

Fiction in the 1960s and the Notion of Change

American and European Concepts of Postmodernism

TOMASZ BASIUK

THE CRISIS TODAY

The current fiscal and, in some places, political crisis, which includes insurgencies and massive demonstrations taking place in the US and in some European and Arab countries seems reminiscent of the social and political turmoil associated with the 1960s. With events connected to the civil rights movement, as well as the 1969 student riots in Paris and in Warsaw, the Prague Spring, and the Stonewall Inn riots in New York, that the same year, the decade has gone down in history as a time in which a demand for change was especially vivid. Popular culture has since canonized the 1960s in just this way. In the summer of 1969, the Woodstock Festival seemed like a happy marriage of popular culture and radical politics. Many popular culture texts heralded change, and subsequent representations of the era continued this tradition, for example Miloš Forman's 1979 film *Hair*, based on a 1968 musical. The tradition was not without its precedents, for example in the 1950s films *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which glorified a young, usually male and heterosexual person as bearer of a message about social change.¹ Retrospectively, the radical tone of some of these representations is partly belied by a naïveté that their op-

1 Rado and Ragni, *Hair*; Paxton, *The Wild One*; Stern, *Rebel Without a Cause*.

timistic zeal betrays. Their messages may also seem incongruous with present-day predicaments.

Despite the current unrest, a dose of skepticism about revolutionary action seems widespread today. This skepticism has resulted in a re-evaluation of the 1960s in popular representations of that decade. To offer just one example, fascination with and skepticism about the decade seem evenly balanced in the TV series *Mad Men* (2007 – present).² The show focuses on male advertising executives, whose many faults include not just the characters' evident hunger for cash but their equally evident misogyny and homophobia as well as their self-indulgent smoking and drinking. Moreover, the characters' drive for economic success is presented as a positive trait, however ambivalent it may seem to us in the context of the financial crisis heralded by the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy. Nonetheless, being profit-driven is intimately linked to the characters' creativity. Their business acumen and relentlessness are not new but their focus on the management of symbolic rather than commodity exchanges is. This new focus makes these characters and their work revolutionary. Working in the fledgling field of mass advertising, the characters of *Mad Men* are inventing a new branch of the industry by upgrading to a newly professional level what had so far seemed a relatively minor component of a market pursuit focused on manufacturing and on sales. The protagonists of *Mad Men* are effecting a change in the organization of social life through their capable, if calculating, manipulation of consumer behavior, which they hope to influence with communication techniques. Their work is sometimes almost poetic, especially in the etymological sense of creating new representations, even though retrospectively it must also appear as blatantly exploitative and perhaps destructive of some treasured traditions.

The series' representation of change is thus ambivalent: successful implementation of some changes may have had the negative consequences of promoting an unabashedly consumerist ethic and, simultaneously, perfecting techniques for turning the deliberation of public issues into aesthetically pleasing spectacles, orchestrated by PR specialists. Much is suggested by some characters' rooting for Richard Nixon and helping out in his 1960 presidential campaign (when Nixon lost to John F. Kennedy, who was apparently better prepared for the spectacle of the televised debate). The mak-

2 Weiner, *Mad Men*.

ers of *Mad Men* establish a connection between developments in social communication, including the growing role of Public Relations in political life, and a market economy driven by consumption that was spurred on by advertising. These developments confirm the reservations which the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin voiced in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) about the spectacle of power and those articulated in the French Situationist Guy Debord’s attack on what he described as the society of the spectacle in 1967.³ But once again: the interesting aspect of this TV series is the way in which it portrays these developments (whose problematic consequences are common knowledge to us today) as revolutionary changes that required courage, cunning, and determination to put in place.

DEFINING POSTMODERNISM

Somewhat like the fairly complex and ambivalent representation of change in the series *Mad Men*, the intellectual and aesthetic practice of postmodernism in the 1960s offers a nuanced and, quite possibly, helpful way to grasp the concept of change as it applies to the present time. The relationships between novelty and tradition, change and continuity, originality and imitation have been at the center of interest to postmodernism, which was seen as a call for change, while it also questioned the idea that a radical breaking with the past was possible—not so much for conservative reasons but as a matter of intellectual rigor. Due to the relative longevity of postmodernism as an intellectual formation and as an analytical tool with which to discuss artworks and cultural practices and discourses, the articulation of its premises has evolved between the end of the 1960s and the early 1990s, by which time postmodernism seems to have exhausted itself as a consciously adopted intellectual position. Postmodernism’s history in the 1960s may be thought of as that decade’s *Nachträglichkeit*—a sort of Minerva’s owl flying out at dusk. Although the idea of change as revolutionary, radical, and political seems a dominant motif of the era, postmodern-

3 Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*; Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.

ism offers an alternative perspective that may not so much contradict the epoch's longing for change as in some ways complicate it.

The term 'postmodernism' has a past which precedes its currency in American Studies and, more broadly, in literary and cultural studies. As early as the 1870s, the word postmodern was used with reference to French Impressionist painting, and in the 1930s the term *postmodernismo* became current in the context of Latin American poetry. In the United States, it had been used about architecture before it became a prominent term in literary criticism. Ihab Hassan began consistently to use the term to describe some contemporary fiction starting with his 1971 study *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*.⁴ Hassan was trying to pinpoint what he saw as an important shift in literary and intellectual paradigms that had been taking place for more than a decade, a development in which the 1960s seemed at the time to represent an apex. In a later essay "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," included in his 1987 text *The Postmodern Turn*, he attempted to represent what he saw as a historical shift away from modernism with a table of paired-up terms describing specific ways in which modernism and postmodernism differed.⁵ These pairs of terms, which may be seen as binary oppositions, include many that were borrowed from others. For example, Hassan juxtaposes "rhizome" (postmodernist) with "root (modernist)," taking both terms from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. With such pairs of oppositions, Hassan suggests that modernism is grounded in thought which presumes a center, while postmodernism operates in a decentered way, analogous to the rhizome, which is composed of many strands. Modernism is associated with depth and a hierarchical arrangement of categories, one in which some categories are subsumed under a more general one (as Hassan's word "hypotaxis" suggests).

On the other hand, postmodernism, described as paratactical, connotes surface play and a complex interrelatedness among elements. Thus, in postmodernism any particular surface effect is overdetermined, as it cannot be reduced to an underlying cause. The features of postmodernism which Hassan discusses at greatest length are indeterminacy and immanence; the latter term, opposed to transcendence, suggests that the meaning of any one

4 For example: "The modern age discovers the postmodern at its center." Hassan, *Dismemberment of Orpheus*, xviii. The words "postmodern" and "postmodernism" appear throughout.

5 Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," 84–96.

sign is not situated beyond the phenomenal but depends, in an indeterminate way, on the complex interplay of the perceptible signifiers. There is no meta-level containing an explanation of the world we know. There is just the world as it appears: “The world is everything that is the case,” as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously put it, though in this case it might be more accurate to say: the appearance of the world is all that the case is.⁶ To draw on Wittgenstein’s late period, there is no meaning to be extracted from linguistic utterances other than that which is produced by what he called language games: these are semiotic practices whose internal rules arise from those practices themselves.⁷

The intellectual investment in defining postmodernism involves a certain debunking of rationality, especially the tradition of the Enlightenment. In the wake of World War II, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put in question the belief that human rationality guarantees either progress or ethical answerability. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, 1947), they described widespread but unfounded trust in reason’s ability to contain its own destructive ambitions as a slippery slope.⁸ Three decades later, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard argued in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) that the grand narratives about rationality, representing a heritage of the Enlightenment and legitimizing the quest for knowledge and with it universities as social institutions, had lost their credibility in the postwar decades.⁹ Lyotard identified two now-debunked grand narratives about rationality. One was the narrative of speculation, which promised that knowledge would yield understanding and that there was a hidden layer of meaning to be grasped in the pursuit of knowledge. The other was the narrative of emancipation, which anticipated that knowledge would yield freedom from the constraints posed by the body and its ailments, by natural

6 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 1, 25.

7 Language games are not predetermined but immanent to practice: “But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?— There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols’, ‘words’, ‘sentences’. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics).” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, proposition 23, page 11, emphases in the original.

8 “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology.” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

9 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 37–41.

disasters, and by social injustice: that it would take us to a better tomorrow. These grand narratives answered the question *why* seek knowledge, but they have been superseded by what Lyotard calls input-output productivity: the question about *how* to achieve a specific goal. The *how* question is far more important nowadays than the *why* question, in which we seem to have lost interest.

Lyotard's immediate context for these reflections was the state of Western universities, which he believed had aligned themselves to this shift in thinking about knowledge due to pressures from the marketplace as well as from governments. But he also offers a philosophical explanation by focusing on certain intellectual developments. In particular, Lyotard finds in Wittgenstein's concept of language games an apt reflection of the debunking of the grand narratives about reason. Language games are always local and therefore do not guarantee a unifying theoretical perspective, which the narrative of speculation promised. And because knowledge is descriptive rather than prescriptive, the practical applicability of knowledge to the solving of real-life problems is always in question, as it was not in the narrative of emancipation.¹⁰ Bereft of those justifications, we have turned to solving local problems without bothering with the big picture. The loss of the grand narrative of emancipation seems especially troubling from the viewpoint of change. The absence of the principle of emancipation does not mean that change will not occur but it does suggest that we cannot project what that change will be.

Some intellectuals embraced the debunking of grand narratives noted by Lyotard and affirmed the indeterminacy and immanence posited by Hassan. Jacques Derrida famously invoked the concept of "play" to talk about how signifiers interact in ways that are irreducible to any one paradigm, endlessly deferring the meaning which they seem to promise. Unlike the dyadic formula for the sign which consists of the material signifier and the conceptual signified, postulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida conceptualized the signifier as always shy of completion. He asserted that signifiers refer to one another rather than to their signified, displacing de Saussure's vertical relationship between the signifier and the signified with a

10 Lyotard made this argument in 1979, the year Margaret Thatcher became the British prime minister and one year before Ronald Reagan was elected US president. Today both politicians are seen as promoting neo-liberalism and dismantling the welfare state.

horizontal, rhizome-like interplay of signifiers.¹¹ This interplay, which carries the promise of a meaning but never quite delivers that meaning, is indeed overdetermined, or, as Hassan has put it, it is both indeterminate and immanent to the game itself. There is no outside, no meta-plane on which meaning may be said to reside, and neither is there any way in which to predict the outcome of the game. To describe the interplay of signs in very practical terms, the English critic Terry Eagleton invites us to think of looking up a word in a dictionary. As you do so, you do not find an actual concept but rather a definition composed of more words. The dictionary has a horizontal, rhizome-like structure in which signifiers refer the user to other signifiers by seeming to promise access to their referent: the signified. But this access is deferred, and all that is ever apparent is the play of difference between words.¹²

The logic of open-ended and indeterminate play has been the focus of possible political, as much as aesthetic, change in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. They turned inside-out the psychoanalytic model, grounded in the idea of the unconscious mind driven by repressed desires, proposing instead that desire needs to be conceived not in terms of what is lacking but as a mechanism that is inherently productive.¹³ In their reinterpretation, desire arises from the interplay of the senses and of affects, produced by our bodies, and of concepts, produced by the part of the body called the mind. This interplay continually churns out new meanings and is capable of achieving unprecedented and unforeseen results by combining material signifiers in new ways, not unlike in the artistic technique of assemblage.

ASSESSING POSTMODERNISM AS A POLITICAL RESPONSE

For some thinkers at least, such as for Derrida and for Deleuze and Guattari, there was a fair amount of optimism in the broad range of ideas describable as postmodernist. But other views on postmodernism have been

11 Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 278–91.

12 Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 111.

13 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1–9.

more reserved or outright pessimistic. In particular, the idea that getting rid of some foundational principles, including those that were a heritage of the Enlightenment, would be somehow liberating was attacked by conservative and by some progressive thinkers alike. Speaking from a self-defined progressive position, Jürgen Habermas argued that modernity was an incomplete project, prematurely abandoned in a way that was pointless and damaging.¹⁴ To Habermas, the postmodernist refusal of a clear program for action constituted a refusal of the political, which betrayed an underlying investment in maintaining the status quo. Contrary to its revolutionary appearance, postmodernism was effectively conservative. Habermas' argument provoked a response from Lyotard, who came to postmodernism's defense by presenting it as the very stuff of change. In 1982, Lyotard published a brief paper called "Answering the Question: What is the Postmodern?" whose title alludes to Immanuel Kant's 1784 "What is Enlightenment?" (*Was ist Aufklärung?*), which postulates that Enlightenment is the age of humanity's reaching maturity.¹⁵

Lyotard's reply to Habermas is grounded in a critique of the notion of totality and a correlate elevation of difference. Lyotard holds that a political program which projects a *totality* of social life is far more problematic than the fragmented worldview of the postmodernists, which Habermas deems politically ineffectual. Lyotard makes this argument by calling on Kant's Third Critique, called *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which distinguishes between the aesthetic of the beautiful and the aesthetic of the sublime (*die Schönheit / das Erhabene*) by explaining aesthetic experience as an interplay between the human faculties of reason and of the imagination, or presentation (*Darstellung*). The faculty of reason is responsible for coming up with a concept; the faculty of the imagination then tries to come up with an appropriate presentation of the concept. Kant notes that sometimes we can grasp a concept but do not have an adequate presentation of it. For example, we understand the geometric concept of the infinite line but we cannot draw one, or even imagine it in its entirety. A presentation marked by the dissonance between the faculties is given the name "sublime," while a presentation based on harmony between the faculties is "beautiful." Reiterating Kant's position that judgments of taste are based in common sense,

14 Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," 3–15.

15 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 71–82.

Liotard argues that the aesthetic of the beautiful is a matter of consensus. We perceive as beautiful such presentations of concepts as we are already familiar with. The aesthetic of the beautiful is thus a kind of lazy aesthetic. Liotard argues that it is connected to realism: what comes to us easily and seems to be based in common sense seems real to us. The aesthetic of the beautiful is thus particularly conservative: it presents to us that which we already know well, confirming its reality. Referring to TV series as one of his examples, Liotard speaks of the “around the house and in the backyard kind of realism,” whose sociopolitical function it is to reassure the viewers that their lives are worth living. He then proceeds to subdivide the aesthetic of the sublime—in which the concept and its presentation do not coincide through consensus—into what he calls the mode of regret and the mode of assay. In the mode of regret, which is modernist, the presentation is available but the concept is evaporated. As Liotard puts it, the solace of good form is offered but that form is emptied of content. Modernism is thus rather like an empty church. One can enjoy its architecture and the elaborate decorations, but there is no longer a presence to which these forms seem to be pointing. In the mode of assay, which is postmodernist, a concept that is as yet without its presentation is given an indirect expression through a form that is newly invented. The new form is not immediately readable but it attempts to justify itself in a performative way: showing what it is doing by doing it. The mode of assay—of trying out new forms—can be grasped as a kind of gesturing toward a concept that so far has not had its proper presentation.

The question here is how do we even comprehend such new forms, and how does the artist come up with them? To explain how a new presentation can explain itself, Liotard calls on the paradoxical temporality of the future anterior (future in the past)—the temporality of something that “will have been done”—which is “performative” in the sense that it determines the conditions of its legibility.¹⁶ In the mode of assay, a work is illegible until the moment when it manages to justify its own means of expression. The mode of assay may be called the properly poetic mode, etymologically

16 According to Derrida, the Declaration of Independence is performative in this sense because the words “We the people” came to denote the American nation only *after* the Declaration had been completed, as the Declaration was that which rhetorically gave rise to the new nation. Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 7–15.

speaking, because it produces a completely new form. Lyotard contends: “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state and this state is constant.”¹⁷ Postmodernism is thus defined in terms of a logical precession rather than as a historical epoch. One could speculate that whatever was postmodern may become modernist once the concept evaporates, and it may also become beautiful, and hence realistic, once it is familiar enough.

Far from being merely an abstract argument about aesthetic processes, Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism is explicitly political. It was intended as a response to Habermas and seems to have anticipated other critiques of Habermas’ unwittingly universalist position. For example, Seyla Benhabib’s *Situating the Self* (1992) polemically engages Habermas on the grounds that he fails to understand the specific condition of the gendered, and the minority, subject. Lyotard’s linking of the aesthetic and the political is also reminiscent of Jacques Rancière’s more recent argument that aesthetics is intrinsically political, because it involves the sorting of everything into that which is perceptible and that which is not. Aesthetics is “distribution of the perceptible” (*partition du sensible*), and that distribution determines who is a political subject and who gets to be represented.¹⁸ Rancière is in effect saying that access to the political sphere, defined as the most preliminary stage at which you either will or will not be heard as a political subject, may depend on your successful aesthetic self-presentation. And although he does not call on the sublime, Rancière’s argument is akin to Lyotard’s because both are interested in making perceptible something that was not. Moreover, they believe that such aesthetic work of making visible something that was invisible has important political consequences.

A deep distrust of postmodernism on political grounds is nonetheless found in major theorists of the postmodern. For Fredric Jameson, who works within the Marxist critical tradition, postmodernism is a politically relevant category because it allows for useful periodization, also in terms of modes of production.¹⁹ The postmodern epoch is characterized by mass production of representations. The representations which proliferate in con-

17 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 79.

18 Rancière, *Le partage du sensible*, 9, *passim*.

19 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 3–5.

temporary culture often draw on the past in a nostalgic manner. Nostalgia is an important category for Jameson, and one that has a special significance for popular culture. It is a relationship to the past that is imaginary because it erases any sense of a causal link between the past and the present. In nostalgia, the past becomes separated from the present, floating around in its own mythic time.²⁰ Jameson's nostalgia is similar to "frozen time" in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, as both notions presume a perspective in which the past has no effects in the present. Debord looks at the museum as the institution which safely contains the past, making it available for our enjoyment rather than as a tool for making sense of the present. Daniel Mendelsohn makes use of a similar figure in a 2011 essay on *Mad Men* in *The New York Review of Books*, when he asserts that the series appeals to viewers who did not live through the 1960s, except perhaps as children.²¹ Watching *Mad Men* offers them the fantasy of having been there, which may be especially appealing to people born in the era but incapable of remembering much about that decade (as would be the case for Mendelsohn). While the visual realism of *Mad Men* seems to encourage nostalgic enjoyment, its connection to the Madison Avenue of today arguably works the opposite effect by establishing a causal link between the 1960s and the present.

Jameson equates postmodernism with a late stage of capitalism, characteristic of economically developed countries. Late capitalism confounds Marx's distinction between the economic base and the ideological superstructure by making cultural production an important part of the economy. By superstructure Marx meant culture, education, religion, family, and many other social institutions whose ideological function was that they misrepresented the real economic relations determined by who controlled the means of production. The change in late capitalism is that once television and other forms of infotainment became big business, superstructure has become a major component of the base. One result of this development is what Jameson calls the disappearance of critical distance. Any critique of capitalism (presumably including Jameson's) is readily subsumed into the

20 One may be in danger of succumbing to the allure of nostalgia when talking about the sixties, for example. The present essay is an attempt to bulwark against this possibility.

21 Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Mad Men Account," *New York Review of Books*, February 24, 2011, 4–6.

base and returned to the market in the form of a product. This process is often described as co-optation. Jameson himself is at a loss about how to regain a position of critical distance, but the advantage he finds in the term postmodernism is that it allows him to define the contemporary epoch in terms of a particular mode of cultural production.

An aesthetic correlative in Jameson of the postmodern loss of critical distance is his well-known distinction between parody and pastiche: parody depends on a linguistic norm, and by parodying someone's speech or writing style, we emphasize the manner in which that style deviates from that norm by exaggerating the distance between them. In pastiche, the distance disappears because the norm itself is gone:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic 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. Pastiche is thus blank parody.²²

Defined this way, pastiche is a distinctly postmodernist trope that corresponds to the loss of critical distance.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORIAL CONTROL

Robert Coover's short story "The Magic Poker" (1969) and Donald Barthelme's "I Bought a Little City" (1974) are self-conscious pastiches in Jameson's sense, as is Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (published in Polish in 1937), which Hassan mentions as one of postmodernism's founding texts. These works seem bound on preventing any position from which their playfulness could be given a particular meaning. Coover's narrator "wanders the island, inventing it" and repeatedly changes his or her mind about the story's events. In fact, there is little reason to believe that there is a single narrator. Coover relies heavily on intertextuality to create the mul-

22 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.

tiple strands of his narrative but the way he alludes to other texts, such as fairy tales, does not help elucidate his meaning; rather, it leads to chaos.

Barthelme and Gombrowicz both exemplify a satirical intent in their work, but the satire is undermined by the absence of a position from which it is waged. Barthelme's story "I Bought a Little City" may be read as a critique of private property, but it can equally be read as a general critique of any reformist intentions. The fact that the narrator is both a capitalist and a reformist complicates the reading of the story as satire by making it rather difficult to know against whom the critical edge is turned. Gombrowicz presents a similar difficulty even though his satire is turned against some easily recognizable social phenomena of interwar Poland.²³ But, set as he is on debunking the falsehoods surrounding him, the novel's first-person narrator sees himself as equally fake as the next person. Everyone in the novel merely pretends to be what they are: whether teacher or school principal, or the modern-minded wife of an engineer, everyone is role-playing, and the protagonist's exposing of this situation in no way suggests that he has found a way out of this predicament, which affects him, too.

Gombrowicz implies that in order to be a rebel, you need to be recognized as one; however, in trying to achieve that recognition, you will likely end up conforming to other people's expectations of a rebel. This hopeless conundrum is just a particular instance of the way that everyone is enslaved by what Gombrowicz refers to as Form. Form is what endows our actions with meaning and simultaneously renders them inauthentic. Gombrowicz's response is to enact a loss of control over his own text by claiming that he does not know how to end his novel and by interrupting its narrative with interludes in the form of philosophical fables, preceded by mocking prefaces. These prefaces illustrate that the author succumbs to literary forms instead of masterfully wielding them. Gombrowicz's preface to "The Child Runs Deep in Filibert" reads in part: "I'm a captive to a Preface. . . . The law of symmetry requires it. . . . Even if I wanted to [omit it,] I can't." The

23 I might anecdotally add that a former schoolmate of Gombrowicz who was my neighbor assured me that the novel's satirical portrayal of a secondary school teacher making students repeat in unison that this or that author was great—as in: "Słowacki was a great poet, now repeat"—is a faithful rendition of an actual professor's pedagogical method. It is therefore delicious irony that Gombrowicz's *Ferdynand* has been made mandatory reading at Polish schools.

author's apparent helplessness is reflected by the first-person narrator's grotesque mishaps.

By contrast to these examples, John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey" and "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968) are more directly parodist by virtue of relying on something like a linguistic norm. "Night-Sea Journey" reads like a pastiche composed of fragments of philosophical and theological discourses, drawing on Jungian, Existentialist, and Christian inspiration. However, once the reader grasps the mock allegorical character of the piece and its literary jest has become evident—the narrator is a spermatozoid—pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fall neatly into place. Likewise, the story "Lost in the Funhouse" offers an explanation for its self-reflexive form. This story allegorizes a teenager's shyness as metafictional commentary by suggesting that every word is painfully deliberated. Indeed, the entire cycle of stories collected in *Lost in the Funhouse* is readable as a kind of allegorization of the stages in one's life. "Frame Tale," which opens the cycle, reads: "Once upon a time there was a story that began: once upon a time there was a story that began . . ." and so on *ad infinitum*, in a loop which we are prompted to imagine as a Möbius strip (whose model can be made from a strip of paper half-twisted and having its ends connected to form a loop, as Barth directs us to do with "Frame Tale"). A Möbius strip has only one surface, though it appears to have two. While the geometrical properties of the Möbius strip correspond to the canon-like form of "Frame Tale," the combination of shape and of the endlessly repeated message suggest a DNA sequence.

The next story, "Night-Sea Journey," dramatizes the moment of conception, or fertilization, while "Lost in the Funhouse" illustrates the extreme self-consciousness of adolescence. Other stories may be read in a similar manner. Such allegoric composition stabilizes and partly neutralizes the experimental dimension of these fictions because we understand how to read them. These stories begin as what Roland Barthes calls *scriptible*, or writerly text, meaning that the reader is invited to co-invent the work in reading it. But they end up seeming more *lisible*, or readerly, meaning that we are expected to figure out a sense that has been encoded in the work from the beginning.²⁴ One could thus argue that Barth's stories are modernist to Gombrowicz's more postmodernist novel, despite their chronology

24 Barthes, *S/Z*, 4. The distinction forms part of Hassan's comparative table.

suggesting the reverse. There is, nonetheless, a similarity in the message they communicate. The narrator of “Night-Sea Journey” discovers that he is powerless in the face of the higher forces which manipulate and ultimately determine his journey and its destination. It dawns on him that all he has with which to oppose this powerful logic is his puny “negative resolve” which may not even have any impact on “that which I am about to become.” This mock-heroic message is suggestive of Gombrowicz’s sense that the most authentic gesture is to admit the loss of authorial control. In the end, Barth seems to hold on to his authorial control more tightly than Gombrowicz, and possibly his work suffers for it, appearing a little too clever.

Barth obsesses about escaping the inevitability of literary repetition in a way that Gombrowicz does not. Barth’s position in the famous essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) is that everything has been tried before, which leaves little room for originality except by way of commenting on this condition. According to Barth, such metacommentary on the impossibility of original work is the postmodernist solution to the problem of originality.²⁵ A writer’s originality was hardly a concern for Gombrowicz, who thought that everyone was caught in the embarrassing situation of imitating others and conforming to their expectations while pretending to be an autonomous individual. Gombrowicz was simply attempting an adequate representation of this deeply shaming mechanism. In his journal, however, he suggested that the contradiction between conformism and imitation on the one hand and posing as one’s own man on the other was less prevalent in younger, less decadent cultures, such as that of Latin America, where he lived for many years.²⁶

TRANS-AMERICAN AND TRANSATLANTIC LITERARY TRANSACTIONS

Gombrowicz found himself on a tour in Argentina at the outbreak of the Second World War and decided not to return to Europe. He had just turned thirty-five and had published *Ferdynand* two years earlier. He settled down

25 Barth, *Friday Book*, 62–76.

26 Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 71–72.

in Buenos Aires, in the then run-down Retiro district. Working an office job and living very modestly, he wrote some of his most important work. Gombrowicz, who was probably homosexual most of his life, married upon his return to Europe in 1963, at the age of fifty-nine.²⁷ He died in France in 1969, leaving his literary estate to his wife Rita. Gombrowicz never returned to Poland, where his books were not in print, and where the Communist establishment saw him as incorrigibly bourgeois and decadent. He was also eyed with suspicion by the Polish diaspora, both in Argentina and in France, who saw him as disturbingly apolitical. Although he was introduced to Jorge Luis Borges, by Gombrowicz's own account their meeting was disappointing. He did become friends with some young Argentinian literati whose help he enlisted in translating *Ferdydurke* into Spanish.²⁸

The first English translation of *Ferdydurke* by Eric Mosbacher was from the French, and was published in 1961 (a more recent translation from the Polish by Danuta Borhardt, with a foreword by Susan Sontag, appeared in 2000). Thus, Gombrowicz's debut novel became known to the American literary public in the beginning of the 1960s, propelled in part by a strong interest in writings from Latin America, where he still resided. Gombrowicz was read alongside Borges, and later Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez. His literary journey was thus somewhat similar to that of the group of writers whose primary textual space was the important literary review *Sur*, founded by Victoria Ocampo, a literary prodigy and daughter of an Argentinian industrialist. For many years this privately funded journal served as a gateway between Latin American literatures and the North, meaning both North America and Europe. It published many translations into Spanish and promoted Latin American writers.

In terms of his North American reception, Gombrowicz rode the tide of a growing interest in Latin American letters, in which the crucial term for a while was magic realism, a mode of writing which combined exotic-seeming elements of the Latin American reality (such as the sudden appearance of tens of thousands of swarming butterflies in which a lovely girl

27 For anecdotal evidence of Gombrowicz's same-sex activity in Buenos Aires, see Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 80–81.

28 This collective translation from the Polish, published in Buenos Aires in 1947, was directed by Virgilio Piñera and Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu in collaboration with Witold Gombrowicz.

dissolves in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) with playful inventiveness and a grotesque treatment of ordinary or serious themes. Although *Ferdydurke* does not literally form part of the magic realist movement for precise historical and geographic reasons, its playfulness and the grotesque, exoticized descriptions of life in rural Poland make it akin to works by some Latin American authors. The interest in magic realism is in evidence in John Barth. For example, in his 1979 essay "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth favorably compares Márquez to Borges, who was the idol of the earlier essay "The Literature of Exhaustion."²⁹ Ihab Hassan also discusses the influence of Latin American writers on postmodernist fiction in the US, and he mentions Gombrowicz as a forerunner of postmodernist literature.

SOME NORTH AMERICAN GREATS AND THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

In the Anglo-American context, the American forerunners of postmodernism and the beginnings of postmodernism were variously identified. The English literary historian Tony Tanner points to *The Recognitions* (1955), the debut novel of William Gaddis, as America's first postmodern novel.³⁰ *The Recognitions* anticipates some themes that inform poststructuralist theory. Gaddis is interested in the idea of copies without originals, which corresponds to Jean Baudrillard's notion of the *simulacrum* as copy for which there is no original. Baudrillard's argument in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1994) contradicted Plato's theory that a copy was always inferior to the original.³¹ Baudrillard's influential notion of the precession of simulacra includes, as the penultimate stage, the idea of a sign which hides the absence of any reality to which the sign seems to refer. In the final stage of the precession, which is the stage of the simulacrum proper, no relation is posited between the sign and any reality other than the sign itself. In *The Recognitions*, the theme of art forgeries includes the counterfeit practice of creating works that had never really been painted by the old masters and, in

29 Barth, *Friday Book*, 204–5.

30 Tanner, *City of Words*, 393–94.

31 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 4–5.

one instance, the “discovery” of a work by a master painter whose own existence had been hypothetical.

Art is a point of departure for postmodern speculation also in Thomas Pynchon’s 1963 debut novel *V*. In chapter seven, titled “She Hangs on the Western Wall,” which tells the story of a character’s disillusionment with a work of art, a collector is overcome with a desire to possess Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* which he arranges to have stolen from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The complicated plot, which involves cutting the painting from its frame and hiding it, rolled up, in a hollowed-out, potted tree, succeeds. However, once the work is in his hands, the collector feels disenchanted. Contemplating it, he sees merely paint laid on a canvas, and a ridiculous arrangement of figures: a nude woman standing in a seashell and trying to cover herself up, another female figure holding a cape and attempting to veil the first, and two floating male figures blowing air at the nude female. All of a sudden, the work makes very little sense. The narrative logic determining its meaning seems irrelevant, and the figurative representations become ludicrous. The merely material layer of the work is deeply dissatisfying once something like a grand narrative informing it and supplying a sense of depth has been lost. This subplot bears a striking similarity to Lyotard’s thesis about grand narratives being without credibility today and seems to dramatize Lyotard’s mode of regret: the solace of good form may be offered but the content is no longer to be found.

One of Pynchon’s most recognized themes is conspiracy and the related notion of paranoia. Pynchon’s second novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) makes extensive use of both themes. Its heroine, Oedipa Maas, is put in charge of executing the will of her former lover, a real estate mogul. In attempting to penetrate the byzantine complexity of his holdings, she stumbles upon what seems to be an underground organization whose main goal is to break the government’s postal monopoly with an alternative, secret system for sending messages. This alternative postal service uses stamps which differ in small details from the government-issued stamps and has specially marked waste bins used as mailboxes. Letters are delivered late at night in designated bars. However, Oedipa is ultimately unclear about her discovery of an alternative to her own boring world of suburbia. She thinks she may only be imagining this alternative, or may have been tricked into seeing those things, perhaps as a postmortem joke by her late lover, or maybe she has gone mad. Oedipa thus resembles the character Oedipus in

Sophocles's play, in that she is obligated to conduct an investigation but discovers, in the course of her detective work, that her own existence is at stake. Indicative of Pynchon's interest in mind-altering substances and the question of how and why they are controlled, a motif of LSD use runs through the novel. Crucially, it is never made clear whether LSD is connected to the underground world whose existence Oedipa suspects, or if it is a substance controlled and secretly distributed by the government in order to manipulate the general populace, as Oedipa's conversation with her shrink suggests.³² Indeed, the strange post stamps that Oedipa's late lover was collecting may suggest that the underground postal service is in fact distributing LSD. But if that is the case, it is unclear who supplies the drug and why; moreover, a reverse reading is also possible: the regular US post stamps, which most users in the 1960s would lick in order to affix them to the envelopes, might be saturated with LSD, in which case using the underground postal service would be a way to avoid taking the drug. The reader has no way of resolving this dilemma, or even having it confirmed.

As critic John Johnston argues about *The Crying of Lot 49*, the novel portrays the logic of paranoia, of an obsessive suspicion of a conspiracy, on multiple plot levels, in order to question that very logic.³³ Johnston supplements this reading with a discussion of the political implications of what he describes as the "semiotic regime of paranoia," which determines the logic of interpretation by casting specific actors in roles such as the scapegoat or the culprit. Such paranoid logic can be persuasive because it offers a satisfyingly coherent account. Johnston's analysis bears a striking similarity to the notion of the empty signifier developed in political theory by Ernesto Laclau, who assumes that discursive systems inevitably privilege certain signifiers over others (and hence are "paranoiac" in Johnston's sense).³⁴ However, Laclau insists that it is possible to keep such discursive systems from petrifying into one-sided, biased, and hence oppressive regimes by keeping their central signifiers "empty" and thus foreclose their meaning. For example, democracy is a privileged signifier in our world, but it is important to keep it content-less in the sense that its referent should not be defined once and for all. A useful distinction for discussing postmodernist

32 LSD was outlawed in 1966, the year that the novel was published.

33 Johnston, "Paranoia as Semiotic Regime," 47–78.

34 Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 36–46.

aesthetics in connection to the political has been suggested by Paul Maltby in *Dissident Postmodernists* (1991).³⁵ Maltby argues that Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon are more concerned with reality than some other postmodernist writers. These writers are producing fiction that is sign-reflexive rather than self-reflexive, or concerned with its own procedures. Sign-reflexive fiction is concerned with the ways in which signs are used to represent reality. Rather than examine their own procedures for some abstract intellectual enjoyment, these works examine how their own generic assumptions determine the resulting representations, and consequently they critique mimetic conventions. The intention behind these works is linked to their investment in explaining how we make representations of the world.

Such sign-reflexivity is readily apparent in novels by Gaddis and Pynchon, as well as in Gombrowicz. It is less evident in Coover or Barth, especially in their short fictions, which are exercises in form making rather than attempts to put forth critical representations of our concepts of the world. Maltby's category of sign-reflexivity, however tentatively defined, offers a perspective from which postmodernist fiction of the 1960s appears relevant to a broader historical and theoretical context instead of being reduced to mere playfulness and formal experimentation.

CONCLUSION

American literary postmodernism of the 1960s needs to be seen as participating in the international, and even intercontinental, circulation of ideas and of literary tendencies. Postmodernism risks being read reductively unless it is placed in a historicizing transatlantic context, as well as understood to cross the Americas. Geographically, the term “postmodernism,” and the literary practices it denotes, have traveled back and forth between South and North America (mostly from South to North), as well as between the Americas and Europe. Historically, the decade of the 1960s represents a fulcrum for a discussion of postmodernism in American literature because of the great number of experimental works of fiction published then—both by US authors and in translation—and also because these works occasioned

35 Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 42, *passim*.

a sustained critical effort to define postmodernist aesthetics. However, a narrowing focus on the period's formal experimentation is insufficient to sustain interest in its literary achievements. At best, it risks succumbing to merely nostalgic enjoyment. To forestall this outcome, postmodernist fiction and its critical elaboration, for example by Hassan, should be studied alongside non-American writings which influenced American postmodernism and with a view to theoretical insights that the category "postmodernism" inspired.

Once the 1960s postmodernism is set in this broader context, it invites comparison with the demand for change prompted by the current economic crisis in Europe and in the US. Today's demand, which manifests itself primarily as popular protest, is undisciplined in so far as it lacks a specific political project. The forms it takes are primarily aesthetic, rather than argumentative. This is one reason why the 1960s literary discourse can illuminate the present crisis of representation. The postmodernist aesthetic was especially concerned with the possibility of a radical break from the past and of negating the prevalent way of doing things. Writers of the period voiced the desirability of such a break and of such negation even as they questioned their viability, noting that what seemed like change might be merely simulation. An analogously dialectical approach promoting change and also questioning its meaning seems characteristic of the present moment. No doubt this is so because today's political protesters have internalized some aspects of the postmodernist sensibility, and they intuitively understand how representation can be immediately assimilated to simulation. This does not mean they feel at home in a world in which this keeps happening. American postmodernists of the 1960s, their literary predecessors from other parts of the world, and critics applying a wide range of theoretical approaches to reflect on postmodernist aesthetics have struggled with remarkably similar problems.

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