Female Man* — « I was born on a farm on

Whileaway » —, presenta alla lettrice come prima cosa il personaggio di Janet e l'universo fantastico di Whileaway, la Terra in un lontano futuro, « ma non il nostro futuro », un matriarcato di donne intelligenti e longeve che vivono in un idilliaco mondo ecologico-pastorale senza uomini, sterminati secoli prima da una epidemia, che ha cancellato la loro nefasta eredità storico-culturale.

Le duellanti (per gioco) si battono a causa del « temperamental thing » (screzi di gioventù), ma esse non sono amazzoni, bensì pacifiste. Tuttavia, anche se la Russ acclude descrizioni accurate e informazioni essenziali per identificare l'organizzazione socio-culturale di Whileaway, come si addice alla tradizione utopica — economia, educazione, riproduzione, storia —, non risparmia dalla sua vena ironica neanche l'utopia. Cominciamo dai nomi stessi come quello di Janet Evason è chiaramente provocatorio: *Eva* è il nome materno dell'eroina e *son* — viene scherzosamente spiegato alla lettrice — non significa figlio: « Evason is not 'son' but daughter. This is *your* translation » (p. 18). Lo stesso nome dell'Eden di questa nuova Eva è burlesco e demistificatorio: non Erewhon, ma Whileaway — « While-away. While. A. Way. To while away the time. That means it's just a pastime » (p. 108).

Ancora una volta la Russ si prende gioco di alcune convenzioni dei generi narrativi; le utopie femminili come *Mizora* di Mary E. Bradley Lane (1880) e *Herland* di Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915), per citarne solo due, pur traducendosi in un matriarcato sereno ed equilibrato alla luce delle teorie pseudo-biologiche coeve, rappresentano solo uno dei frammenti di *The Female Man*, quello del sogno. Inoltre, la Russ cerca di smitizzare il procedimento narrativo esemplificato da una scrittrice come Ursula LeGuin, che, in *The Dispossessed* (pubblicato nel 1974), aveva progettato due mondi alternativi, uno situato prima e uno dopo il processo di libertà utopica promosso dalle donne. Il viaggio dal pianeta Anarres a Urras, cioè dalla realizzazione dell'utopia all'incubo della distopia, è compiuto però da un *lui* che continua a idealizzare il punto di vista maschile.

Torniamo all'emissaria di Whileaway. Janet è un poliziotto, è goffa e brutale, brutta e sciatta. Indossa lo stesso impermeabile dei poliziotti che la osservano. La sua apparizione diviene una messinscena dei media: stampa e televisione ne fanno una star, una *alien star*, oggetto di curiosità perché estranea alle convenzioni socio-culturali del periodo: « WOMAN APPEARS FROM NOWHERE ON BROADWAY ». Non va dimenticato che non parla perfettamente l'americano, anche se le sue difficoltà di comunicazione sono di carattere culturale. Ironicamente la lingua dell'aliena, della « vanishing woman », è il « pan-Russo ». Alle perplessità del presentatore che non riesce ad immaginare una vita senza uomini, in una lunga intervista da teatro pinteriano, l'inviata dell'Utopia, risponde mettendo in discussione in modo radicale lo strumento fondamentale della comunicazione — il linguaggio:

Excuse me, perhaps I'm mistaking what you intend to say as this language we're speaking is only a hobby of mine, I am not as fluent as I would wish. What we speak is pan-Russian even the Russians would not understand; it would be like Middle English to you, only vice-versa (p. 10).

Ingenuità, grossolanità e freschezza sono gli ingredienti di questa eroina che non riesce a sintonizzarsi con i rappresentanti della Terra del passato, assuefatti al consumismo, alla diseguaglianza tra i sessi, alle prepotenze maschili e ai tabù sessuali. Lo scontro tra i due mondi culmina in una scena comica che si svolge alla festa borghese dove Janet viene introdotta nell'universo degli uomini e, insultata da un aduttore/seduttore che la scambia per una verginella pudica, ricorre ai pugni e stende il « giant marine ». Il riso, in questo episodio che riproduce un fatto quotidiano abbastanza banale, ma trasformato dalla presenza della super-eroina-aliena, oltre ad essere una componente del gioco narrativo caro al postmodernismo, è il contrario del pianto, è quell'elemento indispensabile, secondo la femminista francese Hélène Cixous, per consentire il distacco totale dall'uomo:

[22]

Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humour no one would expect to find in women — which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it is humour that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen<sup>35</sup>.

Le scene comiche, comunque, preparano gli episodi che affrontano direttamente, senza mezzi termini, i tabù sessuali. Il punto di vista di Janet si è ormai affermato nel tessuto narrativo, e la lettrice, essendosi divertita, ridendo, agli eventi burleschi della donna aliena poco bella, può cominciare a simpatizzare con lei. Una volta confermato che, ironicamente, Janet è regolarmente sposata e ama sua moglie, si può passare alla 'normalità' della messinscena di una relazione lesbica. La descrizione particolareggiata del rapporto sessuale tra due donne vuole scandalizzare i lettori SF timidi ed inibiti. Essa riecheggia l'atmosfera sconcertante e volutamente provocatoria del contemporaneo 'cult-movie' *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in cui appare una timida e ingenua eroina di nome Janet<sup>36</sup>.

Nella costruzione di un « *feminine textual body* »<sup>37</sup> la Russ propone un modello omosessuale femminile opposto a quello fallocentrico, burlandosi, verso la fine di *The Female Man*, del rapporto eterosessuale, anch'esso descritto senza veli, ma giudicato banale dalle altre tre *J*, osservative annoiate dall'amplesso al quale assistono: « Good Lord! Is that all? » (p. 198).

Pornografia? Autobiografia? Tutto viene incluso nella mente gravida della scrittrice che non tralascia neanche

<sup>35</sup> H. Cixous, « Castration or Decapitation? », in *Signs*, Autumn 1981, p. 55. N. M. Rosinsky (in « *A Female Man? The 'Medusan' Humor of Joanna Russ* », *Extrapolation*, Spring 1982, pp. 31-36) dimostra che lo *humour* è un elemento strutturante del romanzo.

<sup>36</sup> Molti sembrano essere i punti di contatto tra il 'cult-movie' citato e *The Female Man*; si rimanda, comunque, a M. Siegel, « *The Rocky Horror Picture Show: More than a lip service* », *Science-Fiction Studies*, 22, Novembre 1980, pp. 305-312. Va notato che il film uscì proprio nel 1975, anche se era già noto come *musical play*.

<sup>37</sup> H. Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

[23]

il privato nel gioco ironico della confessione narrativa. Qualche critico smalzato potrebbe sostenere che la cornice SF è stato un pretesto per affrontare il lesbismo. La Russ, infatti, si è trovata a dover rispondere alle domande degli intervistatori che semplificavano il problema chiedendole se i suoi romanzi erano autobiografici e se lei era lesbica. La Russ ha così risposto:

Now it's certainly a fact that I am interested in gay women and their lesbianism, as a theme, appears in much of my work. On the other hand, it's taken me almost a quarter of a century to perfect that personal tone. It is not spontaneous or easy, damn it. Writing is work. On the other hand, I do use a lot of my experience (real or imagined) in my work.

« Sure I'm a lesbian »<sup>38</sup>.

In *The Female Man* la Russ investiga quelle « regioni della femminilità » tendenti all'edificazione di un immaginario femminile, come ribadisce la Cixous, non più identificato con immagini maschili, ma dalla scoperta-invenzione di immagini legate al corpo femminile, « for women on the march, or [...] in 'flight' so that instead of lying down, women will go forward by leaps in search of themselves »<sup>39</sup>. In più di un senso la Russ procede per balzi. Dalla confessione alla pornografia, fino all'utopia e alla SF, la scrittrice saltella da un genere all'altro alla ricerca di un ibrido che produca una forma completamente nuova rispetto ai modelli egemonici maschili. Nello stesso tempo balza da una storia all'altra la lettrice del romanzo, con salti da canguro dal futuro al passato, dal passato prossimo al presente, senza un ordine preciso, districandosi tra una massa di episodi spesso sotto forma di dialogo, in capitoli ridotti alla lunghezza di una frase o addirittura di una esclamazione. I voli della fantasia femminile si concretizzano, però, in quel « feminine body text » caratterizzato da un flusso continuo, come nel flusso mestruale, ir-

<sup>38</sup> *Dream Makers*, op. cit., p. 200.

<sup>39</sup> H. Cixous, op. cit., p. 52.

regolare; che non si conclude, non ha una fine, procede oltre la parola finale della pagina del testo<sup>40</sup>.

Shrill ... vituperative ... no concern for the future of society ... maunderings of antiquated feminism ... selfish femlib ... needs a good lay ... this shapeless book ... of course a calm and objective discussion is beyond ... twisted, neurotic ... (pp. 140-141).

La Russ trascina la lettrice in un labirinto di immagini e stereotipi femminili: da una galleria di incarnazioni allegoriche fino al *female man*, l'eroina Joanna che afferma di trasformarsi, fin dalle prime battute del romanzo, appunto, in un *female man*. Non si tratta qui dell'essere ermafrodito inventato dalla LeGuin in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, creatura fantastica che la Russ critica perché artificiosa e perché attraverso di essa la LeGuin tocca solo marginalmente il problema dell'uguaglianza tra i sessi concentrandosi sulle ragioni maschili. Nella parte Settima del romanzo l'io narrante spiega la sua metamorfosi in un *female man* non in termini biologici, ma psicologici, socio-culturali:

I'll tell you how I turned into a man.

First I had to turn into a woman.

For a long time I had been neuter, not a woman at all (p. 133).

Gli schemi mentali si trasformano come il corpo prodigioso della Alice di Lewis Carroll per cui, come osserva la Russ stessa commentando una scena di *The Left Hand of Darkness*: « Perhaps, with the straight jackets of our gender-roles, with women automatically regarded as second-class, intelligent and active women feel as if they were female men or hermaphrodites »<sup>41</sup>. Oppure, come ancora suggerisce la Russ, attraverso la voce di una delle sue eroine: « I'm not a woman; I'm a man. I'm a man with a woman's face. I'm a woman with a man's mind » (p.134).

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> J. Russ, « The Image of Women in Science Fiction », op. cit., p. 90.

*The Female Man* è, forse, come la Joanna e la Jael fittizie, la scrittrice stessa che diviene « male », *male* in quanto scrive un romanzo ma cerca, in quanto *female*, di trasformarlo in scrittura femminile.

Il testo non completo, aperto, la pellicola montata male, termina con un augurio che il parto della mente della scrittrice — « little daughter book » —, incarnazione dei sogni e degli incubi del genere femminile, possa affermarsi in quanto, appunto, *feminine textual body*:

Do not scream when you are ignored, for that will alarm people, and do not fume when you are heisted by persons who will not pay, rather rejoice that you have become so popular. Live merrily, little daughter-book, even if I can't and we can't; recite yourself to all who will listen, stay hopeful and wise. Wash your face and take your place without a fuss in the Library of Congress, for all books end up there eventually, both little and big. Do not complain when at last you become quaint and old-fashioned, when you grow as outworn as the crinolines of a generation ago and are classed with *Spicy Western Stories*, *Elsie Dinsmore*, and *The Son of the Sheik*; do not mutter angrily to yourself when young persons read you to hrooch and hrch and guffaw, wondering what the dickens you were all about. Do not get glum when you are no longer understood, little book. Do not curse your fate. Do not reach up from readers 'laps and punch th readers' noses.

Rejoice, little book!

For on that day, we will be free (pp. 213-214).

Il gioco delle convenzioni della SF si conclude così, per il momento, con un rinvio ironico alla componente didascalica del genere.

Niente « He-Men », poche avventure in questo volume « dedicated to Anne, to Mary and to the other one and three-quarters billions of us ».

*The Female Man*: « a toi de rompre les vieux circuits »<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> H. Cixous, « Le Rire de la Meduse », *L'Arc*, 61, p. 52.

## LIVING DOLLS

by  
Elizabeth Wilson

The first time I saw one was in the forecourt of the Beaubourg on a cold January afternoon. The cobbled square slopes upwards, away from the mass of pipes and tubes that rises above it; he was standing near the top of the slope.

A knot of onlookers had gathered and my friends and I joined them. Our breath steamed into the dim grey air. The cold gripped us, slowed us down, it was painful to stand still.

He though — but partly for this reason we murmured: it must be a — a what? — a doll, a statue, a plaster figure — he did not breathe. No cloud of frozen breath escaped his lips. Nor did he shiver in his thin suit, while our hands and feet ached with it, and we huddled in our thick furs. The figure of a man's outfitter's dummy from the 1950s: hair slicked back, short back and sides; tan, clean cut face, smooth as plaster; he wore a cheap fifties suit, white shirt, dark tie, laced-up shoes, and carried a small attaché case. He stood — had been placed — near a bollard: a piece of kitsch sculpture.

Suddenly his arm jerked upwards, he executed a half turn, brought his attaché case to a horizontal position, supported it with his other hand, snapped open the locks. The effect was uncanny — we watched compulsively with a mixture of euphoria that the imitation of lifelessness could be so perfect and disappointment that the moving statue was not a living doll but only a performer. In spite of the cold we found it impossible to tear ourselves away and we watched the dummy display the contents of his briefcase (a notebook, some sandwiches), walk a few steps down the slope, pause, take up his petrified position again, then waltz into a new series of

clockwork movements. At length a sense of the endlessness of the sequence and our disappointment in deciding that the doll was alive won out over our glee in the 'lifelike' imitation of unnaturalness, and we wandered down towards the art centre, casting backward glances at the waxen figure, who was still turning and stopping, somehow unsatisfied yet still thrilled by this bizarre performance.

It is two and a half years later — the tourist season in Florence. I have found a café near our hotel, off Santa Croce, where they sell genuine 1950s postcards as though they were new. There is one of the Piazzale Michelangelo in which girls in circular skirts stand posed like something out of *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* — stuck in past time like the apparition of the Beaubourg.

In the evenings the Piazza della Signoria is crowded with American teenagers, with hippies, with a youthful international soldiery of pleasure seekers. There are entertainments — guitarists who sing the songs of the sixties, « Blowin' in the Wind », and « Yellow Submarine ». There are fire eaters, sword swallows and jugglers. In a side alley an especially large crowd encircles two performers ...

A woman dressed as a man stands behind a hurdy gurdy. S/He wears a waistcoat, rolled up shirtsleeves, dark striped trousers, a hat pushed to the back of the head, and a bow tie — evoking a figure from the slums of the twenties, Chicago, Naples, Petticoat Lane, anywhere: an old-fashioned organ grinder.

Only instead of a monkey ... a giant doll flops at the feet of the organ grinder, placed leaning against the machine. He stands her upright, balances her on her feet, sets her head and arms in place, then winds her up. The plaintive music begins. The big boned doll dressed in her plaits and apron and ballet shoes slowly turns, her arms move up and down, her head jerks left and right.

The mechanical dance ended, the organ grinder ceases to crank out the tune from his organ and sits his doll down again, her arms now holding her apron wide: and waits. There is a silence. Then, gradually, the coins and notes

begin to drop into her apron. The organ grinder stands impassive, leaning against his machine, he puffs a cigarette and watches, waits, and the doll sits rigid, smiling, open-armed. In the silence the coins, the notes are thrown towards the apron. But reluctantly — the crowd is waiting for something. A man leans down flaunting a large note, holding it just out of reach of the doll — nearer, pulled away, nearer again. And finally she cracks, and snatches it, laughing, but defeated. The spell is broken. The crowd, disappointed, moves away. The man has spoilt it.

We leave too, not wanting to see the organ grinder and his doll depart. That would spoil it even more. But I wonder about them. Do they travel through Italy performing their act — travelling entertainers as though it were still the nineteenth century. Are they lovers? Does the organ grinder always treat her like a doll? Is it sado-masochistic? Does she always dress in men's clothes?

Now I'm hurrying through an intersection of the London Underground at Bond Street in the West End. At the bottom of a short escalator a brightly-lit esplanade opens out, and short passageways lead out of it to the platforms on either side. At the foot of the other escalator a life size Action Man twists and jerks. Combat jacket and camouflage trousers tucked into boots, leather gloves, a balaclava helmet — the outfit's complete; this time the face is a mask, so you can't know if there's a real person behind it. He's positioned himself so that the travellers emerging from the platform on his left confront him suddenly and unexpectedly as they turn towards the 'up' escalator. From the mouth of the opposite platform passengers waiting for their train watch, mesmerised. Some remain even when their train does roar along the tracks, riveted by the effect the twitching, epileptic Action Man has on the unsuspecting men and women who turn the corner and almost bump into him.

As before, there's a sense of shock, of slight horror — yet you want it to go on forever. And at the same time there's a weariness as you watch because you also know



that nothing is going to come of it, there's no conclusion, just the ritualised repetition of gestures, fetishised, a sort of artistic repetition compulsion.

What is this performance art that has sprung up spontaneously in late twentieth century cities? It has all the post-modernist fascination with surfaces, with play, with kitsch. The living human being alienates herself, himself, recreated as a thing, a doll. But is it simple alienation when individuals make of themselves objects that are works of pop art? They appear to comment on commodification, or on the dehumanisation of the individual, yet at the same time to glory in it. And, for all their frivolity, superficiality, and even modishness, there is more to these performances than meets the eye.

The art — the perfect imitation of a mechanised object, necessitating absolutely perfect control over one's body — is itself worthy of admiration, but it is in the reactions of the audience that we must seek for further meanings of these street happenings. There is not the same unmixed pleasure with which we greet the skill of jugglers, musicians or acrobats, nor even the slightly cynical respect with which we watch the *trompe l'oeil* of the conjurer or the fire eater, when we know a deceit is being perpetrated but still enjoy the skill whereby we are deceived.

There is something definitely unpleasant as well as terribly magical about these living dolls. Uncanny. The impossible idea of human beings turned to dolls is a theme of horror literature (Freud, for example, uses one of Hoffmann's tales. « The Sandman » in exploring the significance of the living-dead doll<sup>1</sup>). There is also the theme of dolls that come alive in order to kill human beings; or of the living turned into dolls and thereby suffering a kind of petrification or living death. So it is understandable if we

<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund (1925), « The Uncanny », *The Standard Edition*, Volume 17, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis (originally published in 1919).

feel relief when the masquerade breaks down and the doll is unmasked as a living person. What is less easy to understand is the unpleasure of this *dénouement* — the realisation that we wanted the illusion to continue, wanted the person to be, really, a doll — wanted the magical, not the 'real'. This, it seems to me, is not because we want the living person to be dead, but on the contrary that we want the doll to come alive. That is the magical part. As Freud pointed out, this is a common enough childhood fantasy. At one level, therefore, our engagement in these performances may be the simple desire for the triumph of the pleasure principle over reality.

The whole event remains, nonetheless, tinged with the uncanny because behind the reassurance that all is well — that the doll is alive — is the opposite: a doll is actually not alive. Entwined in all the tales of living dolls and humans turned to statues is the fear of death.

In his discussion of the uncanny, Freud associated some of these themes to the compulsion to repeat — the persistent re-enactment of past unresolved conflicts in the present. This too, I feel, goes some way towards explaining our mixed sensations in the fact of the street performances I have described. The fascination of the repeated movements, of the cyclical nature of the act — the pause, then the series of movements, then the caesura again — reflects both the satisfaction and the dissatisfaction of the compulsion to repeat: which is the attempt, always frustrated, to resolve the conflicts of the past. It never succeeds because the conflicts are simply repeated in a new, or rather a disguised form. The repressed only returns; it is not transcended.

So, eventually the crowd turns away, sated but not satisfied, frustrated, cheated, yet longing for more, searching through the interstices of the city — along medieval streets or the underground alleys of the modern labyrinth, the Metro, or in the public squares, gardens and piazzas, the city spaces, for the magical figure, the fairy tale come true: who reassures us that we are, after all, alive, but also that we do not need to feel, that we too could become living dolls.

Why is this essentially an urban phenomenon? These performances can only achieve their effect in the anonymity of the crowd. The performance is instant; the living doll appears as if by magic, and at the end disappears as quickly. The uncanny effect would be ruined were we to have any idea of this being as having a known identity. Then it would be simply good fun, a masquerade, amateur theatricals.

It is essentially urban too for it replicates the experience of the crowd. The being, the living doll, has banished all fear by being neither dead nor alive. Thus, it is safe from the dangers of the city and symbolises the feeling so typical of great city life: the feeling of semi-euphoria, of slightly dreamlike dis-association. The living doll is Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd*<sup>2</sup>, a restless wanderer, seeking to exorcise some guilt, seeking to escape, yet finding his being only in the crowd. The living dolls repeat endlessly our conflicts, our guilt, our infantile, ritualised memories of a pleasure we attempt to recover; even if, as Freud suggests<sup>3</sup> it is the pleasure of the cessation of pain.

The living dolls are simultaneously our nightmare and our pleasure — a dream of urban man.

<sup>2</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan (1967), « The Man of the Crowd », *Selected Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin (originally published in 1845).

<sup>3</sup> Freud, Sigmund (1953), « Beyond the Pleasure Principle », *The Standard Edition*, Volume 18, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis (originally published in 1920). This essay is the most extended discussion by Freud of the repetition compulsion and its significance.

J. CLARKE, C. CRITCHER, *The Devil Makes Work*, London, Macmillan, 1985, 245 pp.

A prima vista un simile titolo potrebbe indurre il lettore ad oscure suggestioni, ma in effetti esso risulta essere solo la prima parte di un proverbio che per intero recita: « The Devil makes work for idle hands »; la morale è quindi evidente, la saggezza popolare ha da sempre considerato l'ozio come qualcosa di pericoloso per sé e per gli altri membri della società. In realtà il libro, scritto durante il 'tempo libero' dagli impegni accademici degli autori, non deve considerarsi, come essi affermano programmaticamente, né una sintesi di tutto ciò che è stato scritto sul *leisure*, né una nuova teoria sull'argomento; al contrario vuol mettere in discussione lo status del *leisure* inteso quale sfera autonoma rispetto alle strutture sociali e politiche del capitalismo britannico.

Il saggio si compone di due parti, nella prima dopo un esame delle odierne teorie sociologiche sul *leisure* si procede ad un'attenta analisi storica del concetto di tempo libero in Gran Bretagna nel corso degli ultimi due secoli. La presenza dell'indagine storica a questo punto risulta utilissima, in quanto la discussione complessiva non appare sbilanciata a favore di quella matrice critico-politico-ideologica così preponderante nella seconda parte.

La trattazione di carattere storico, che pure risente dell'influenza del Thompson di *The Making of the English Working Class*, procede ad intervalli di un quarantennio, privilegiando il punto di vista della *working-class*, scelta questa più che giustificata se si considera che tale prospettiva, come sottolineano gli autori, per molto tempo non ha trovato alcun tipo di riscontro analitico degno di menzione.

Si parte dagli anni intorno al 1800, quelli della « Merry England », per giungere infine agli anni sessanta percorsi da molteplici tendenze innovatrici. Innanzitutto si cominciò ad usufruire del tempo libero per lo più nella dimensione familiare e privata, con il conseguente declino dei posti d'intrattenimento pubblico, in secondo luogo aumentò sensibilmente l'intervento dello stato in un campo come quello del *leisure* sottoposto allo sfruttamento commerciale di un mercato sempre più specializzato.

Negli anni sessanta apparve inoltre il fenomeno della caratterizzazione etnica del tempo libero in seguito alla forte emigrazione in Inghilterra di popolazioni di colore provenienti dalle ex colonie. Non bisogna dimenticare poi il forte influsso esercitato dalle culture giovanili che, per la loro carica anticonformistica e contestatrice, sembravano met-

tere in discussione, tra l'altro, anche quell'etica protestante del lavoro da sempre considerata base fondante delle civiltà anglosassoni. In realtà, secondo Clark e Critcher, il cambiamento all'interno della sfera del *leisure* fu più fittizia che reale, le vecchie disuguaglianze di classe e di sesso infatti rimasero, con l'aggiunta di quella razziale.

Questa prima parte di *The Devil Makes Work* è sembrata particolarmente ben riuscita, sia rispetto alla presentazione del problema nei suoi termini generali, sia per quanto concerne la dettagliata analisi storica del *leisure* connesso ai processi e alle strutture sociali e politiche del capitalismo britannico. Clarke e Critcher sostengono inoltre che l'identificazione del tempo libero come la sfera in cui i bisogni individuali trovano soddisfazione fa sì che, conseguentemente, il lavoro stesso risulti meno suscettibile di critica ed anzi venga tollerato di buon grado in quanto unico mezzo per raggiungere la presunta libertà del riposo. Quest'ottica, dietro la quale è possibile leggere anche una matrice religiosa (nel libro della Genesi si legge che l'uomo fu maledetto e condannato da Dio al lavoro), avrebbe contribuito, insieme agli altri fattori già discussi, alla formazione del carattere ambiguo del *leisure* divenuto durante i secoli terreno di scontro tra interessi sociali contrastanti.

Nella seconda parte di *The Devil Makes Work* gli autori esaminano quelle che a loro parere sono le due contraddizioni presenti nell'odierno concetto di *leisure*. La prima è tra un modello di tempo libero controllato, istituzionalizzato e la sua fruibilità basata sulla libertà di scelta individuale (libertà però solo apparente); la seconda contraddizione riguarda quella tensione presente oggi fra continuità e cambiamento, un'analisi accurata mostra infatti che il panorama sociale, pur soggetto ad evoluzione, si muove tuttavia seguendo linee strutturali capitalistiche, all'interno cioè dei vecchi conflitti sociali che esse da sempre producono.

A questo punto è naturale chiedersi quali siano le reali prospettive del *leisure* nella società industriale dei prossimi anni. Le risposte di Clarke e Critcher si articolano innanzitutto attraverso la disamina delle argomentazioni di alcuni tra i più importanti teorici del post-industriale (Robert, Parker, Young e Willmot), per poi passare, come è costume metodologico dei due autori, da una fase di critica-confronto, ad una effettivamente propositiva. Molti studiosi presentano un quadro ottimistico della situazione, ma secondo Clarke e Critcher tale ottimismo è del tutto infondato perché il futuro ci riserverebbe invece un tasso di disoccupazione permanente. È quindi sotto l'ombra del più acuto pessimismo che si conclude la seconda parte di *The Devil Makes Work*, anche se gli autori hanno voluto lasciare un piccolissimo varco alla speranza nel momento in cui affermano:

Which of the various post-industrial prophecies will come true depends not on the inevitable progress of technological change, but on the economic and political power which commands the uses to which such technology will be put (pp. 209-210).

Questo saggio che, come si è detto, era iniziato con un esame delle teorie sociologiche sul *leisure*, si conclude con quello che definiremmo un doveroso, quanto superfluo, omaggio da parte dei due autori alla tradizione degli studi culturali, nel cui alveo essi evidentemente si collocano. In particolare vengono esaminati tre testi: *The Sociological Imagination* di C. Wright Mills, *The Long Revolution* di R. Williams e *Women's Oppression Today* di M. Barrett, dei quali si sottolinea l'utile influenza metodologica.

In realtà, dal momento che i libri citati non possono certo considerarsi una rappresentanza sufficientemente esaustiva dell'ampio background culturale che sottende le argomentazioni di Clarke e Critcher, meglio sarebbe stato mantenere la trattazione su di un piano più generale, evitando quella frammentazione del discorso che in fase conclusiva appare del tutto inopportuna, frammentazione accuratamente evitata, del resto, in altre zone del testo (utilissimi in tal senso sono risultati i *résumé* di raccordo alla fine di ognuna delle due parti).

Certo l'influenza degli studi culturali in questo saggio appare evidente e distintiva rispetto ad altri approcci metodologici più accademicamente accreditati, soprattutto per quanto concerne l'attenzione dedicata dagli autori al processo storico-sociale di costituzione del *leisure*, secondariamente nell'aver indicato il tempo libero quale luogo di espressione di senso, ed infine allorché l'analisi del *leisure* smette di essere mera speculazione teorica per calarsi invece nel campo esperenziale della cultura 'vissuta', assumendo così i toni propositivi dell'impegno politico.

Che l'uso del tempo sia ormai al centro dello scontro sociale nei paesi industrializzati sembra una considerazione ovvia, tuttavia non si capisce perché la sinistra abbia evitato di occuparsi dell'argomento in maniera organica. I due autori non paiono fornire alcuna spiegazione al riguardo, ma si può certo avanzare un'ipotesi; in effetti la sinistra soprattutto dagli anni post-bellici si è preoccupata esclusivamente di far fronte a quella domanda di benessere materiale proveniente da alcuni settori della società, dimenticando gli aspetti qualitativi dell'esistenza (come l'uso del tempo libero) che l'odierna divisione del lavoro e la sua crescente meccanizzazione hanno portato prepotentemente alla ribalta.

In effetti *The Devil Makes Work* può considerarsi un libro politico, espressione di un intelligente sforzo di riflessione, un tentativo che deve considerarsi almeno in parte riuscito, se si osserva che gli autori, pur rimanendo nell'ambito delle tradizionali teorie socialistiche sul capitalismo, tuttavia sembrano suggerire una riforma dello stesso che riduca l'area della produzione di merci a favore di attività più razionali, della diffusione di informazioni non manipolate e di una definitiva demercificazione del lavoro.

In questo senso *The Devil Makes Work*, pur non potendo definirsi saggio politico-economico di grande respiro, per il maggiore approfondimento che alcune complesse questioni avrebbero meritato (ed anche per la programmatica esclusione di ogni riferimento a realtà sociali contingenti), costituisce tuttavia un'utile sollecitazione per ulteriori tenta-

tivi d'analisi. A restare aperto infatti è soprattutto il tema delle scelte che la sinistra deve necessariamente compiere nei diversi paesi e su scala europea per far fronte a tutti quei problemi la cui soluzione è indispensabile per lo sviluppo delle nostre società.

ANNA NOTARO

DAVID FRISBY, *Fragments of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985, pp. 319

It has been in the fashionable, but not for that necessarily less serious, debate on modernity and post-modernity that questions of how we acquire sense and direction in the contemporary world have been most forcibly stated recently. And it is the emergence of the theme of modernity in modern critical thought, in particular in the largely overlooked writings of Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin (whose massive and uncompleted project on *Paris. Capital of the XIX Century* is available only in German and Italian), that this extensively researched book deals. The richness of detail and argument, if occasionally over-densely presented, and the decidedly Continental, in particular *Mitteleuropean*, slant (underlined by the critical presence of Nietzsche for all three writers) provides us with an important and suggestive pre-history of the present debate, quite distinct in tone from the Anglo-American 'deconstructionist' school, or Lyotard's trek through the rubble of decaying discourses — yesterday's *grand récits* — in search of the sublime, or Baudrillard's cinemascopic 'wild realism'.

What is considered central by the three German writers is the experience of the metropolis in the formation of modernity. The city, and the instantaneous reality of the modern street, composed of fragmentary signs and empty time (« without memory », Kracauer), is considered the exemplary instance of modernity. To read it requires a phenomenology of the superficial and the fragment, a critical Polaroid. It is this novel experience, its new modes of perception, and the subsequent need « ... to understand how great and poetic we are in our patent-leather shoes and our neckties » (Charles Baudelaire), that provides the focus of the book. And it is the French poet's characterization of modernity as « le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent » and his attention to fashion — the fleeting sensation and beauty of an ideal perpetually threatened by death, hence rendering beauty (aesthetics) profoundly historical by inserting the temporal into taste — that supplies the interrogatory *leit-motif* hanging over the diverse critical paths that all three critics follow through the modern metropolis. Their common problem was how to analyze what was transitory and contingent: modern sensations that are seemingly without memory or history, and whose sense apparently lies in the immediacy of the moment. It leads to questioning not only our relationship with the present, but also with the past.

Instead of commencing from a totalizing view of society, Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin « start out from the apparent fragments of social reality » (p. 6), basing their analysis of modernity in the kaleidoscopic experience of the metropolis. In Simmel's case this was turn-of-the-century Berlin, for Kracauer it was the avant-garde city of Weimar Berlin and the Paris of the Second Empire, for Benjamin it was the Berlin of his childhood and the Paris of Baudelaire.

In order to examine the novel forms of modernity — the crowd and the anonymous flux of the metropolis, fashion and the 'eternal return' of the commodity — each writer deployed such figures as the stranger, the wanderer, the adventurer, the flâneur, the detective, the gambler: all individuals living on the margins of society, « at the mercy of the meaninglessness of coincidence », who were convinced « that in the coincidence there resides a meaning, some kind of necessary — though not a necessity that accords with rational logic — significance » (Simmel, p. 66. Unless otherwise stated quotes are from Frisby 1985). It is in this unconditional logic and its challenge to everyday routines that the glimmer of significance shines through.

In *White Collar Workers: Out of Newest Germany* (1930), Siegfried Kracauer asserts that it is only from its extremes that reality can be grasped. Like the detective, the flâneur and the gambler, the critic is drawn into investigating the metropolitan labyrinth of history and experience: that juncture between a mythical and material world, between the dream and the drama of urban life that is encountered in the rapid semiology of the streets; in the uninterrupted montage of new sights, sounds, sensations, shocks and surprises where we experience « the trivia, the refuse » of history that Benjamin collected in constructing his history of the 'mosaic' of modernity: « I have nothing to say. Only to show. I will not appropriate any intellectual formulations, not steal anything valuable. But the rags, the refuse. I will not describe but rather exhibit them. » (Benjamin, pp. 188-9).

If the city, characterized in Georg Simmel's words as « the seat of the most advanced economic division of labour » (p. 81), was central to all three authors so was an aesthetic perception of metropolitan life. In Simmel's case his deep empathy for the restless movement of his times, for the neurasthenic quality of urban life, led to an explicit aestheticization of reality. Money became its principal metaphor. In *The Philosophy of Money*, he refers to money as the most « striking symbol of the completely dynamic character of the world ... with its own emptiness and merely transitional character » (p. 103). Faced with the anonymous crowd and the impersonal movement of city life there was the tendency to accentuate the individual and the personal (codified in the momentary eccentricities of fashion, in distinctive styles and the general aestheticization of metropolitan habits).

Benjamin viewed modernity as a dream. He considered nineteenth-century Paris a labyrinth, the site of the « primeval landscape of consumption » through which the « dreaming collectivity » would pass.

(Benjamin, p. 192). Both Kracauer and Benjamin believed that critical writing had to adapt itself to this metropolitan mode and adopt the manner of literary montage: observations, quotations, interviews and conversations that go into the book do « not count as examples of some particular theory, but rather as exemplary instances of reality ... » (Kracauer, p. 163), in which « the reader must actively participate in the 'construction of reality' while at the same time having 'room for one's own position' » (Inka Müller, p. 166). To commence from the singular and the particular, from the fragment, and not from the totality, this is the explicit procedure adopted by all three. The idea of 'totality' breaks up in the complexity of detailed differences, dialectical images, discontinuous tempos and realities. If for Simmel the fragment is an essence, an exemplary instance, of the totality, which led Adorno and others to accuse him of an 'aesthetic pantheism' (where « the total beauty, the total meaning of the world as a whole radiates from every single point », p. 57) and carries us away from the historical and the concrete into the realm of the eternal, for Kracauer and Benjamin the question was more complex.

For Kracauer a sense of totality had been shattered, the project of the Enlightenment had been 'atomized' in the « chaos of the present time » (Kracauer, p. 116). He considered orthodox Marxism to be « the last offshoot of totality philosophy » (*ibid*, p. 161). His own response to this situation was that of a « hesitant openness », in which he attempted to bring into significance the unacknowledged and the unrecognized: the 'refuse' of modernity, the margins, the twilight zones of metropolitan space and daily life, the substantive surface of the everyday world; what he elsewhere called a « flat materialism ». This is a self-conscious response on his part to Simmel's timeless aestheticization of social life.

Benjamin, too, worked from the fragment, from the 'rags' of history, seeking a series of 'dialectical images' capable of telescoping the past through the present. « It is not a question of the past throwing its light on the present or the present its light on the past, but the image in which what has occurred is united in a flash with the now (*Jetzt*) ... » (*Parigi Capitale del XIX secolo*, Torino, 1986, p. 599). « The dialectical image appears there where thought has come to a halt in a constellation saturated with tensions » (*ibid*, p. 617). This can be set alongside and illuminate Nietzsche's more elliptical pronouncement: « ... when the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it » (p. 33).

Benjamin was fundamentally interested in breaking out of modernism. He sought to awake the world by moving both beyond the surrealist dream (Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* had been particularly influential on him) and by shattering the time of the 'dreaming collectivity' in order to de-mythologize the modern world. But, at the same time, the historical construction of modernity could not be grasped as a totality, only by dialectical images: those illuminating flashes that momentarily grab our attention while the thunder of history rolls on in the background.

The historian is a collector, a flâneur, in search of the shock of recognition in the dialectical images of modernity. And the 'dialectical image' of modernity lay in « that blasting apart of historical continuity which allows the historical object to constitute itself ... materialist historiography ... does not pluck ... from the processes of history, but rather blasts them out of it » (Benjamin, p. 217). It is these images that release the energy of history from the dead hand of historicism. History is to be conceived « as an after-life of that which is understood, whose pulse can still be felt in the present ». It « leads the past to place the present in a critical condition ».

But to undertake this « tiger's leap into the past » we need first to awaken from the dreams that drug our times. The historian has to interpretate these dreams and de-mythologize them; critical excavation exists at the threshold between dreaming and awakening ... « the art of experiencing the present as the waking world ... » (Benjamin).

Benjamin's proposed book on Paris was to be a « prehistory of the nineteenth century ». In the world of commodity production, that initially reveals its secret life in the arcade, and then in the department store and the world exhibition, we encounter the ever new and the ever same, offering something that is simultaneously always novel (the latest fashion, gadget, update, style) and always the same (a commodity, an exchange value). The city is a dream 'scape' filled by the 'phantasmagoric' world of commodities. In examining the very materials of the 'dreaming collectivity' displayed in its architecture and the materials of construction employed (glass, cement, iron) Benjamin sought to excavate the ruins of the bourgeois order: « knowledge grows for him out of the ruins » (Kracauer, p. 213). With « ... the upheaval in the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled ... the development of the forces of production had turned the wish symbols of the previous century into rubble » (Benjamin, p. 233).

The extension of the commodity form to the world of art is the obverse side of this tendency. The decline of the 'aura' (or the 'pathos of distance', noted by both Nietzsche and Simmel) came to be located by Benjamin within the sphere of commodity production. Aura is replaced by the shock and the sensation of the new. Historical events are turned into moments of consumption: the 'eternal return' - Jimi Hendrix on the *Max Headroom Show*, the voice of Malcolm X on the record « No Sell Out » ...

While Simmel tended to celebrate and aestheticize this situation, both Kracauer and Benjamin sought to de-mythologize it. But for all their attention to the direct experience of modernity their analyses carried a certain distance; the 'loss' they noted in the world was perhaps itself the victim of their own 'phantasmagoria'? - the product of an abstract measure, a 'quality' they assumed was necessary. Once mythology has been decanted from reality perhaps the latter becomes merely a lifeless datum. As Frisby notes all three writers attempted to « complete

the fragment, indeed to redeem it aesthetically, politically or historically » (p. 271); but redemption can prove to be a restriction as much as a release. When Kracauer refers to how travel has been reduced to a « pure experience of space », and to dancing as a « scanning of time », we find ourselves in front of the same negative horizons that Paul Virilio evokes in his recent description of the deserts of the contemporary world (*L'orizzonte negativo. Saggio di dromoscopia*, Genova 1986). Whether we adopt this melancholy vision and agree with Benjamin that modernity is « the period of hell » - a perpetual production of the ever-new and the ever-same, or opt in the end for a more open verdict, David Frisby's book undoubtedly provides a stimulating and powerful reminder of our own critical pre-history and its 'eternal return'.

IAIN CHAMBERS

HAWKES, T., *That Shakespearian Rag*, London, Methuen, 1986, 131 pp.

That Shakespearian Rag  
Most intelligent, very elegant  
That old classical drag,  
Has the proper stuff, the line 'Lay on Macduff'

(G. Buck, H. Ruby, D. Stamper)

*That Shakespearian Rag*, di Terence Hawkes, è una raccolta di saggi il cui punto di raccordo è dato dalla riflessione costante sui modi in cui la società britannica ha fatto uso dei testi shakespeariani e sulle possibili finalità che sottendono alla particolare utilizzazione di Shakespeare in questo secolo.

Shakespeare sembra essere uno dei più potenti strumenti ideologici per veicolare il concetto al tempo stesso culturale e politico di 'English' e 'Englishness' e Hawkes fa risalire questo tipo di lettura e critica shakespeariana agli inizi del secolo, quando era forte il bisogno di asserire un'eredità storica e un'identità culturale nazionale. Nel 1878 fu inaugurata una collana di studi biografici e critici dal titolo *English Men of Letters* (pubblicata da Macmillan e curata da John Morley), che contribuì in larga misura a dare un potente impulso al discorso dominante dell'istituzionalizzazione della tradizione nazionale, insieme alla consapevolezza dell'importanza del ruolo britannico nella storia mondiale. Nessuno meglio di Shakespeare rispondeva ai requisiti richiesti per la personificazione dello 'English man of letters' e fu con Sir Walter Raleigh, che nel 1907 collaborò alla collana *English Men of Letters* con un volume su Shakespeare, che si inaugurò la monumentalizzazione del 'Bardo' quale 'superuomo' letterario e depositario dell'eredità culturale britannica e, soprattutto, della lingua inglese, che, a partire dalla I guerra mondiale, assumerà sempre più il ruolo di lingua egemonica:

For what Raleigh clearly sees is that the war involves a historic clash in terms of *linguistic* hegemony, and that victory in the struggle would settle what, at that time, was a major issue: which was to be the dominant world language, German or English? The entry of America into the war was portentous for this reason. The 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States was and is based on a common language, representing the full flowering of the linguistic seeds planted by the Elizabethan colonizers: a massive adventure in cultural re-creation to which *The Tempest* stands as a lasting monument (p. 65).

Shakespeare, secondo Hawkes, viene dunque 'creato' e usato a sostegno di una particolare posizione ideologica, in una congiuntura storica di importanza vitale per l'impero britannico e ciò è continuato e continua ad accadere:

Shakespeare is a powerful ideological weapon, always available in periods of crisis, and used according to the exigencies of the time to resolve crucial areas of indeterminacy. As a central feature of the discipline we call 'English', his plays form part of that discipline's commitment — since 1870 in a national system of education — to the preservation and reinforcement of what is seen as a 'natural' order of things (p. 68).

La lettura ideologica di un testo è naturalmente portata a contrastare, o per lo meno ad omettere, il rilevamento della pluralità e della polifonia del testo e la proliferazione di senso viene volutamente imprigionata e canalizzata da letture monolitiche e da impalcature di pensiero tanto forti quanto univoche:

The pressures and compulsions of ideology are at work here. These are what seek to control the alarming plurality of all texts, and clearly there could be no effective instrument for such a controlling, prophylactic function in Britain than the aptly named edifice of English letters (p. 60).

L'intento di Hawkes è di decostruire l'impalcatura dell'edificio delle 'English letters' e, a tale proposito, dà un quadro allo stesso tempo preciso e irridente di un 'classico' approccio critico di impianto tradizionale. È il caso di A. C. Bradley e delle sue difficoltà nel 'classificare' il silenzio di Hamlet nei confronti di Ofelia:

Bradley's disquiet can be imagined. He has encountered a Ghost on the Battlements: it brings the alarming news that a text's 'meaning' cannot be limited to the words it uses. The situation wrings from him a further admission [...] If silence speaks in *Hamlet*, does it not do so in every text? (p. 40).

La comunicazione del non detto, 'l'imperfezione' del non definito è invece oggetto dell'attenzione di Hawkes che, a questo proposito, afferma:

Bradley here runs full tilt into the central issues of textuality. We, who since Freud, since Saussure, since Marx, Barthes, or Derrida, have felt compelled to listen to the sounds silence makes in a text, to respond to what is not said as if it were as significant as what is said can hardly feel superior to Bradley as he wrestles with this matter (pp. 38-39).

Rifacendosi a Freud, Saussure, Marx, Barthes, Derrida, Bachtin, l'autore riafferma la qualità polifonica dei testi e il loro carattere di strutture intrinsecamente plurali e continua, sottolineando come i drammi di Shakespeare non siano entità trasparenti, ma sedimenti di ri-scrittura che rifiutano un significato ultimo, singolo, coerente o preordinato: « Our 'Shakespeare' is our invention: to read him is to write him » (p. 124). Da ciò consegue (ovviamente) che la critica ai testi di Shakespeare non è né trasparente né innocente e che va condotto uno studio sui modi in cui i significati di tali testi sono stati prodotti, presentati ed usati: « ... the study of how readings of them arise, operate, conflict and clash, of the social and political positions which they embody and on behalf of which they function » (p. 133).

La ricerca di Hawkes è però orientata soprattutto verso una diversa nozione di interpretazione dei testi shakespeariani. Definiti *play-texts* in quanto non appartengono « né al genere dei romanzi né a quello dei poemi o dei drammi », essi si pongono al di fuori delle sole categorie disponibili al critico per descriverli. Mettendo a nudo le inadeguatezze di ogni lettura 'addomesticata', essi agiscono attraverso un inquietante modo comunicativo, che supera le frontiere del linguaggio scritto codificato, per dirigersi nel territorio del paralinguaggio, destabilizzando, così, il piano di lettura e i normali codici di significato:

In the form of qualities which cannot be 'dragged to light', which you cannot 'point to in the speeches', but which, as in Hamlet's 'O, O, O, O' or Charmian's 'Ah, soldier', or Antony's 'thus', exhibit an involving and complicating musical power beyond ordinary words [...] (p. 88).

Il legame significante-significato, e con esso la rete che determina i confini dei significati, sembra spezzarsi di fronte alla visione di un segno grafico che sconcerta il lettore e ne spiazzava le aspettative:

And even if, as a defensive measure, we seek to impose a limiting, analgesic, domesticating meaning upon the event — 'Ah soldier' means 'orgasm', 'O, O, O, O' means 'agony and death', 'thus' means 'a commitment to a way of life' — and even when we try to link these meanings ... with the larger 'thematic' contours of each play, we still have not disposed of them, nor can we (p. 88).

Il prolungato 'O, O, O, O' di Hamlet è un elemento che sovverte l'ordine e il flusso lineare della sequenza logica. È uno scarto ortografico, una mancanza, una 'scrittura vocale' che invita ad una risposta 'improvvisata', dialogica. È quello che intuitivamente percepì T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, nel gioco tonale e paralinguistico dell'aggiunta delle 'O'

e di una sillaba al titolo della canzone 'That Shakespearian Rag' (parole di Gene Buck e Herman Ruby e musica di David Stamper) che diventò: 'O O O O that Shakespearian Rag'. Il territorio della musica (e soprattutto della musica jazz improvvisata) e del *play-text* risulta così attraversato dalle stesse frequenze sonore che invadono l'ascoltatore, il lettore, lo spettatore 'al di sotto dei livelli di pensiero conscio' rendendolo parte di uno stesso processo, di uno stesso momento comune:

In short, like all texts in which dialogic 'voicing' or tonality is crucial ... Shakespeare's play-texts — that Shakespearian Rag — reach out to us (as it were with that extra, dialogical syllable), invade us and invite us to make (with that paralinguistic 'O, O, O, O') a sympathetic act of closure with themselves. And as the groaning Burbage knew, that turns us, even as we read, from spectators into participants (p. 90).

E riprendendo il modello del jazz, per cui il testo di una melodia costituisce non un fine ma un mezzo, ed è l'interpretazione che costituisce la sua arte, Hawkes propone (e il suo libro ne è esempio) un modello di critica in cui l'interpretazione diventa un rispondere, improvvisare e giocare con il testo. Come avviene durante una 'jam-session': un ricreare.

ANNAMARIA MORELLI

W. LEISS, S. KLINE, S. JHALLY, *Social Communication in Advertising*, London, Methuen, 1986, 311 pp.

*Social Communication in Advertising* attraversa e discute molti dei campi di studio che ruotano intorno al complesso sistema dei mass media e della pubblicità. In questo lavoro Leiss, Kline e Jhally si propongono, infatti, di esplorare le molteplici influenze che la pubblicità esercita nella cultura contemporanea, costituendone nel bene come nel male una parte integrante.

« In industrial societies in this century, national consumer product advertising has become one of the great vehicles of social communication » (p. 3). Questo, in sintesi, il nucleo argomentativo intorno al quale ruotano le tre sezioni del libro. Il volume parte da un resoconto del dibattito critico sull'argomento e procede con un panorama diacronico della pubblicità in relazione allo sviluppo degli altri media; si concentra, nella terza parte, su una discussione degli studi improntati ai due principali approcci critici del campo (l'analisi semiologica e quella del contenuto) e culmina con un esempio originale di analisi che utilizza entrambi questi approcci con in più un'attenzione ai linguaggi e ai contesti culturali e comunicativi in cui la pubblicità si esprime.

Nella loro registrazione del 'dibattito sulla pubblicità' si ritrovano echi del 'dibattito culturale', che pare si riconvertano nelle posizioni dicotomiche e manichee dell'accusa e della difesa ad oltranza. Alla prima posizione danno voce le critiche, ormai storiche, della pubblicità come



persuasione occulta (Packard), manipolazione (Key), creazione di falsi bisogni (Marcuse, Boorstin), magia altamente organizzata e professionale (Williams, Leymore, Gossage), controllo sociale e ideologia del falso e dell'irreale (Williamson ed altri).

Ma la critica alla pubblicità è spesso un attacco diretto verso qualcos'altro, di cui la pubblicità può essere sintomo, effetto o simbolo:

Objections directed at advertisements, the industry and its alleged social impacts, are often indirect attacks on the so-called « materialistic ethos » of industrial society or on capitalism in general as a social system; these are critiques of society masquerading as critiques of advertising ... We do think that when advertising is used as a surrogate for these larger concerns, the criticisms are being aimed at the wrong target (p. 30).

Le 'voci' della difesa (in realtà ben poche) dissacrano quello che viene definito il 'mito' della manipolazione pubblicitaria (Albion, Schudson, Driver, Foxall, Levitt ...), ma è soprattutto dagli 'addetti ai lavori' che viene fermamente, e spesso ironicamente, respinto il ruolo di « magici imbonitori »:

Manipulating wizards? It's one of the misconceptions and I wish it were true — we'd be running the country and sitting in the sun somewhere if I knew absolutely how to manipulate people ... Human beings can't be thus manipulated — if they could we could banish war and apply the same techniques to larger theaters of life and control whole populations. We can't because fundamentally human beings refuse to be categorized and are finally unpredictable (p. 35).

Ma, osservano gli autori, i confini del dibattito sono ancora troppo limitati e sterili. Sviluppatisi di pari passo con la nascente società dei consumi, delle comunicazioni, delle nuove tecnologie, delle arti visive e cinetiche, la pubblicità è diventata essa stessa un sistema comunicativo; si è evoluta in risposta ad un continuo interscambio di senso fra il messaggio pubblicitario e il fruitore e in risposta a idee, forme e stili diversi che, esplorati in altri generi e/o in altri media, vengono trasferiti nella pubblicità e quindi adattati, contaminati o cambiati nella forma e nell'enfasi.

Centro nevralgico dei media commerciali, la pubblicità si trova nella posizione ideale per assimilare tutti questi influssi e ri-costituirli e riprodurli in modi nuovi:

In some senses it can be regarded as the quintessential communication form of the modern era. Its noteworthy features in this context are the « condensing » of ideas, skillful combination of language and imagery, the breadth of its thematic and social references, and its accessibility to and acceptance by wide audiences that may even cross linguistic and cultural barriers (p. 72).

Quale medium tra i media, la pubblicità ha sviluppato una propria gamma di tecniche, retoriche e forme; un proprio modo di narrare l'immagine, che, a sua volta, influenza quello televisivo (emblematica la

serie *Miami Vice*) e quello cinematografico (molti degli attuali registi del cinema inglese, come Allan Parker, Ridley Scott, Adrian Lyne, ad esempio, provengono dalla pubblicità). Questa capacità di osservare, alterare, trasferire tecniche, idee ed immagini da un medium all'altro ha anche reso la pubblicità un elemento nodale nello stabilire stili e modi, oltre che rifletterli; cosicché le tendenze, i ritmi e perfino gli 'eroi' della pubblicità hanno una grande influenza sulle altre forme della produzione culturale:

Thus advertising not only evolved as a unique cultural form with its own grammar and logic — where the relation between consumption and popular culture was always the central theme — but also as a pattern for the whole communication field, affecting cultural activities ranging from fashion to election campaigns (pp. 101-102).

Lo stile, il design e le suggestioni visive dei testi pubblicitari hanno introdotto tali innovazioni da essere spesso indicati tra i maggiori elementi di influenza che incidono sull'arte moderna e le varie pratiche massmediali. La fascinazione dell'icona, del simbolo grafico, della metafora visiva, rappresentano il tessuto connettivo delle forme comunicative usate nella pubblicità contemporanea:

The ambiguity that can be supported by visual imagery is significant, both for the ease with which symbolic qualities can be dispersed over a wide variety of product categories and types, and also for the resultant indeterminacy of the associations ... The openness of the product image to varying permutations and interpretations means that both advertisers and consumers can experiment freely with the meanings — which may be constructed differently by each, to be sure — in a particular ad campaign (p. 245).

Il consumatore non è dunque la confusa e disorientata vittima delle abili macchinazioni dell'industria pubblicitaria, ma il referente di un processo comunicativo. La sua ricezione è attiva e abile in quanto produttrice di senso; la sua fruizione esperta in quanto capace di decodificare, associare, interpretare, riconoscere.

Le forme del messaggio pubblicitario si sono evolute lungo i tracciati dei cambiamenti più generali della società che hanno diversificato lo spettro degli « stili di vita »; cioè di quei modelli culturali che guidano alla ricerca della soddisfazione personale. La pubblicità si colloca dunque al crocevia dove confluiscono l'industria, i media e gli « stili di vita », riflettendo, esplicitando, a volte anticipando molte delle tendenze culturali e delle trasformazioni sociali più profonde. A ragione affermano gli autori:

Advertising is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves, but is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions (p. 7).

In *Social Communication in Advertising* si legge dunque il tentativo di estendere i confini di questo campo di studi; a differenza di altri lavori sull'argomento che spesso mancano, nelle loro analisi, di tenere conto della globalità dell'esperienza culturale contemporanea di cui la pubblicità è, appunto, espressione, veicolo, segno.

ANNAMARIA MORELLI

T. MODLESKI, *Loving with a Vengeance, Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, London, Methuen, 1984, pp. 140.

Nel dibattito esistente — dentro e fuori la critica letteraria — sulle espressioni della cultura di massa, il libro di Tania Modleski si inserisce con autorevolezza e precise intenzioni: rivalutare il campo salvandolo dai giudizi che vi vedono un indiscriminato 'declino di gusto e di sensibilità' (p. 110); osservare i generi popolari e porli a confronto con le matrici o filiazioni colte usando strumenti — quali la critica psicoanalitica — in genere riservati alla letteratura 'alta'; affiancare nell'analisi codificazioni appartenenti a media diversi. Infatti accanto al romanzo sentimentale e a quello gotico l'autrice pone il racconto per immagini e specificamente la *soap opera* televisiva. Ella non fa mistero di adottare un'ottica femminista, iniziando con la denuncia del doppio standard critico che si ritrova negli studi sulla letteratura popolare non meno che in quelli letterari:

One cannot find any writings on popular feminine narratives to match the aggrandized titles of certain classic studies of popular male genres («The Gangster as Tragic Hero») or the inflated claims made for, say, the detective novel... (p. 11).

La discriminazione era stata rilevata anni prima da Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* («football and sport are 'important', the buying of clothes trivial» - cit. a pag. 11), con un riferimento stranamente appropriato agli ambiti della cultura popolare odierna.

Nella lunga introduzione che dà il sottotitolo al libro (*Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*), Modleski sottolinea che sono — e sono state — soprattutto le donne, da George Eliot a Germaine Greer, a contribuire a questo atteggiamento paternalistico e ostile. Questo primo capitolo si focalizza sulla funzione dell'arte di massa che in modo non troppo dissimile da quella colta trasforma bisogni e desideri inconsci, soddisfacendoli e stimolandoli al tempo stesso. La creazione continua di bisogni e quindi la funzione di assuefazione portano alla nozione della letteratura di massa come narcotico e droga.

Modleski si pone sulla scia di Jameson, Enzemberger ed altri nel sottolineare la componente utopica di sogni e fantasie di massa, non condividendo tuttavia la riserva dello stesso Jameson, che ci siano dei manipolatori occulti di tale letteratura esterni all'ideologia:

... I avoid imputing to, for example, the board of directors of the Harlequin company, an omniscience about the nature and effects of their product. I sincerely doubt that men on the board, cynical as they may be about feminine romance, actually possess a total awareness of where «mystification» leaves off and «truth» begins (p. 9).

L'autrice si propone di adottare l'approccio psicoanalitico, analizzando il 'masochismo' che pervade questi testi e vedendolo come mascheratura di ansietà, bisogni e desideri femminili. Le analisi che seguono sono un contributo alla psicologia della interazione tra lettrici e testi e tendono alla ricostruzione del dramma edipico femminile forse in polemica con tutta una critica che, seguendo un suggerimento di R. Barthes, ha visto la narrativa popolare, soprattutto cinematografica, come la rivisitazione della crisi edipica maschile.

Tale angolazione viene applicata in particolare agli 'Harlequin romances' e ai romanzi gotici, serie formulaiche di grande popolarità che si possono far risalire rispettivamente al modello sentimentale e a quello gotico. I primi prendono il nome dalla casa produttrice Harlequin Enterprise Ltd di Toronto. Sono romanzi d'amore a lieto fine, raccontati dal punto di vista dell'eroina e in terza persona. Gli elementi avventurosi sono presenti ma subordinati all'intreccio d'amore; l'epoca è contemporanea e i luoghi variabili ma realistici. I secondi sono pubblicati da vari editori americani, tra cui ad esempio Ace e Fawcett, e sono storie di suspense e mistero. Nel 'gotico puro' l'intreccio avventuroso è dominante e sulla copertina c'è in genere una donna in abiti fluenti sullo sfondo di una casa o un castello dall'apparenza minacciosa. L'ingrediente fondamentale, secondo l'ex editore di Ace Books, è «a handsome, magnetic suitor or husband who may or may not be a lunatic and/or murderer» (cit. a p. 61).

L'autrice vede nell'eroina del genere romantico il soggetto depressivo e nel gotico il soggetto paranoide. Il soggetto depressivo tende a riferire tutti i mali a se stesso e si sente in colpa; l'altro proietta le sue paure fuori di sé e si sente perseguitato.

L'enigma di base della narrazione romantica è legato al mistero della mascolinità, rappresentato per lo più da un eroe ironico, irato e persino brutale. Questo mistero, che è comune anche al gotico e a molti tipi di narrativa popolare, non è condiviso dalla lettrice che a differenza dell'eroina sa che cosa si cela dietro l'apparenza negativa (poiché conosce la formula) ed è perciò divisa tra meccanismo di identificazione e distacco. Il secondo enigma riguarda la ricchezza dell'uomo che viene tenuta nascosta: la trama è ancora una volta quella della ragazza povera che finisce per sposare un uomo ricco e nobile ma senza saperlo fino alla fine. L'eroina crede di odiarlo ma lo ama. Non è

un'avventuriera, è pura e innocente, spesso svenuta (« to be alive and conscious is to be suspect » - p. 52). Lo scioglimento dei due enigmi passa attraverso fantasie di sparizione, di suicidio o di fuga che costringeranno l'uomo a svelare il suo amore (questo 'disappearing act' trova un parallelo nell'evento della lettura nella vita delle donne). Ma non mancano le fantasie di vendetta. Per questa analisi *Pamela* e anche *Pride and Prejudice*, sono richiami obbligati.

Mentre questo tipo di narrativa si può far risalire alla fase del corteggiamento nella vita di una donna, il gotico si riferisce alla fase immediatamente successiva, il matrimonio (così come la *soap opera* viene vista come coincidente con l'inserimento nella famiglia). Al senso di colpa e all'amore si sostituisce come sentimento dominante la paura. Paura del nuovo ambiente, quasi sempre diverso, esotico, pieno di porte sbarrate, corridoi labirintici, stanze scure; ma soprattutto paura di 'lui', l'uomo misterioso con cui all'improvviso si deve vivere. Che sia marito o corteggiatore, l'eroe è sospettato di aver ucciso l'altra donna (spesso la prima moglie) e/o, in ripetizione simmetrica, di voler uccidere l'eroina stessa. Gli ovvi riferimenti per Modleski sono *Jane Eyre*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* e *Northanger Abbey*.

È qui che l'autrice riesce ad applicare con maggior successo la critica psicoanalitica: il complesso di castrazione viene collegato come fa Freud a quello di ripetizione e usato per spiegare il rapporto tra l'eroina e l'altra donna, personaggio fondamentale nella formula del gotico. L'altra donna è una figura materna nel ruolo di vittima, da cui ci si deve differenziare per sottrarsi a quel ruolo così come la bambina si deve differenziare dalla madre per acquisire la propria identità. Ed è proprio l'uomo-carnefice che si tramuterà nello strumento di distacco. La madre complice e alleata diventa matrigna, il padre minaccioso e ostile diventa amante.

Gothics, then, are expressions of the « normal » feminine paranoid personality. Just as Harlequins are in some ways expressions of the « normal » feminine hysterical character. Further, each kind of text may be seen to relate to two basic anxieties, guilt and fear (p. 81).

Questo discorso, che è il più interessante del libro, si conclude con un riferimento al gotico 'femminista' se così si può chiamare, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* di Wollstonecraft, che esplora a livello consapevole ciò che nel genere popolare pure c'è a livello inconscio, la ribellione e il rifiuto verso la nozione di sacrificio di sé.

L'ultima analisi è rivolta alle *soap operas*, serie interminabili di telefilm a puntate di circa un'ora che vengono trasmesse dalla televisione americana ogni giorno, con circa 25 milioni di spettatori al giorno, di cui il 90% donne. L'autrice conferma la sua posizione critica entrando in polemica con l'atteggiamento di disprezzo, quasi proverbiale, che circonda questi racconti, di cui ella mette in rilievo strutture narrative interessanti. L'eterno differimento viene visto come una rottura della narrativa tradizionale e così la molteplicità degli intrecci e l'assenza di un io unitario con cui lo spettatore possa identificarsi. Modleski

vede l'estetica della distrazione, dell'interruzione e del frammentario in coincidenza con l'etica e la materialità della vita femminile, in particolare della casalinga.

Il rapporto della spettatrice con la *soap opera* passa attraverso la famiglia che è il centro di ogni intreccio, e si realizza nell'identificazione con il personaggio della 'madre buona' che conosce tutte le trame, le contraddizioni e la loro insolvibilità. La famiglia è sempre rappresentata come infelice e turbata; tale infelicità è appunto la condizione perché duri in eterno ed è parte del piacere della fruizione. Non sufficientemente dimostrata è tuttavia l'affermazione finale che tale piacere non è tanto legato alla famiglia quanto al bisogno e all'aspirazione a una comunità più ampia.

L'approccio psicoanalitico risulta qui meno convincente; inoltre la limitazione dell'analisi a una tipologia molto ristretta — la *day-time soap opera* — ne riduce in parte l'interesse. La narrativa televisiva pur nella grande proliferazione di forme che ha avuto si è andata sempre più configurando secondo criteri di astrazione e formalizzazione che qui sfuggono necessariamente all'osservazione.

La scelta degli esempi data l'ampiezza di un materiale che si sottrae a ogni classificazione interna offre non poche difficoltà che l'autrice ha superato con molta abilità, soprattutto nell'analisi dei romanzi. Ella non tenta giustificazioni della sua scelta: indica in nota un gruppo di romanzi per ciascuno dei due tipi di narrativa ed attinge ad essi per illustrare le linee del suo discorso critico. Non si vuole qui criticare l'uso sintomatico dei testi ma il pericolo di considerare i campi esaminati come una massa indifferenziata in cui l'opera non si distingue dal genere, una pratica frequente nella critica negativa da cui pure l'autrice prende le distanze.

Il maggiore elemento di interesse del libro rimane quello di offrire un esempio stimolante e produttivo di metodologia analitica in un campo che viene spesso esaminato con strumenti sociologici. Insieme a un gruppo di studiose del Center for 20th Century Studies dell'Università di Milwaukee, Modleski utilizza e prosegue, nell'ambito della letteratura popolare, il lavoro fatto da un gruppo di psicologhe femministe, tra cui è da ricordare principalmente Nancy Chodorow con *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). L'unica riserva che questo approccio può suscitare è che in gran parte trascura l'incidenza dei linguaggi riconducendo così a uno dei limiti degli studi sulla cultura di massa, che viene esaminata troppo spesso solo nei contenuti.

L'altro aspetto che rende questo studio degno di nota è che è uno dei pochi a porsi in modo positivo e privo di pregiudizi di fronte a oggetti di studio fin qui disprezzati. E questo in contrasto con il lavoro pur interessante svolto in questo campo da studiose quali Rosalind Coward (*Female Desire*, 1984) e Judith Williamson (*Consuming Passions*, 1985) che danno la loro attenzione ai 'prodotti' consumati dalle donne per concludere su una visione critica di manipolazione e di passività a mio parere estremamente riduttiva.

LIDIA CURTI

Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London, Methuen, 1984, viii+176 pp.

LINDA HUTCHEON, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, New York, Methuen, 1985, x+143 pp.

Il romanzo, per molti autori contemporanei, è gioco e ripetizione. Si pensi all'opera di Borges o di Calvino, in cui il linguaggio sembra rappresentare in primo luogo se stesso, e a tutti quei casi in cui l'opera finita include il processo del suo farsi; o ancora ai romanzi di autori come Barth o Butor che dilatano la dimensione autoreferenziale del testo fino a escluderne ogni altra. Per tutti questi la letteratura nasce sempre da altra letteratura, è cioè consapevolmente incentrata su se stessa, è metaletteraria. In due studi recenti, *Metafiction* di Patricia Waugh e *A Theory of Parody* di Linda Hutcheon, rilevata la presenza dominante di elementi metanarrativi nel romanzo degli ultimi trenta anni, da molti critici *tout court* identificato come postmoderno, si sostiene che è proprio questo l'elemento tipizzante del nuovo romanzo e che da questo bisogna partire per comprenderne teoria e prassi.

È infatti vero che non basta più, per interpretare o leggere soltanto gran parte del romanzo contemporaneo, riferirsi al paradigma arte/realità; o almeno appare necessario ridefinire i due termini; rilevare la problematicità di questa relazione. Il metaromanzo, in quanto scrittura di finzione che in maniera sistematica e consapevole attira l'attenzione del lettore sul proprio statuto di artefatto, aiuta appunto a comprendere tale problematicità. Il metaromanzo, afferma Waugh, è una riflessione sulla forma e sulla teoria del romanzo svolta attraverso la pratica stessa della scrittura; è un romanzo che non si accontenta di sollevare il metaforico specchio nei confronti della realtà, ma vuole rispecchiare l'arte stessa.

Il fenomeno del metaromanzo non è nuovo. La dimensione meta-narrativa è inerente al romanzo stesso e se si pensa alle sue origini, a Cervantes, a Fielding, a Sterne, si dovrà accettarla non solo come legittima, ma come quella che dà al romanzo la sua identità. La sua ripresa oggi va tuttavia posta in relazione con gli studi sul linguaggio. A partire da Saussure e da Hjelmslev la cultura contemporanea è divenuta sempre più consapevole della funzione del linguaggio nella costruzione della nostra percezione della realtà quotidiana. Se il romanzo media la conoscenza del mondo, lo fa attraverso il tramite del linguaggio ed è diventato sempre più difficile oggi credere alla lingua come mero strumento, un qualcosa che passivamente riflette un mondo oggettivo, costruito in maniera coerente. La lingua è un sistema autonomo che genera i suoi stessi significati; la dimensione *meta* serve appunto a esplorare la relazione che intercorre tra un sistema linguistico arbitrario e il mondo a cui si riferisce. Nel romanzo, in particolare, essa esplora la relazione tra il mondo della finzione e il mondo esterno. In questo

modo il metaromanzo denuncia l'inautenticità dell'assunto e della pratica realista secondo cui il romanzo non è che l'estensione del mondo reale. Mettendo a nudo i meccanismi della finzione, il metaromanzo inscena un gioco coerente che ne rappresenta i limiti e attesta la vera natura del rapporto arte/realità.

Lungi dall'essere sintomo di povertà immaginativa, il metaromanzo ha una sua ricca gamma espressiva che comprende sia i romanzi che esplorano l'artificio in quanto tema, come quelli di Borges o John Barth, sia quelli che esprimono una forma di insicurezza ontologica, come quelli di John Fowles e B. S. Johnson, o quelli ancora che rifiutano il realismo e inventano un mondo semiotico alternativo, come i romanzi di Vonnegut, Brooke-Rose o Doris Lessing. Per metanarrativo bisogna intendere dunque non solo l'infrastruzione sistematica delle convenzioni letterarie, come la presenza del narratore nel testo, la drammatizzazione del lettore, la confusione tra i livelli narrativi, la rottura dell'organizzazione spaziale e temporale del testo, ma anche l'uso di immagini riflettenti, il testo nel testo, il testo-inventario di 'merci rubate', l'adozione di generi popolari (*thriller, romance, detective, science-fiction*), la parodia di un altro testo e ogni forma di esperimento tipografico; in definitiva, tutto ciò che sovverte un ordine sia formale che tematico, tutto ciò che porta in primo piano la scrittura come l'aspetto più problematico del testo.

Ciascuna di queste modalità viene nel volume di P. Waugh esemplificata con riferimenti a autori e opere della letteratura contemporanea, prevalentemente di lingua inglese. Oltre alla classificazione del genere, l'autrice pone questioni di ordine generale tentando di dimostrare che l'atteggiamento metanarrativo e autoreferenziale, piuttosto che come segno di esaurimento del romanzo possa e debba considerarsi un significativo momento innovativo. Sulla scorta dei formalismi russi e in particolare di Sklovskij, Waugh ribadisce l'importanza della parodia — tra le espressioni del metaromanzo forse la più incisiva — nell'aver indicato al romanzo nuove possibilità creative:

Parody renews and maintains the relationship between form and what it can express, by upsetting a previous balance which has become so rigidified that the conventions of the form can express only a limited or even irrelevant content (p. 68).

La funzione della parodia è dunque sempre duplice, critica e creativa. Lo studio di L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, è anch'esso volto al riscatto della forma parodica, ma non si limita al romanzo come fa Waugh, bensì identifica la parodia con l'intera pratica artistica del nostro secolo, dalla pittura al cinema, dalla musica alla letteratura.

In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon sviluppa le premesse contenute in un precedente saggio, *Narcissistic Narrative* (Methuen, 1980), la cui tesi centrale era che il romanzo è per sua stessa natura narcisista, votato

cioè all'autoriflessione e alla parodia. Lo studio successivo nasce dalla constatazione dell'assoluta centralità della parodia nella produzione artistica contemporanea: la ricodificazione ironica è diventata, secondo Hutcheon, non solo uno dei modi principali di strutturazione del testo artistico, sia al livello formale che tematico, ma anche uno dei modi principali per l'artista di fare i conti con il passato in maniera dialettica.

La parodia va sottratta una volta per sempre alla pesante eredità romantica che la riteneva una forma d'arte parassitaria e volgare; e tuttavia essa resta imbrigliata in un paradosso: quello di essere una forma di *ripetizione*, e in quanto tale conservatrice, e allo stesso tempo una *differenza*, dotata di potenziale rivoluzionario, o almeno di capacità di trasformazione. Questa differenza, che Hutcheon definisce 'transcontestualizzazione ironica', essendo l'ironia la principale strategia retorica esibita dal genere, è ciò che permette all'autrice di distinguere la parodia, e decretarne la superiorità, dalle forme contigue (*burlesque*, *pastiche*, citazione, satira, etc.). La tesi di Hutcheon per quanto suggestiva e argomentata con limpidezza lascia tuttavia perplessi soprattutto per la sua pretesa definitoria e sistematizzante di questioni tuttora aperte, come ad esempio quella che discute lo status dell'arte contemporanea, recentemente dibattuta sulle pagine della *New Left Review* tra Fredric Jameson e Terry Eagleton.

Nella sua complessa disamina della cultura postmoderna, « Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism » (*NLR* n. 146, 1984), Jameson individua nella scomparsa del soggetto e nelle sue conseguenze a livello formale — la mancanza di uno stile personale — l'origine della diffusa pratica del *pastiche*, che è per lui una forma vuota di parodia, « una statua dalle orbite vuote »:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists (p. 65).

Per questo il postmoderno non può considerarsi uno stile, ma piuttosto una forma omogeneizzante e pervasiva di 'cultural dominant' che permette la coesistenza caotica di elementi disparati. Secondo Eagleton invece, nella cultura postmoderna, la parodia esiste, anche se spesso in forma inconsapevole, ed è diretta per lo più alle avanguardie rivoluzionarie del XX secolo (*NLR* n. 152, 1985).

L'estetica postmoderna può leggersi infatti come parodia dell'anti-rappresentazionalismo sperimentato dalle avanguardie degli anni venti: l'arte si rifiuta di rappresentare il mondo non perché voglia cambiarlo piuttosto che imitarlo, ma perché non esiste una realtà da riflettere che non sia immagine, spettacolo, simulacro (la tesi ha molti punti di convergenza con quella sostenuta da M. Perniola in *La società dei simu-*

*laci*, Bologna, 1983). Rappresentare la realtà per l'arte contemporanea non significa altro dunque che rispecchiare se stessa in forme che si risolvono nel discorso della citazione, dell'autoreferenzialità, e così via. Ne deriva, per Eagleton, il paradosso dell'arte postmoderna: essere parte integrante di un sistema economico che l'ha resa feticcio, bene di consumo.

La tesi di Linda Hutcheon sulla pervasività della parodia nel discorso artistico postmoderno, nonostante i rimandi ad autorevoli teorie critiche, appare riduttiva e semplificante. Nel saggio non si propone ad esempio alcuna distinzione tra funzioni e modi della parodia come fa invece Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1982), che resta lo studio più organico e articolato delle pratiche intertestuali. Tra le relazioni *formali* possibili tra un testo B e uno anteriore A, Genette distingue quelle di tipo imitativo da quelle di tipo trasformativo; quelle con funzione satirica dalle altre. Hutcheon sembra accettare la definizione di parodia come relazione *formale* tra due testi ma, in polemica con le teorie strutturaliste dell'intertestualità (Kristeva), enfatizza sia la componente attiva di trasformazione del testo anteriore che il contesto di ricezione della parodia: i testi non generano nulla finché non vengono percepiti e interpretati, afferma Hutcheon, e propone i più funzionali strumenti della semiotica pragmatica di Charles Morris e Umberto Eco.

Bachtin rappresenta un altro testo di riferimento obbligato e dal suo studio su Rabelais si fa derivare, non senza qualche forzatura, l'idea del metaromanzo (o parodia) come carnevale:

Like Bachtin's Renaissance and medieval carnival [...] modern meta-fiction exists on the self-conscious borderline between art and life, making little formal distinction between actor and spectator, between author and co-creating reader (p. 72).

Come il mondo gioioso e derivato del carnevale esisteva in opposizione all'austera cultura ecclesiastica dell'epoca, così il metaromanzo contesta l'illusione realista e tenta il sovvertimento di una pratica critica autoritaria; e come il carnevale riuscì ad affermarsi quasi come pratica 'istituzionale' accettata, come trasgressione autorizzata, così il discorso parodico può solo esistere in funzione della 'licenza speciale' a trasgredire le norme, sia pure nei limiti della loro riconoscibilità. Ma mentre per Bachtin la parodia resta una forma passiva di discorso rappresentato, una forma centripeta e omogeneizzante, per Hutcheon essa può essere centrifuga e denormalizzante.

Un aspetto interessante discusso nel volume è inoltre quello della possibilità di una spiegazione storica del fenomeno della parodia. Confrontando la nostra epoca con il secolo XIV, altra epoca d'oro della parodia, Hutcheon individua una matrice comune nel senso dell'instabilità ideologica e della sfida alle norme costituite. La tendenza del discorso artistico a costruirsi in riferimento ad altre forme di discorso

codificato — ad altre opere d'arte — si spiega nella nostra epoca anche con la progressiva sostituzione della natura con la cultura come soggetto dell'arte. Lo studio di L. Hutcheon è corredato di una ricca e utile bibliografia.

PAOLA SPLENDORE

riassunti

M. BILLI, « Dal teatro al romanzo: trasformazioni e trasmodalizzazioni del dramma elisabettiano nella narrativa gotica inglese », XXVIII, 2, pp. 7-46.

English gothic fiction is particularly remarkable for its strongly theatrical character, modelling itself on plays of the Elizabethan era and taking from the text and from their Eighteenth-century performances its characters and, in particular, its sinister atmosphere and striking scenic effects. The Elizabethan drama is present in these works, recognizable but at the same time significantly transformed. The authors attempt to adapt the material to a new form, and, above all, to accomplish a socio-cultural and aesthetic recontextualization, which reveal the ambiguity and the disquiet of a whole epoch.

M. CALBI, « Immagini del 'popolare' in *Bartholomew Fair* di Ben Jonson », XXVIII, 2, pp. 47-74.

This study is an attempt to combine bachtinian discourse analysis with linguistic textual analysis, using the ambiguous representation of the 'popular' in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* as a test-case. The analysis concentrates on the rhetorical devices which convey the interplay between 'high' and 'low' discourses within the play. The contradictory system of images of the grotesque body retains some of the carnivalesque playfulness inherited from Medieval popular culture, though undermined by a spiteful attitude already announcing an early-modern notion of the 'reformed' and 'private' body. The metatheatrical disquisitions provided by the « Induction » and the puppet-play within the play are partly defied by the 'subversive' language of Carnival they are ostensibly devised to contain.

I. CHAMBERS, « A Handful of Sand ... ? », XXVIII, 3, pp. 15-27.

For many modern (and postmodern) critics, the contemporary world and its culture is a semiotic desert: full of signs but no sense. This article proposes a brief journey through this landscape, following the

tracks of other 'nomads' of modernity (Nietzsche, Benjamin, Pirsig), in an attempt to reveal its 'other', possible side, where we encounter the ruins of metaphysics and historicism, and the suggestion that it represents a further intellectual (but not only intellectual) chance.

R. CIOCCA, « Macbeth Re capovolto », XXVII, 1, pp. 11-30.

In the light of the ritual figure of the royal double in the archaic tradition of kingship, the story of the relationship between Macbeth and the crown, as a symbol of the supreme power, is interpreted as his vain attempt to gain a royal dignity he in fact cannot grasp.

Duncan's death is considered as the end of the phase in which the king was regarded as a sacred symbol of the integration of the body natural and the body politic.

The killing of Macbeth and the re-establishing of the legitimate succession to the throne with Malcolm only apparently solves this crisis. Actually the brief reign of Macbeth inaugurates the beginning of a new era characterized by the disruption of the old core of beliefs which surrounded the king and raised him to a sacred state.

M. R. COCCO, « Salomé di O. Wilde. La ripetizione come strategia testuale e scenica », XXVIII, 2, pp. 75-114.

*Salomé* was written, as Wilde himself states in his letters, as an attempt to make drama 'as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet'.

According to Lotman repetition is the main characteristic of poetry and it is therefore not surprising to find it playing a prominent part in the drama. The same motifs occur at all levels of theatrical communication thus uniting the various codes into a symphonic whole. Moreover *Salomé* is a poetic drama and therefore works principally through words and relies on verbal 'tours de force' to create mood, atmosphere and the sense of impending doom and approaching death both of the characters and paradoxically, for here we have it at its height, of language itself.

C. CORTI, « I 'modi signandi' del 'Macbeth' », XXVIII, 1, pp. 31-51.

A semiotic reconstruction of the Renaissance epistemological debate stresses the formation of two opposite tendencies: the one towards strange forms of 'vision' and the predominance of the icon, the other towards critical and rational opposition to superstition and the

predominance of the Logos. The struggle is between the neoplatonic representation of the external world through the magical strength of *vis verborum* and the neoaristotelian ability to represent reality as the product of human rationality. The debate is materialized in the theatrical text of *Macbeth* which is explored through the analysis of the two related categories of language (*verbum mirificum*) and visual representation (*species inteligibilis*).

M. DEL SAPIO, « 'The Question is whether You can make Words mean so Many Different Things': a proposito di arte e linguaggi metropolitani », XVIII, 3, pp. 107-129.

Ranging from literature to popular culture this article discusses the erased distance between art and contemporary everyday life, raising in an aestheticized metropolitan landscape the twin problem of the critical status of any such concepts as uniqueness, truth, depth, referentiality, transparency. The article is divided into two sections. The first part traces back to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* the playful, flexible relationship between referents and signs which was to be fully explored by the twentieth century avant-garde. The second part examines, in the influential youth style magazine of the 1980's *i-D*, how such a play of doubling surfaces is both faced and performed by a street-wise bricoleur.

F. FERRARA, « Il tempo sintetico del Macbeth », XXVIII, 1, pp. 53-77.

Time is often discussed as a problematic issue in many of Shakespeare's plays and poems. In the case of *Macbeth*, 'synthetic time' concentrates eventful hours in brief corrosive moments of dramatic action (such is the case of I, 1, 2 and 3; III, 4; etc.). Moreover, the whole tragedy — which compresses about twenty years of historical facts in a convulsive sequence of actions included in a week's time — shows that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are forcing time's rhythm in their attempt to grasp the future.

This violence changes and perverts the world surrounding them, their apprehension of life, and the very nature of time, transforming its cyclic reassuring motion into a linear sequence devoid of meaning which leads men's lives into nothingness.



D. HEBDIGE, « The Bottom Line of Planet One », XXVIII, 3, pp. 29-62.

Employing the metaphors of science-fiction, the author moves between the planet of modernism (Planet One) and the postmodernist one inhabited by the contemporary London style magazine *The Face* polemicalising with the superficial aesthetics (and morality) of the latter. He argues that in the vertiginous play of surfaces and styles something — the possibility of drawing a line and arriving at a reasonable sense, the articulation of a recognizable politics and morality — has gone missing.

A. JOHNSON, « Per un'analisi paradigmatica e simbolica di *Macbeth* », XXVIII, 1, pp. 79-115.

Supernatural and natural elements, generate, in *Macbeth*, 'dramatic situations' and 'clusters of images' which impress a strong impetus to action and are the symbolic key to the meaning of the whole play.

Such are the paradigms of 'blood' (present through the whole action), the sequence of 'desire - thought - image - action' (typical of the main characters of the play), the paradigm of 'safety' and others that build clusters of symbolic meaning about *Macbeth*, while Lady *Macbeth's* rhetoric speeches rest on the opposition 'desire vs fear', and other symbolic paradigms.

All these elements contribute in bringing about the final crisis of the play which transforms 'desire' into 'horror' signifying the disruption of order and meaning both in the microcosm and the macrocosm.

A. McROBBIE, « Postmodernism and Popular Culture », XXVIII, 3, pp. 63-78.

Initially responding to Dick Hebdige's essay on *The Face*, the author argues that postmodernism represents a welcome breath of fresh air in Britain, it being certainly closer to expressing the instantaneous and fragmentary urban experiences of many young people, women and blacks, than the totalizing and nostalgic explanations offered by modernism.

C. PAGETTI AND O. PALUSCI, « 'SF' e Post-moderno. Due modelli narrativi », XXVIII, 3, pp. 131-156.

The authors look at the tradition of science fiction novels, those « half serious Bibles of the new World », connecting them to the cultural area identified as post-modern novel. The absence of a message, the

ironic recycling of modernist art, the parody of the genre conventions are some of the common features observed in Philip Dick's and Kurt Vonnegut's narrative, in particular in Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*. The second part of the article deals with the SF feminist novel and its subversive potential: Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, with its fragmentation of narrative structures and the splitting of the heroine into diverse characters, aims at creating « a feminine textual body ».

B. SCHWARZ, « Grammschi goes to Disneyland », XXVIII, 3, pp. 79-104.

This article critically examines recent writings on popular culture, in particular the work of the Popular Culture course team at the Open University and Iain Chambers' book *Popular Culture. The metropolitan experience*. While recognizing certain limits in the Gramscian-inspired work at the Open University, the author goes on to polemicalise, from an avowed Gramscian perspective, with the open-ended, 'post' position (post-marxism, post-structural, post-modern) advanced by Chambers in his analysis of contemporary metropolitan culture. He concludes that before venturing too far into the seductive rhetoric of the postmodern world it would be better to remind ourselves of the more rigorous considerations that Gramsci once offered for cultural analysis.

V. VILLA, « Re Giovanni tra storia e manipolazione teatrale », XXVIII, 2, pp. 115-149.

A comparative study of the dramatic structure of the three XVIth century history plays (*King Johan* by J. Bale, the anonymous *Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England*, *King John* by W. Shakespeare) shows how the history of King John can be re-told according to the different ideologies of the authors. The textual analysis focusses on the earlier play and on the anonymous *T.R.* and it discusses the main differences in the handling of the plot, the organization of the dramatic discourse and the construction of the figure of the king as an ideal image of kingship. Shakespeare's drama — which will be examined in a forthcoming essay — reveals many striking similarities to the anonymous play and is seen here as a successful attempt at creating a more sophisticated dramatic text dealing with the problematical crisis of royal authority.

E. WILSON, « Living Dolls », XXVIII, 3, pp. 157-162.

Drawing upon her metropolitan diary the author dwells on the live sculptures that we bump into in the underground, the squares and streets of the contemporary city. She underlines how these urban objects-subjects disturbingly confront us with the cancellation of commonsensical distinctions between the animate and the inanimate, between the real and the artificial.

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