The Condition of Postmodernity

An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change

David Harvey

3

Postmodernism

Over the last two decades 'postmodernism' has become a concept to be wrestled with, and such a battleground of conflicting opinions and political forces that it can no longer be ignored. 'The culture of the advanced capitalist societist,' announce the editors of *PRECIS* 6 (1987), 'has undergone a profound shift in the *structure of feeling*.' Most, I think, would now agree with Huyssens's (1984) more cautious statement:

> What appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch and hollow spectacle is part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'post-modern' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. The nature and depth of that transformation are debatable, but transformation it is. I don't want to be misunderstood as claiming that there is a wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social, and economic orders; any such claim clearly would be overblown. But in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable shift in sensibility, practices and discourse formations which distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a preceding period.

With respect to architecture, for example, Charles Jencks dates the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern as 3.32 p.m. on 15 July 1972, when the Pruitt—Igoe housing development in St Louis (a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's 'machine for modern living') was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed. Thereafter, the ideas of the CIAM, Le Corbusier, and the other apostles of 'high modernism' increasingly gave way before an onslaught of diverse possibilities, of

which those set forth in the influential *Learning from Las Vegas* by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour (also published in 1972) proved to be but one powerful cutting edge. The point of that work, as its title implies, was to insist that architects had more to learn from the study of popular and vernacular landscapes (such as those of suburbs and commercial strips) than from the pursuit of some abstract, theoretical, and doctrinaire ideals. It was time, they said, to build for people rather than for Man. The glass towers, concrete blocks, and steel slabs that seemed set fair to steamroller over every urban landscape from Paris to Tokyo and from Rio to Montreal, denouncing all ornament as crime, all individualism as sentimentality, all romanticism as kitsch, have progressively given way to ornamented tower blocks, imitation mediaeval squares and fishing villages, custom-designed or vernacular housing, renovated factories and warehouses, and rehabilitated landscapes of all kinds, all in the name of procuring some more 'satisfying' urban environment. So popular has this quest become that no less a figure than Prince Charles has weighed in with vigorous denunciations of the errors of postwar urban redevelopment and the developer destruction that has done more to wreck London, he claims, then the Luftwaffe's attacks in World War II.

In planning circles we can track a similar evolution. Douglas Lee's influential article 'Requiem for large-scale planning models' appeared in a 1973 issue of the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* and correctly predicted the demise of what he saw as the futile efforts of the 1960s to develop large-scale, comprehensive, and integrated planning models (many of them specified with all the rigour that computerized mathematical modelling could then command) for metropolitan regions. Shortly thereafter, the *New York Times* (13 June 1976) described as 'mainstream' the radical planners (inspired by Jane Jacobs) who had mounted such a violent attack upon the soulless sins of modernist urban planning in the 1960s. It is nowadays the norm to seek out 'pluralistic' and 'organic' strategies for approaching urban development as a 'collage' of highly differentiated spaces and mixtures, rather than pursuing grandiose plans based on fuctional zoning of different activities. 'Collage city' is now the theme and 'urban revitalization' has replaced the vilified 'urban renewal' as the key buzz-word in the planners' lexicon. 'Make no little plans,' Daniel Burnham wrote in the first wave of modernist planning euphoria at the end of the nineteenth century, to which a postmodernist like Aldo Rossi can now more modestly reply: 'To what, then, could I have aspired in my craft? Certainly to small things, having seen that the possibility of great ones was historically precluded.'

Shifts of this sort can be documented across a whole range of diverse fields. The postmodern novel, McHale (1987) argues, is characterized by a shift from an 'epistemological' to an 'ontological' dominant. By this he means a shift from the kind of perspectivism that allowed the modernist to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality, to the foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate. The boundary between fiction and science fiction has, as a consequence, effectively dissolved, while postmodernist characters often seem confused as to which world they are in, and how they should act with respect to it. Even to reduce the problem of perspective to autobiography, says one of Borges' characters, is to enter the labyrinth: 'Who was I? Today's self, bewildered, yesterday's, forgotten; tomorrow's, unpredictable?' The question marks tell it all.

In philosophy, the intermingling of a revived American pragmatism with the post-Marxist and poststructuralist wave that struck Paris after 1968 produced what Bernstein (1985, 25) calls 'a rage against humanism and the Enlightenment legacy.' This spilled over into a vigorous denunciation of abstract reason and a deep aversion to any project that sought universal human emancipation through mobilization of the powers of technology, science, and reason. Here, also, no less a person that Pope John Paul II has entered the fray on the side of the postmodern. The Pope 'does not attack Marxism or liberal secularism because they are the wave of the future,' says Rocco Buttiglione, a theologian close to the Pope, but because the 'philosophies of the twentieth century have lost their appeal, their time has already passed.' The moral crisis of our time is a crisis of Enlightenment thought. For while the latter may indeed have allowed man to emancipate himself 'from community and tradition of the Middle Ages in which his individual freedom was submerged,' the Enlightenment affirmation of 'self without God' in the end negated itself because reason, a means, was left, in the absence of God's truth, without any spiritual or moral goal. If lust and power are 'the only values that don't need the light of reason to be discovered,' then reason had to become a mere instrument to subjugate others (*Baltimore Sun*, 9 September 1987). The postmodern theological project is to reaffirm God's truth without abandoning the powers of reason.

With such illustrious (and centrist) figures as the Prince of Wales and Pope John Paul II resorting to postmodernist rhetoric and argumentation, there can be little doubt as to the breadth of change that has occurred in 'the structure of feeling' in the 1980s. Yet there is still abundant confusion as to what the new 'structure of feeling'

might entail. Modernist sentiments may have been undermined, deconstructed, surpassed, or bypassed, but there is little certitude as to the coherence or meaning of the systems of thought that may have replaced them. Such uncertainty makes it peculiarly difficult to evaluate, interpret, and explain the shift that everyone agrees has occurred.

Does postmodernism, for example, represent a radical break with modernism, or is it simply a revolt within modernism against a certain form of 'high modernism' as represented, say, in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe and the blank surfaces of minimalist abstract expressionist painting? Is postmodernism a style (in which case we can reasonably trace its precursors back to Dada, Nietzsche, or even, as Kroker and Cook (1986) prefer, to St Ausgustine's *Confessions* in the fourth century) or should we view it strictly as a periodizing concept (in which case we debate whether it originated in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s)? Does it have a revolutionary potential by virtue of its opposition to all forms of meta-narratives (including Marxism, Freudianism, and all forms of Enlightenment reason) and its close attention to 'other worlds' and to 'other voices' that have for too long been silenced (women, gays, blacks, colonized peoples with their own histories)? Or is it simply the commercialization and domestication of modernism, and a reduction of the latter's already tarnished aspirations to a *laissez-faire*, 'anything goes' market eclecticism? Does it, therefore, undermine or integrate with neo-conservative politics? And do we attach its rise to some radical restructuring of capitalism, the emergence of some 'postindustrial' society, view it, even, as the 'art of an inflationary era' or as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (as Newman and Jameson have proposed)?

We can, I think, begin to get a grip on these difficult questions by casting an eye over the schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism as laid out by Hassan (1975, 1985; see table 1.1). Hassan sets up a series of stylistic oppositions in order to capture the ways in which postmodernism might be portrayed as a reaction to the modern. I say 'might' because I think it dangerous (as does Hassan) to depict complex relations as simple polarizations, when almost certainly the true state of sensibility, the real 'structure of feeling' in both the modern and postmodern periods, lies in the manner in which these stylistic oppositions are synthesized. Nevertheless, I think Hassan's tabular schema provides a useful starting point.

There is much to contemplate in this schema, drawing as it does on fields as diverse as linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, rhetoric, political science, and theology. Hassan is quick to point out how the dichotomies are themselves insecure, equivocal. Yet there is much

Table 1.1   Schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism

modernism	postmodernism
romanticism/Symbolism	paraphysics/Dadaism
form (conjunctive, closed)	antiform (disjunctive, open)
purpose	play
design	chance
hierarchy	anarchy
mastery/logos	exhaustion/silence
art object/finished work	process/performance/happening
distance	participation
creation/totalization/synthesis	decreation/deconstruction/antithesis
presence	absence
centring	dispersal
genre/boundary	text/intertext
semantics	rhetoric
paradigm	syntagm
hypotaxis	parataxis
metaphor	metonymy
selection	combination
root/depth	rhizome/surface
interpretation/reading	against interpretation/misreading
signified	signifier
lisible (readerly)	scriptible (writerly)
narrative/*grande histoire*	anti-narrative/*petite histoire*
master code	idiolect
symptom	desire
type	mutant
genital/phallic	polymorphous/androgynous
paranoia	schizophrenia
origin/cause	difference-difference/trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
metaphysics	irony
determinacy	indeterminacy
transcendence	immanence

Source: Hassan (1985, 123–4)

here that captures a sense of what the differences might be. 'Modernist' town planners, for example, do tend to look for 'mastery' of the metropolis as a 'totality' by deliberately designing a 'closed form,' whereas postmodernists tend to view the urban process as uncontrollable and 'chaotic,' one in which 'anarchy' and 'change' can 'play' in entirely 'open' situations. 'Modernist' literary critics do tend to look at works as examples of a 'genre' and to judge them by the 'master code' that prevails within the 'boundary' of the genre, whereas the 'postmodern' style is simply to view a work as a 'text' with its own particular 'rhetoric' and 'idiolect,' but which can in principle be compared with any other text of no matter what sort. Hassan's oppositions may be caricatures, but there is scarcely an arena of present intellectual practice where we cannot spot some of them at work. In what follows I shall try and take up a few of them in the richer detail they deserve.

I begin with what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism: its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity. But postmodernism responds to the fact of that in a very particular way. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is. Foucault (1983, xiii) instructs us, for example, to 'develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction,' and 'to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.' To the degree that it does try to legitimate itself by reference to the past, therefore, postmodernism typically harks back to that wing of thought, Nietzsche in particular, that emphasizes the deep chaos of modern life and its intractability before rational thought. This does not imply, however, that postmodernism is simply a version of modernism; real revolutions in sensibility can occur when latent and dominated ideas in one period become explicit and dominant in another. Nevertheless, the continuity of the condition of fragmentation, ephemerality, discontinuity, and chaotic change in both modernist and postmodernist thought is important. I shall make much of it in what follows.

Embracing the fragmentation and ephemerality in an affirmative fashion implies a whole host of consequences that bear directly on Hassan's oppositions. To begin with, we find writers like Foucault and Lyotard explicitly attacking any notion that there might be a

meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be connected or represented. Universal and eternal truths, if they exist at all, cannot be specified. Condemning meta-narratives (broad interpretative schemas like those deployed by Marx or Freud) as 'totalizing,' they insist upon the plurality of 'power-discourse' formations (Foucault), or of 'language games' (Lyotard). Lyotard in fact defines the postmodern simply as 'incredulity towards meta-narratives.'

Foucault's ideas – particularly as developed in his early works – deserve attention since they have been a fecund source for post-modernist argument. The relation between power and knowledge is there a central theme. But Foucault (1972, 159) breaks with the notion that power is ultimately located within the state, and abjures us to 'conduct an *ascending* analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, ex-tended, etc. by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination.' Close scrutiny of the micro-politics of power relations in different localities, contexts, and social situations leads him to conclude that there is an intimate relation between the systems of knowledge ('discourses') which codify techniques and practices for the exercise of social control and domination within particular localized contexts. The prison, the asylum, the hospital, the university, the school, the psychiatrist's office, are all examples of sites where a dispersed and piecemeal organization of power is built up indepen-dently of any systematic strategy of class domination. What happens at each site cannot be understood by appeal to some overarching general theory. Indeed the only irreducible in Foucault's scheme of things is the human body, for that is the 'site' at which all forms of repression are ultimately registered. So while there are, in Foucault's celebrated dictum, 'no relations of power without resistances' he equally insists that no utopian scheme can ever hope to escape the power–knowledge relation in non-repressive ways. He here echoes Max Weber's pessimism as to our ability to avoid the 'iron cage' of repressive bureaucratic–technical rationality. More particularly, he interprets Soviet repression as the inevitable outcome of a utopian revolutionary theory (Marxism) which appealed to the same tech-niques and knowledge systems as those embedded in the capitalist system it sought to replace. The only way open to 'eliminate the fascism in our heads' is to explore and build upon the open qualities of human discourse, and thereby intervene in the way knowledge is

produced and constituted at the particular sites where a localized power-discourse prevails. Foucault's work with homosexuals and prisoners was not aimed at producing reforms in state practices, but dedicated to the cultivation and enhancement of localized resistance to the institutions, techniques, and discourses of organized repression.

Foucault evidently believed that it was only through such a multi-faceted and pluralistic attack upon localized practices of repression that any global challenge to capitalism might be mounted without replicating all the multiple repressions of capitalism in a new form. His ideas appeal to the various social movements that sprang into existence during the 1960s (feminists, gays, ethnic and religious groupings, regional autonomists, etc.) as well as to those disillusioned with the practices of communism and the politics of communist parties. Yet it leaves open, particularly so in the deliberate rejection of any holistic theory of capitalism, the question of the path whereby such localized struggles might add up to a progressive, rather than regressive, attack upon the central forms of capitalist exploitation and repression. Localized struggles of the sort that Foucault appears to encourage have not generally had the effect of challenging capitalism, though Foucault might reasonably respond that only struggles fought in such a way as to challenge all forms of power-discourse might have such a result.

Lyotard, for his part, puts a similar argument, though on a rather different basis. He takes the modernist preoccupation with language and pushes it to extremes of dispersal. While 'the social bond is linguistic,' he argues, it 'is not woven with a single thread' but by an 'indeterminate number' of 'language games.' Each of us lives 'at the intersection of many of these' and we do not necessarily establish 'stable language combinations and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.' As a consequence, 'the social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games.' Interestingly, Lyotard here employs a lengthy metaphor of Wittgenstein's (the pioneer of the theory of language games), to illuminate the condition of postmodern knowledge: 'Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from different periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.'

The 'atomization of the social into flexible networks of language games' suggests that each of us may resort to a quite different set of codes depending upon the situation in which we find ourselves (at home, at work, at church, in the street or pub, at a memorial service, etc.). To the degree that Lyotard (like Foucault) accepts that 'know-

ledge is the principal force of production' these days, so the problem is to define the locus of that power when it is evidently 'dispersed in clouds of narrative elements' within a heterogeneity of language games. Lyotard (again like Foucault) accepts the potential open qualities of ordinary conversations in which rules can bend and shift so as 'to encourage the greatest flexibility of utterance.' He makes much of the seeming contradiction between this openness and the rigidities with which institutions (Foucault's 'non-discursive domains') circumscribe what is or is not admissible within their boundaries. The realms of law, of the academy, of science and bureaucratic government, of military and political control, of electoral politics, and corporate power, all circumscribe what can be said and how it can be said in important ways. But the 'limits the institution imposes on potential language "moves" are never established once and for all,' they are 'themselves the stakes and provisional results of language strategies, within the institution and without.' We ought not, therefore, to reify institutions prematurely, but to recognize how the differentiated performance of language games creates institutional languages and powers in the first place. If 'there are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements' we have then also to recognize that they can 'only give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism.'

Such 'local determinisms' have been understood by others (e.g. Fish, 1980) as 'interpretative communities,' made up of both producers and consumers of particular kinds of knowledge, of texts, often operating within a particular institutional context (such as the university, the legal system, religious groupings), within particular divisions of cultural labour (such as architecture, painting, theatre, dance), or within particular places (neighbourhoods, nations, etc.) Individuals and groups are held to control mutually within these domains what they consider to be valid knowledge.

To the degree that multiple sources of oppression in society and multiple foci of resistance to domination can be identified, so this kind of thinking has been taken up in radical politics, even imported into the heart of Marxism itself. We thus find Aronowitz arguing in *The crisis of historical materialism* that 'the multiple, local, autonomous struggles for liberation occurring throughout the post-modern world make all incarnations of master discourses absolutely illegitimate' (Bove, 1986, 18). Aronowitz is here seduced, I suspect, by the most liberative and therefore most appealing aspect of postmodern thought – its concern with 'otherness.' Huyssens (1984) particularly castigates the imperialism of an enlightened modernity that presumed to speak for others (colonized peoples, blacks and minorities, re-

ligious groups, women, the working class) with a unified voice. The very title of Carol Gilligan's *In a different voice* (1982) — a feminist work which challenges the male bias in setting out fixed stages in the moral development of personality — illustrates a process of counter-attack upon such universalizing presumptions. The idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism. Foucault's work with marginal and interstitial groups has influenced a whole host of researchers, in fields as diverse as criminology and anthropology, into new ways to reconstruct and represent the voices and experiences of their subjects. Huyssens, for his part, emphasizes the opening given in postmodernism to understanding difference and otherness, as well as the liberatory potential it offers for a whole host of new social movements (women, gays, blacks, ecologists, regional autonomists, etc.). Curiously, most movements of this sort, though they have definitely helped change 'the structure of feeling,' pay scant attention to postmodernist arguments, and some feminists (e.g. Hartsock, 1987) are hostile for reasons that we will later consider.

Interestingly, we can detect this same preoccupation with 'otherness' and 'other worlds' in postmodernist fiction. McHale, in emphasizing the pluralism of worlds that coexist within postmodernist fiction, finds Foucault's concept of a *heterotopia* a perfectly appropriate image to capture what that fiction is striving to depict. By heterotopia, Foucault means the coexistence in 'an impossible space' of a 'large number of fragmentary possible worlds' or, more simply, incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon each other. Characters no longer contemplate how they can unravel or unmask a central mystery, but are forced to ask, 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of myselves is to do it?' instead. The same shift can be detected in the cinema. In a modernist classic like *Citizen Kane* a reporter seeks to unravel the mystery of Kane's life and character by collecting multiple reminiscences and perspectives from those who had known him. In the more postmodernist format of the contemporary cinema we find, in a film like *Blue Velvet,* the central character revolving between two quite incongruous worlds — that of a conventional 1950s small-town America with its high school, drugstore culture, and a bizarre, violent, sex-crazed underworld of drugs, dementia, and sexual perversion. It seems impossible that these two worlds should exist in the same space, and the central character moves between them, unsure which is the true reality, until the two worlds collide in a terrible denouement. A postmodernist painter like David Salle likewise tends to

'collage together incompatible source materials as an alternative to choosing between them' (Taylor, 1987, 8; see plate 1.6). Pfeil (1988) even goes so far as to depict the total field of postmodernism as 'a distilled representation of the whole antagonistic, voracious world of otherness.'

But to accept the fragmentation, the pluralism, and the authenticity of other voices and other worlds poses the acute problem of communication and the means of exercising power through command thereof. Most postmodernist thinkers are fascinated by the new possibilities for information and knowledge production, analysis, and transfer. Lyotard (1984), for example, firmly locates his arguments in the context of new technologies of communication and, drawing upon Bell's and Touraine's theses of the passage to a 'postindustrial' information-based society, situates the rise of postmodern thought in the heart of what he sees as a dramatic social and political transition in the languages of communication in advanced capitalist societies. He looks closely at the new technologies for the production, dissemination and use of that knowledge as a 'principal force of production.' The problem, however, is that knowledge can now be coded in all kinds of ways, some of which are more accessible than others. There is more than a hint in Lyotard's work, therefore, that modernism has changed because the technical and social conditions of communication have changed.

Postmodernists tend to accept, also, a rather different theory as to what language and communication are all about. Whereas modernists had presupposed that there was a tight and identifiable relation between what was being said (the signified or 'message') and how it was being said (the signifier or 'medium'), poststructuralist thinking sees these as 'continually breaking apart and re-attaching in new combinations.' 'Deconstructionism' (a movement initiated by Derrida's reading of Martin Heidegger in the late 1960s) here enters the picture as a powerful stimulus to postmodernist ways of thought. Deconstructionism is less a philosophical postion than a way of thinking about and 'reading' texts. Writers who create texts or use words do so on the basis of all the other texts and words they have encountered, while readers deal with them in the same way. Cultural life is then viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts (including that of the literary critic, who aims to produce another piece of literature in which texts under consideration are intersecting freely with other texts that happen to have affected his or her thinking). This intertextual weaving has a life of its own. Whatever we write conveys meanings we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean. It is vain to try and master
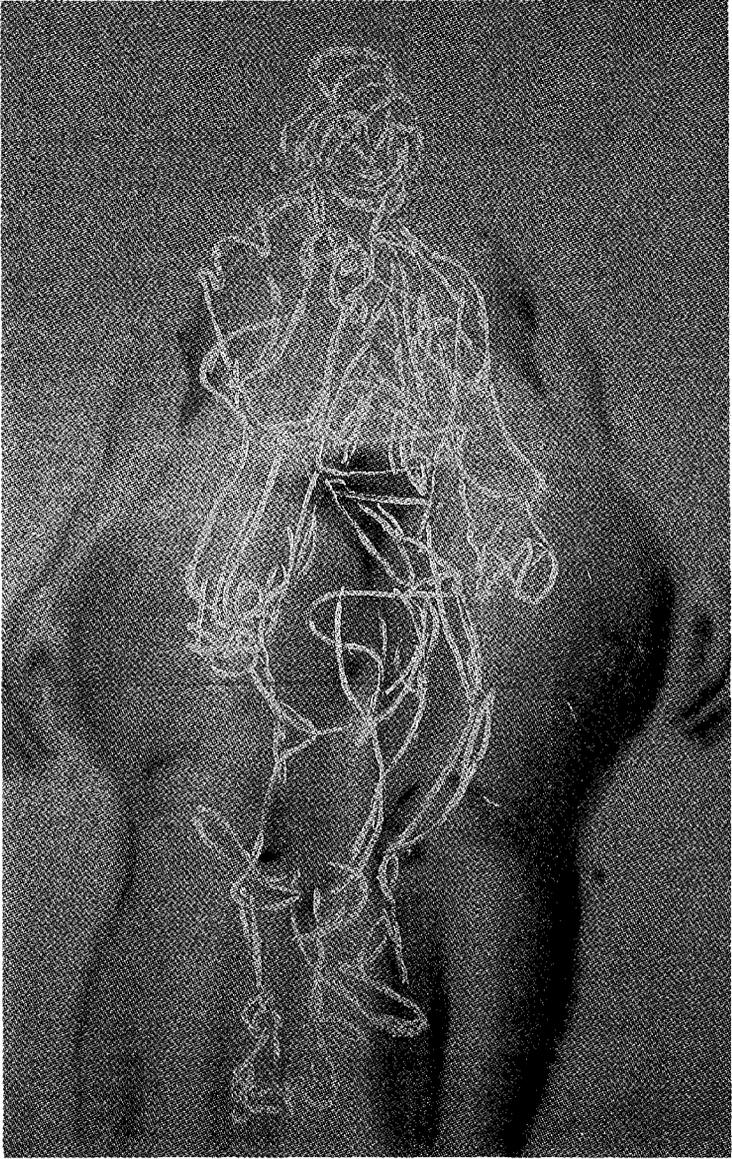
Plate 1.6 The collision and superimposition of different ontological worlds is a major characteristic of postmodern art. David Salle's 'Tight as Houses', 1980, illustrates the idea.

a text because the perpetual interweaving of texts and meanings is beyond our control. Language works through us. Recognizing that, the deconstructionist impulse is to look inside one text for another, dissolve one text into another, or build one text into another.

Derrida considers, therefore, collage/montage as the primary form of postmodern discourse. The inherent heterogeneity of that (be it in painting, writing, architecture) stimulates us, the receivers of the text or image, 'to produce a signification which could be neither univocal nor stable.' Both producers and consumers of 'texts' (cultural artefacts) participate in the production of significations and meanings (hence Hassan's emphasis upon 'process,' 'performance,' 'happening,' and 'participation' in the postmodernist style). Minimizing the authority of the cultural producer creates the opportunity for popular participation and democratic determinations of cultural values, but at the price of a certain incoherence or, more problematic, vulnerability to mass-market manipulation. However this may be, the cultural producer merely creates raw materials (fragments and elements), leaving it open to consumers to recombine those elements in any way they wish. The effect is to break (deconstruct) the power of the author to impose meanings or offer a continuous narrative. Each cited element says Derrida, 'breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality.' Continuity is given only in 'the trace' of the fragment as it moves from production to consumption. The effect is to call into question all the illusions of fixed systems of representation (Foster, 1983, 142).

There is more than a hint of this sort of thinking within the modernist tradition (directly from surrealism, for example) and there is a danger here of thinking of the meta-narratives in the Enlightenment tradition as more fixed and stable than they truly were. Marx, as Ollman (1971) observes, deployed his concepts relationally, so that terms like value, labour, capital, are 'continually breaking apart and re-attaching in new combinations' in an open-ended struggle to come to terms with the totalizing processes of capitalism. Benjamin, a complex thinker in the Marxist tradition, worked the idea of collage/montage to perfection, in order to try and capture the many-layered and fragmented relations between economy, politics, and culture without ever abandoning the standpoint of a totality of practices that constitute capitalism. Taylor (1987, 53–65) likewise concludes, after reviewing the historical evidence of its use (particularly by Picasso), that collage is a far from adequate indicator of difference between modernist and postmodernist painting.

But if, as the postmodernists insist, we cannot aspire to any unified representation of the world, or picture it as a totality full of connections and differentiations rather than as perpetually shifting fragments, then how can we possibly aspire to act coherently with respect to the world? The simple postmodernist answer is that since coherent representation and action are either repressive or illusionary (and therefore doomed to be self-dissolving and self-defeating), we should not even try to engage in some global project. Pragmatism (of the Dewey sort) then becomes the only possible philosophy of action. We thus find Rorty (1985, 173), one of the major US philosophers in the postmodern movement, dismissing 'the canonical sequence of philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche as a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering which made the contemporary North American culture what it is now, with all its glories and all its dangers.' Action can be conceived of and decided only within the confines of some local determinism, some interpretative community, and its purported meanings and anticipated effects are bound to break down when taken out of these isolated domains, even when coherent within them. We similarly find Lyotard (1984, 66) arguing that 'consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value' but then adding, rather surprisingly, that since 'justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect' (how it could remain such a universal, untouched by the diversity of language games, he does not tell us), we 'must arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.'

It is precisely this kind of relativism and defeatism that Habermas seeks to combat in his defence of the Enlightenment project. While Habermas is more than willing to admit what he calls 'the deformed realization of reason in history' and the dangers that attach to the simplified imposition of some meta-narrative on complex relations and events, he also insists that 'theory can locate a gentle, but obstinate, a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason, a claim that must be recognized de facto whenever and wherever there is to be consensual action.' He, too, turns to the question of language, and in *The theory of communicative action* insists upon the dialogical qualities of human communication in which speaker and hearer are necessarily oriented to the task of reciprocal understanding. Out of this, Habermas argues, consensual and normative statements do arise, thus grounding the role of universalizing reason in daily life. It is this that allows 'communicative reason' to operate 'in history as an avenging force.' Habermas's critics are, however, more numerous than his defenders.

The portrait of postmodernism I have so far sketched in seems to

depend for its validity upon a particular way of experiencing, inter-
preting, and being in the world. This brings us to what is, perhaps,
the most problematic facet of postmodernism, its psychological pre-
suppositions with respect to personality, motivation, and behaviour.
Preoccupation with the fragmentation and instability of language and
discourses carries over directly, for example, into a certain conception
of personality. Encapsulated, this conception focuses on schizophrenia
(not, it should be emphasized, in its narrow clinical sense), rather
than on alienation and paranoia (see Hassan's schema). Jameson
(1984b) explores this theme to very telling effect. He uses Lacan's de-
scription of schizophrenia as a linguistic disorder, as a breakdown in
the signifying chain of meaning that creates a simple sentence. When
the signifying chain snaps, then 'we have schizophrenia in the form
of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.' If personal identity is
forged through 'a certain temporal unification of the past and future
with the present before me,' and if sentences move through the same
trajectory, then an inability to unify past, present, and future in the
sentence betokens a similar inability to 'unify the past, present and
future of our own biographical experience or psychic life.' This fits,
of course, with postmodernism's preoccupation with the signifier
rather than the signified, with participation, performance, and hap-
pening rather than with an authoritative and finished art object, with
surface appearances rather than roots (again, see Hassan's schema).
The effect of such a breakdown in the signifying chain is to reduce
experience to 'a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.' Offer-
ing no counterweight, Derrida's conception of language colludes in
the production of a certain schizophrenic effect, thus, perhaps, ex-
plaining Eagleton's and Hassan's characterization of the typical post-
modernist artefact as schizoid. Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 245), in
their supposedly playful exposition *Anti-Oedipus,* hypothesize a re-
lationship between schizophrenia and capitalism that prevails 'at the
deepest level of one and the same economy, one and the same
production process,' concluding that 'our society produces schizos
the same way it produces Prell shampoo or Ford cars, the only
difference being that the schizos are not saleable.'

A number of consequences follow from the domination of this
motif in postmodernist thought. We can no longer conceive of the
individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be
alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of
self from which to be alienated. It is only in terms of such a centred
sense of personal identity that individuals can pursue projects over
time, or think cogently about the production of a future significantly
better than time present and time past. Modernism was very much

about the pursuit of better futures, even if perpetual frustration of that aim was conducive to paranoia. But postmodernism typically strips away that possibility by concentrating upon the schizophrenic circumstances induced by fragmentation and all those instabilities (including those of language) that prevent us even picturing coherently, let alone devising strategies to produce, some radically different future. Modernism, of course, was not without its schizoid moments – particularly when it sought to combine myth with heroic modernity – and there has been a sufficient history of the 'deformation of reason' and of 'reactionary modernisms' to suggest that the schizophrenic circumstance, though for the most part dominated, was always latent within the modernist movement. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that 'alienation of the subject is displaced by fragmentation of the subject' in postmodern aesthetics (Jameson, 1984a, 63). If, as Marx insisted, it takes the alienated individual to pursue the Enlightenment project with a tenacity and coherence sufficient to bring us to some better future, then loss of the alienated subject would seen to preclude the conscious construction of alternative social futures.

The reduction of experience to 'a series of pure and unrelated presents' further implies that the 'experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and "material": the world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing the mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy' (Jameson, 1984b, 120). The image, the appearance, the spectacle can all be experienced with an intensity (joy or terror) made possible only by their appreciation as pure and unrelated presents in time. So what does it matter 'if the world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density?' (Jameson, 1984b). The immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle (political, scientific, military, as well as those of entertainment), become the stuff of which consciousness is forged.

Such a breakdown of the temporal order of things also gives rise to a peculiar treatment of the past. Eschewing the idea of progress, postmodernism abandons all sense of historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously developing an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present. Postmodernist architecture, for example, takes bits and pieces from the past quite eclectically and mixes them together at will (see chapter 4). Another example, taken from painting, is given by Crimp (1983, 44–5). Manet's *Olympia,* one of the seminal paintings of the early modernist movement, was modelled on Titian's
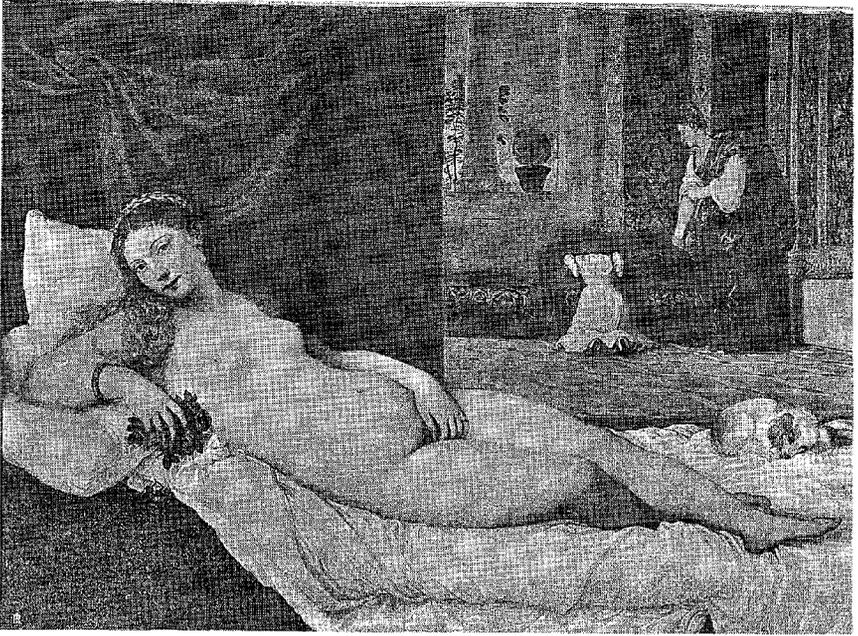
Plate 1.7 The Venus d'Urbino *by Titian provided the inspiration for Manet's* Olympia *of 1863.*

Venus (plates 1.7; 1.8). But the manner of its modelling signalled a self-conscious break between modernity and tradition, and the active intervention of the artist in that transition (Clark, 1985). Rauschenberg, one of the pioneers of the postmodernist movement, deployed images of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Rubens's *Venus at her toilet* in a series of paintings in the 1960s (plate 1.9). But he uses these images in a very different way, simply silk-screening a photographic original onto a surface that contains all kinds of other features (trucks, helicopters, car keys). Rauschenberg simply *reproduces,* whereas Manet *produces,* and it is this move, says Crimp, 'that requires us to think of Rauschenberg as a post-modernist.' The modernist 'aura' of the artist as producer is dispensed with. 'The fiction of the creating subject gives way to frank confiscation, quotation, excerption, accumulation and repetition of already existing images.'

This sort of shift carries over into all other fields with powerful implications. Given the evaporation of any sense of historical continuity and memory, and the rejection of meta-narratives, the only role left for the historian, for example, is to become, as Foucault
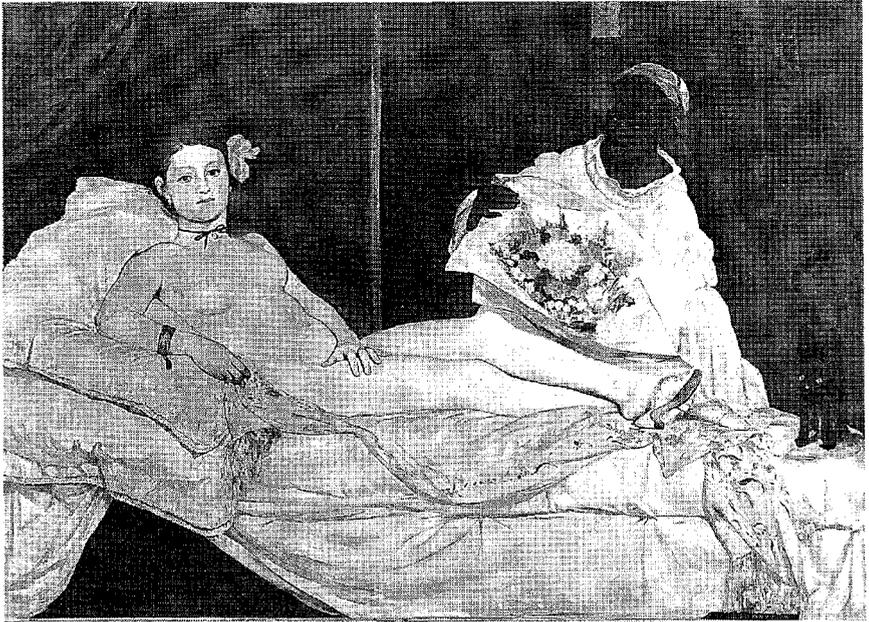
Plate 1.8 Manet's pioneering modernist work Olympia *re-works the ideas of Titian.*

insisted, an archaeologist of the past, digging up its remnants as Borges does in his fiction, and assembling them, side by side, in the museum of modern knowledge. Rorty (1979, 371), in attacking the idea that philosophy can ever hope to define some permanent epistemological framework for enquiry, likewise ends up insisting that the only role of the philosopher, in the midst of the cacophony of cross-cutting conversations that comprise a culture, is to 'decry the notion of having a view while avoiding having a view about having views.' 'The essential trope of fiction,' we are told by the postmodernist writers of it, is a 'technique that requires suspension of belief as well as of disbelief' (McHale, 1987, 27–33). There is, in postmodernism, little overt attempt to sustain continuity of values, beliefs, or even disbeliefs.

This loss of historical continuity in values and beliefs, taken together with the reduction of the work of art to a text stressing discontinuity and allegory, poses all kinds of problems for aesthetic and critical judgement. Refusing (and actively 'deconstructing') all authoritative or supposedly immutable standards of aesthetic judgement, postmodernism can judge the spectacle only in terms of how

Plate 1.9 Rauschenberg's pioneering postmodernist work Persimmon *(1964), collages many themes including direct reproduction of Rubens's* Venus at her toilet.

spectacular it is. Barthes proposes a particularly sophisticated version of that strategy. He distinguishes between *pleasure* and *'jouissance'* (perhaps best translated as 'sublime physical and mental bliss') and suggests we strive to realize the second, more orgasmic effect (note

the connection to Jameson's description of schizophrenia) through a particular mode of encounter with the otherwise lifeless cultural artefacts that litter our social landscape. Since most of us are not schizoid in the clinical sense, Barthes defines a kind of 'mandarin practice' that allows us to achieve '*jouissance*' and to use that experience as a basis for aesthetic and critical judgements. This means identification with the act of writing (creation) rather than reading (reception). Huyssens (1984, 38−45) reserves his sharpest irony for Barthes, however, arguing that he reinstitutes one of the tiredest modernist and bourgeois distinctions: that 'there are lower pleasures for the rabble, i.e. mass culture, and then there is *nouvelle cuisine* of the pleasure of the text, *jouissance*.' This reintroduction of the high-brow/low-brow disjunction avoids the whole problem of the potential debasement of modern cultural forms by their assimilation to pop culture through pop art. 'The euphoric American appropriation of Barthes's *jouissance* is predicated on ignoring such problems and on enjoying, not unlike the 1984 yuppies, the pleasures of writerly connoisseurism and textual gentrification.' Huyssens's image, as Raban's descriptions in *Soft city* suggest, may be more than a little appropriate.

The other side to the loss of temporality and the search for instantaneous impact is a parallel loss of depth. Jameson (1984a; 1984b) has been particularly emphatic as to the 'depthlessness' of much of contemporary cultural production, its fixation with appearances, surfaces, and instant impacts that have no sustaining power over time. The image sequences of Sherman's photographs are of exactly that quality, and as Charles Newman remarked in a *New York Times* review on the state of the American novel (*NYT*, 17 July 1987):

> The fact of the matter is that a sense of diminishing control, loss of individual autonomy and generalized helplessness has never been so instantaneously recognizable in our literature − the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscapes rendered in the flattest possible diction. The presumption seems to be that American is a vast fibrous desert in which a few laconic weeds nevertheless manage to sprout in the cracks.

'Contrived depthlessness' is how Jameson describes postmodern architecture, and it is hard not to give credence to this sensibility as *the* overhelming motif in postmodernism, offset only by Barthes's attempts to help us to the moment of *jouissance*. Attention to surfaces has, of course, always been important to modernist thought and

practice (particulary since the cubists), but it has always been paralleled by the kind of question that Raban posed about urban life: how can we build, represent, and attend to these surfaces with the requisite sympathy and seriousness in order to get behind them and identify essential meanings? Postmodernism, with its resignation to bottomless fragmentation and ephemerality, generally refuses to contemplate that question.

The collapse of time horizons and the preoccupation with instantaneity have in part arisen through the contemporary emphasis in cultural production on events, spectacles, happenings, and media images. Cultural producers have learned to explore and use new technologies, the media, and ultimately multi-media possibilities. The effect, however, has been to re-emphasize the fleeting qualities of modern life and even to celebrate them. But it has also permitted a *rapprochement*, in spite of Barthes's interventions, between popular culture and what once remained isolated as 'high culture.' Such a *rapprochement* has been sought before, though nearly always in a more revolutionary mode, as movements like Dada and early surrealism, constructivism, and expressionism tried to bring their art to the people as part and parcel of a modernist project of social transformation. Such avant-gardist movements possessed a strong faith in their own aims as well as immense faith in new technologies. The closing of the gap between popular culture and cultural production in the contemporary period, while strongly dependent on new technologies of communication, seems to lack any avant-gardist or revolutionary impulse, leading many to accuse postmodernism of a simple and direct surrender to commodification, commercialization, and the market (Foster, 1985). However this may be, much of postmodernism is consciously anti-auratic and anti-avant-garde and seeks to explore media and cultural arenas open to all. It is no accident that Sherman, for example, use photography and evokes pop images as if from film stills in the poses she assumes.

This raises the most difficult of all questions about the postmodern movement, namely its relationship with, and integration into, the culture of daily life. Although much of the discussion of it proceeds in the abstract, and therefore in the not very accessible terms that I have been forced to use here, there are innumerable points of contact between producers of cultural artefacts and the general public: architecture, advertising, fashion, films, staging of multi-media events, grand spectacles, political campaigns, as well as the ubiquitous television. It is not always clear who is influencing whom in this process.

Venturi et al. (1972, 155) recommend that we learn our architectural

aesthetics from the Las Vegas strip or from much-maligned suburbs like Levittown, simply because people evidently like such environments. 'One does not have to agree with hard hat politics,' they go on to say, 'to support the rights of the middle-middle class to their own architectural aesthetics, and we have found that Levittown-type aesthetics are shared by most members of the middle-middle class, black as well as white, liberal as well as conservative.' There is absolutely nothing wrong, they insist, with giving people what they want, and Venturi himself was even quoted in the *New York Times* (22 October 1972), in an article fittingly entitled 'Mickey Mouse teaches the architects,' saying 'Disney World is nearer to what people want than what architects have ever given them.' Disneyland, he asserts, is 'the symbolic American utopia.'

There are those, however, who see such a concession of high culture to Disneyland aesthetics as a matter of necessity rather than choice. Daniel Bell (1978, 20), for example, depicts postmodernism as the exhaustion of modernism through the institutionalization of creative and rebellious impulses by what he calls 'the cultural mass' (the millions of people working in broadcast media, films, theatre, universities, publishing houses, advertising and communications industries, etc. who process and influence the reception of serious cultural products and produce the popular materials for the wider mass-culture audience). The degeneration of high-brow authority over cultural taste in the 1960s, and its replacement by pop art, pop culture, ephemeral fashion, and mass taste is seen as a sign of the mindless hedonism of capitalist consumerism.

Iain Chambers (1986; 1987) interprets a similar process rather differently. Working-class youth in Britain found enough money in their pockets during the postwar boom to participate in the capitalist consumer culture, and actively used fashion to construct a sense of their own public identities, even defined their own pop-art forms, in the face of a fashion industry that sought to impose taste through advertising and media pressures. The consequent democratization of taste across a variety of sub-cultures (from inner-city macho male to college campuses) is interpreted as the outcome of a vital struggle that pitched the rights of even the relatively underprivileged to shape their own identities in the face of a powerfully organized commercialism. The urban-based cultural ferments that began in the early 1960s and continue to this very day lie, in Chambers's view, at the root of the postmodern turn:

> Post modernism, whatever form its intellectualizing might take, has been fundamentally anticipated in the metropolitan cultures

of the last twenty years: among the electronic signifiers of cinema, television and video, in recording studios and record players, in fashion and youth styles, in all those sounds, images and diverse histories that are daily mixed, recycled and 'scratched' together on that giant screen which is the contemporary city.

It is hard, also, not to attribute some kind of shaping role to the proliferation of television use. After all, the average American is now reputed to watch television for more than seven hours a day, and television and video ownership (the latter now covering at least half of all US households) is now so widespread throughout the capitalist world that some effects must surely be registered. Postmodernist concerns with surface, for example, can be traced to the necessary format of television images. Television is also, as Taylor (1987, 103–5) points out, 'the first cultural medium in the whole of history to present the artistic achievements of the past as a stitched-together collage of equi-important and simultaneously existing phenomena, largely divorced from geography and material history and transported to the living rooms and studios of the West in a more or less uninterrupted flow.' It posits a viewer, furthermore, 'who shares the medium's own perception of history as an endless reserve of equal events.' It is hardly surprising that the artist's relation to history (the peculiar historicism we have already noted) has shifted, that in the era of mass television there has emerged an attachment to surfaces rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to super-imposed quoted images rather than worked surfaces, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than solidly achieved cultural artefact. And these are all vital aspects of artistic practice in the post-modern condition.

To point to the potency of such a force in shaping culture as a total way of life is not necessarily to lapse, however, into a simple-minded technological determinism of the 'television causes post-modernism' variety. For television is itself a product of late capitalism and, as such, has to be seen in the context of the promotion of a culture of consumerism. This directs our attention to the production of needs and wants, the mobilization of desire and fantasy, of the politics of distraction as part and parcel of the push to sustain sufficient buoyancy of demand in consumer markets to keep capitalist production profitable. Charles Newman (1984, 9) sees much of the postmodernist aesthetic as a response to the inflationary surge of late capitalism. 'Inflation,' he argues, 'affects the ideas exchange just as surely as it does commercial markets.' Thus 'we are witness to continual internecine warfare and spasmodic changes in fashion, the

simultaneous display of all past styles in their infinite mutations, and the continuous circulation of diverse and contradictory intellectual elites, which signal the reign of the cult of creativity in all areas of behaviour, an unprecedented non-judgemental receptivity to Art, a tolerance which finally amounts to indifference.' From this standpoint, Newman concludes, 'the vaunted fragmentation of art is no longer an aesthetic choice: it is simply a cultural aspect of the economic and social fabric.'

This would certainly go some way to explain the postmodernist thrust to integrate into popular culture through the kind of frank, even crass, commercialization that modernists tended to eschew by their deep resistance to the idea (though never quite the fact) of commodification of their production. There are those however, who attribute the exhaustion of high modernism precisely to its absorption as the formal aesthetics of corporate capitalism and the bureaucratic state. Postmodernism then signals nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production. Crimp (1987, 85) waxes quite acerbic on this point:
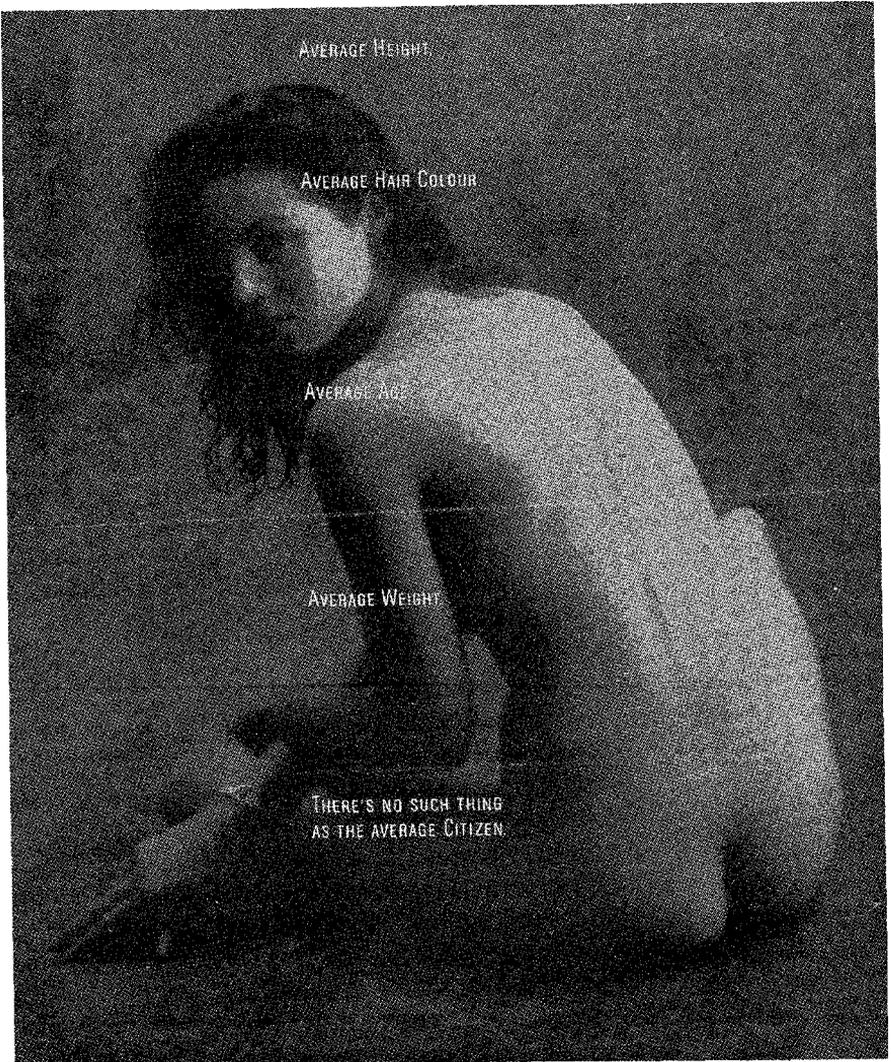
> What we have seen in the last several years is the virtual takeover of art by big corporate interests. For whatever role capital played in the art of modernism, the current phenomenon is new precisely because of its scope. Corporations have become the major patrons of art in every respect. They form huge collections. They fund every major museum exhibition . . . . Auction houses have become lending institutions, giving a completely new value to art as collateral. And all of this affects not only the inflation of value of old masters but art production itself. . . . [The corporations] are buying cheap and in quantity, counting on the escalation of the value of young artists. . . . The return to painting and sculpture of a traditional cast is the return to commodity production, and I would suggest that, whereas traditionally art had an ambiguous commodity status, it now has a thoroughly unambiguous one.

The growth of a museum culture (in Britain a museum opens every three weeks, and in Japan over 500 have opened up in the last fifteen years) and a burgeoning 'heritage industry' that took off in the early 1970s, add another populist (though this time very middle-class) twist to the commercialization of history and cultural forms. 'Post-modernism and the heritage industry are linked,' says Hewison (1987, 135), since 'both conspire to create a shallow screen that intervenes between our present lives and our history.' History be-

comes a 'contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enact-
ment than critical discourse.' We are, he concludes, quoting Jameson,
'condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and
simulacra of that history which itself remains for ever out of reach.'
The house is viewed no longer as a machine but as 'an antique for
living in.'

The invocation of Jameson brings us, finally, to his daring thesis
that postmodernism is nothing more than the cultural logic of late
capitalism. Following Mandel (1975), he argues that we have moved
into a new era since the early 1960s in which the production of
culture 'has become integrated into commodity production generally:
the frantic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel
seeming goods (from clothes to airplanes), at ever greater rates of
turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function to
aesthetic innovation and experimentation.' The struggles that were
once exclusively waged in the arena of production have, as a con-
sequence, now spilled outwards to make of cultural production an
arena of fierce social conflict. Such a shift entails a definite change
in consumer habits and attitudes as well as a new role for aesthetic
definitions and interventions. While some would argue that the
counter-cultural movements of the 1960s created an environment of
unfulfilled needs and repressed desires that postmodernist popular
cultural production has merely set out to satisfy as best it can in
commodity form, others would suggest that capitalism, in order to
sustain its markets, has been forced to produce desire and so titillate
individual sensibilities as to create a new aesthetic over and against
traditional forms of high culture. In either case, I think it important
to accept the proposition that the cultural evolution which has taken
place since the early 1960s, and which asserted itself as hegemonic in
the early 1970s, has not occurred in a social, economic, or political
vacuum. The deployment of advertising as 'the official art of capit-
alism' brings advertising strategies into art, and art into advertising
strategies (as a comparison of David Salle's painting and an advertise-
ment for Citizen Watches (plates 1.6 and 1.10) illustrates). It is
interesting, therefore, to ruminate upon the stylistic shift that Hassan
sets up in relation to the forces that emanate from mass-consumer
culture: the mobilization of fashion, pop art, television and other
forms of media image, and the variety of urban life styles that have
become part and parcel of daily life under capitalism. Whatever else
we do with the concept, we should not read postmodernism as some
autonomous artistic current. Its rootedness in daily life is one of its
most patently transparent features.

The portrait of postmodernism I have here constructed, with the

AVERAGE HEIGHT

AVERAGE HAIR COLOUR

AVERAGE AGE

AVERAGE WEIGHT

THERE'S NO SUCH THING
AS THE AVERAGE CITIZEN.

● CITIZEN

Plate 1.10 An advertisement for Citizen Watches engages directly with the postmodernist techniques of superimposition of ontologically different worlds that bear no necessary relation to each other (compare the David Salle painting of plate 1.6). The watch being advertised is almost invisible.

help of Hassan's schema, is certainly incomplete. It is equally certainly rendered fragmentary and ephemeral by the sheer plurality and elus-iveness of cultural forms wrapped in the mysteries of rapid flux and

change. But I think I have said enough as to what constitutes the general frame of that 'profound shift in the structure of feeling' that separates modernity from postmodernity to begin upon the task of unravelling its origins and speculatively constructing an interpretation of what it might betoken for our future. Nevertheless, I think it helpful to round out this portrait with a more detailed look at how postmodernism is manifest in contemporary urban design, because a closer focus helps reveal the fine-grained textures rather than the broad brush strokes of which the postmodernist condition is constructed in daily life. This is, then, the task I shall take up in the next chapter.

Note

The illustrations used in this chapter have been criticized by some feminists of a postmodern persuasion. They were deliberately chosen because they allowed comparison across the supposed pre-modern, modern and postmodern divides. The classical Titian nude is actively reworked in Manet's modernist Olympia. Rauschenberg simply reproduces through postmodern collage, David Salle superimposes different worlds, and the Citizen's Watch advertisement (the most outrageous of the lot but which appeared in the weekend magazine supplements of several quality newspapers in Britain for an extended period) is a slick use of the same postmodern technique for purely commercial purposes. All the illustrations make use of a woman's body to inscribe their particular message. The additional point I sought to make is that the subordination of women, one of the many 'troublesome contradictions' in bourgeois Enlightenment practices (see p. 14 above and p. 252 below), can expect no particular relief by appeal to postmodernism. I thought the illustrations made the point so well that no further elaboration was necessary. But, in some circles at least, these particular pictures were not worth their usual thousand words. Nor, it seems, should I have relied upon postmodernists appreciating their own technique of telling even a slightly different story by way of the illustrations as compared to the text. (*June, 1991.*)