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Linda Hutcheon

The Politics of Postmodernism

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misery is part of the historical context that formal parody calls up in Rosler’s series, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems.

Barbara Kruger chooses to appropriate mass-media images and use their formal complicity with capitalist and patriarchal representational strategies to foreground confessional elements through ironic contradictions. Parody, she asserts, allows for some distance and critique, especially of notions such as ‘competence, originality, authorship and property’ (Kruger 1982: 90). Certain of Vincent Leo’s works may look like derivative variations or pastiches of the work of Robert Frank – and they are. They are cut-up collages of reproductions from Frank’s canonical book of photographs The Americans. It has been argued that this kind of parodic play has its own complex politics of representation: it points to the legions of contemporary photographers who unreffectively copy the canonical icons and their techniques; it undercuts the myth and mystique of originality in art; it works to recall the history of photography by literally using the past as the building blocks of the present; and it comments critically on the canonical status of photographers like Frank within the art institution (Solomon-Godeau 1984a: 83).

Parody in postmodern art is more than just a sign of the attention artists pay to each others’ work and to the art of the past. It may indeed be complicitous with the values it ascribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there: the politics of postmodern parodic representation is not the same as that of most rock videos’ use of allusions to standard film genres or texts. This is what should be called pastiche, according to Jameson’s definition. In postmodern parody, the doubleness of the politics of authorized transgression remains intact; there is no dialectic resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction in narrative fiction, painting, photography, or film.

POSTMODERN FILM?

In his article, ‘Metacinema: a modern necessity,’ William Siska characterizes ‘modernist’ cinema in terms of a new kind of self-reflexivity, one that challenges the traditional Hollywood variety of movies about movie-making that retain the orthodox realist notion of the transparency of narrative structures and representations: Sunset Boulevard, Day for Night, Singin’ in the Rain (Siska 1979: 285). The ‘modernist’ contesting of this, he argues, takes the form of an insistence on formal intransitivity by such techniques as the rumping of the chain of causation upon which character and plot motivation depend, spatial or temporal fragmentation, or the introduction of ‘alien forms and information’ (286). Examples would include W.R., Persecution, and 8½. But what happens when the ‘alien’ form introduced is parody? And what if it is that very self-conscious introduction of the ‘alien’ that is itself being parodied? What happens when we get Woody Allen’s Stardust Memories parodying and challenging, however respectfully, Fellini’s modernist 8½?

What happens, perhaps, is something we should label as postmodern, something that has the same relation to its modernist past as can be seen in postmodern architecture today: both a respectful – if problematized – awareness of cultural continuity and a need to adapt to changing formal demands and social conditions through an ironic contesting of the authority of that same continuity. The postmodernist is in this sense less radical than the modernist; it is more willfully compromised, more ideologically ambivalent or contradictory. It at once exploits and subverts that which went before, that is, both the modernist and the traditionally realist.

Parody, of course, is omnipresent in contemporary film and it is not always challenging in mode. Parody can work to signal continuity with (though today it is usually with some ironic difference from) a tradition of film-making: Witness rewrites High Noon’s characterization structure (law officer male/pacifist woman) and even echoes individual shots (villains on the high road), but adds the distancing irony of the increased (not, as might be expected, decreased) ruralization of the modern world, at least in terms of the Amish community. Similarly, Crossroads reworks Leather’s thematic and formal structure in fictionalized terms, with differences that foreground the relation of race to the blues. While both music films operate within the same historical framework (Allan Lomax and Folkway recordings figure prominently in both plots), the new climactic contest scene has significant ironic differences: it pits the electric guitar versus the acoustic (in the original it was six- versus twelve-string) and adds a heavy dose of Faustian challenge.

Another way of talking about the political paradoxes of parody would be to see it as self-consciously intransitive representation (film
recalls film) which also milks the power of transitivity to create the spectator’s identification. In other words, it simultaneously destabilizes and inscribes the dominant ideology through its (almost overly obvious) interpellation of the spectator as subject in and of ideology (Althusser 1971; Belsey 1980: 56–84). In other chapters, too, I have argued that the question of ideology’s relation to subjectivity is central to postmodernism. The challenges to the humanist concept of a coherent, continuous, autonomous individual (who paradoxically also shares in some generalized universal human essence) have come from all sides today: from poststructuralist philosophical and literary theory, Marxist political philosophy, Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis, sociology, and many other domains. We have also seen that photography and fiction — two art forms with a certain relevance for film — have shared in this questioning of the nature and formation of subjectivity. Where modernism investigated the grounding of experience in the self, its focus was on the self seeking integration amid fragmentation. In other words, its (for many, defining) focus on subjectivity was still within the dominant humanist framework, though the obsessive search for wholeness itself suggests the beginnings of what would be a more radical postmodern questioning, a challenging brought about by the doubleness of postmodern discourse. In other words, postmodernism works both to undermine and to undermine the notion of the coherent, self-sufficient subject as the source of meaning or action.

Think of films like Woody Allen’s Zelig, with its many parodic intertexts, including actual historical film footage and the conventions of documentary as well as other specific films from Citizen Kane to Res. Parody points at once to and beyond cinematic textuality to the ideological formation of the subject by our various cultural representations. Zelig is centrally concerned with the history and politics of the prewar years for which the chameleon Zelig becomes the ironic symbol. Real historical personages (Susan Sontag, Saul Bellow) ‘document’ and ‘authenticate’ Zelig in this symbolic role: his freakishness becomes his typicality. But what does it mean to be a symbol of something when that something only wants to be other than what it is? The implied historical intertexts give us the answer to this contradiction: as a Jew, Zelig has a special (and historically ironic) interest in fitting in, in being other than what he is — as we know from subsequent history. In other words, this is more than just the typical Allen assimilation anxiety: the history of the Holocaust cannot be forgotten by the contemporary viewer of this film. Nor can the history of the representation of the subject in cinema. The story of a self that changes constantly, that is unstable, decentered, and discontinuous, is a parody both of the traditional filmic subject of realism cinema and also of the modernist searching for integration and wholeness of personality. Here the only wholeness attained is that of the media monster the public makes of the protocan protagonist. Zelig is ‘about’ the formation of subjectivity, both the subjectivity of the spectator and that created by the spectator — the Star.

This critique from within the institution and history of film production is part of what is postmodern about Allen’s work: its insider-outsider doubled position. Through parody, it uses and abuses dominant conventions in order to emphasize both the process of subject-formation and the temptations of easy accommodation to the power of interpellation. It questions the nature of the ‘real’ and its relation to the ‘reel’ through its parody and metacinematic play. This questioning becomes even more overt in The Purple Rose of Cairo, where real and reel life mingle with self-conscious irony. This kind of postmodern film never loses sight of the appeal of that humanist-modernist wholeness; indeed, it exploits it. But the exploitation is done in the name of contesting the values and beliefs upon which that wholeness is constructed — with the emphasis on the act of construction — through representations.

Showing the formation process not just of subjectivity but also of narrativity and visual representation has become a staple of meta-cinema today. The postmodern variant of this kind of self-reflexivity calls attention to the very acts of production and reception of the film itself. In Richard Rush’s The Stunt Man, the audience is placed in the same (hermeneutic) position as the protagonist, as the conventions of movie-making are both employed (and employed effectively — to dramatic and suspenseful ends) and undercut, that is, barred as conventions in a self-conscious way. This focus on what we might call the enunciation is typical of postmodern art in general, with its overt awareness that art is produced and received within a social and political, as well as aesthetic, context.
Suzanne Osten's The Mozart Brothers gives a good sense of the complexity of parody's politics of representation. Walter, an opera director who wants to do Mozart's opera Don Giovanni as a series of flashbacks set in a graveyard, is played by co-writer Etienne Glaser who, in fact, is also an opera director who has done precisely such a production. Within this film about rehearsing an opera, we also watch a female director make a documentary film about Walter. Her camera and her feminist perspective are periodically brought to our attention, problematizing the gender politics of all representation—filmic, operatic, documentary.

This is a movie about a Swedish opera company's production of an utterly unconventional version of Mozart's famous opera. The outrage that greets Walter's anti-canonical directorial decisions comes from singers, orchestra, theater managers, voice trainers, stage crew, in short, everyone who has worked within certain Mozartian conventions and sees them as fixed 'doxa'—what Mozart intended. However, the ghostly apparition of the composer himself keeps assuring Walter that it is convention—not opera itself—that is boring and that even if people hate his production, at least they will be responding emotionally to it. The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. In a scene which parodically recalls the Volkssper opera of Don Giovanni in the film of Amostras, the ghost of Mozart appears in the mirror, as Walter eats and drinks with the cleaners and theater workers who lustily sing in falsetto voices Zerlina's interactions with Masetto. Mozart smiles in delight at their true joyous pleasure in his music, even if it is not sung in any traditional manner or place.

The most intricate example of how parodic representation functions in this film is in the structural parallels between the opera and the movie: the members of the opera company live out the opera’s emotions and even its plot details. The womanizing Walter is clearly the modern Don Giovanni; the vengeful Donna Elvira is to be sung in this production by Walter's ex-wife, a strong and forceful woman who loves him still—despite herself. Walter's musical assistant calls himself Leporello and at one point even changes shirts, if not cloaks and hats, with Giovanni/Walter. Walter insults the singer who plays Donna Anna, but she has no father to avenge her slighted (singing) honor. She does, however, have a mother-figure, her teacher, who attacks Walter with her sword-like umbrella. Similarly, it is not Leporello who tells Donna Elvira of the Don's many female conquests; it is the office receptionist who tells the singer portraying Donna Elvira of Walter's other wives and conquests. This ex-wife herself then warns the female film director of Walter's perfidy, but this is no innocent Zerlina, warned and protected by Donna Elvira: the woman directing is as much seducer as seduced.

The Mozart Brothers inevitably suggests other parodic contexts: as a Swedish film about a Mozart opera, it probably cannot avoid recalling Bergman's The Magic Flute, with which it shares similarities of self-reflexivity in terms of staging and also in its play with the usual transparent conventions of realist representation. And its unconventional stage setting in mud and water is a comment, perhaps, on Joseph Losey's famous Venetian film of the opera, with its beautiful watery sets. The final irony of all this parody and self-reflexivity is that we never get to hear or see the planned production. Or do we? Through the rehearsal action and the singers' interactions, we actually have seen a full, if ironically transcoded, version of Don Giovanni that is at least as untraditional as that envisaged by Walter.

Films made from postmodern novels seem to be particularly open to the referential complexities of parody. While all filming of novelistic narrative involves the clash of two very different representational systems, in the postmodern form there are added levels of irony. John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman, with its intense self-reflexivity of narration and its dense parodic intertextuality (of both specific Victorian novels and generic conventions), had to be cinematically transcoded in order to change its insistently novelistic focus into a filmic one.

Another example would be Manuel Puig's novel, Kiss of the Spider Woman, where the ironies of Molina's parodic verbal representations of films had to be visually inscribed for the spectator, while remaining narrated for Molina's cell companion, Valentin. The number of narrated films in the novel had to be drastically reduced in the film without losing the function and significance of the representational process itself. In addition, as we have already seen, the irony of the novel's extended paratextual parody in the form of long footnotes full of authenticating psychoanalytic sources of information (which explain nothing of the subjectivity they presume to illuminate) has to be played out solely through character interaction.
In these and other films, parody is not a form of self-regarding narcissism or in-joke elitist allusions by film-school trained directors. The complex transcoding in Carlos Saura's Carmen of French high art (Bizet's opera and Mérimée's literary text) into the conventions of Spanish flamenco offers a good example of the kind of political critique of which parodic representation is indeed capable. Flamenco is historically not the music and dance of high art; it is the regional and popular art of the poor and the socially marginalized. Saura's film is about the relation of the present to the past traditions of both Spanish folk art and European high-art culture (with its fascination for the stereotypically exotic).

Like The French Lieutenant's Woman, however, this is a very postmodern film in its dialogic doublings. It is tenuously aware of—and challenges—the boundaries between genres and ultimately between art and life. The wall-size studio window onto the outside world is curtained, and the performance goes on behind those curtains. Somewhat reminiscent of the scene in Fellini's The Orchestrab, the performance is both a documentary on a form of music and a rehearsal of a fiction. Added to this is the plot structure's reflexivity, wherein the dancers begin to enact—in their private lives—the jealousy and passion of the fiction. The fact that as viewers we often cannot tell whether we are watching the fiction or the dancers' 'real'-life action underlines the doubling boundary play of the film. The self-reflexivity of Carmen also raises another issue of ideological import: this is a film about the production of art, about art as representation derived from the words and music of others, but as filtered through the imagination of the artist figure, the male Pygmalion who wills reality—a woman and a dancer—to take the form of art and become his Carmen. The overt process of subjectification here underlines the cognate relationship between subject and subjection.

The dominant view of postmodern parody as trivial and trivializing that we saw earlier is also to be found in the field of film criticism. Jameson (1983, 1984a) argues that parody in films like Body Heat or Star Wars is a sign of nostalgic escapism, 'the imprisonment of the past' through pastiche that prevents confronting the present. However, at the same time, we have seen that Jameson laments a loss of a sense of history in today's art. He sees parodic art as simply narcissistic, as 'a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself—or at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history' (Jameson 1983: 117).

However, Zelig, Carmen, The French Lieutenant's Woman, and other postmodern films do indeed deal with history and they do so in ironic, but not at all unserious, ways. The problem for Jameson may simply be that they do not deal with Marxist History: in these films there is little of the positive utopian notion of History and no unproblematic faith in the accessibility of the 'real referent' of historical discourse.

What they suggest instead is that there is no directly and naturally accessible past 'real' for us today: we can only know—and construct—the past through its traces, its representations. As we have repeatedly seen, whether these be documents, eye-witness accounts, documentary film footage, or other works of art, they are all representations and they are our only means of access to the past. Jameson laments the loss of a sense of his particular definition of history, then, while dismissing nostalgia the only kind of history we may be able to acknowledge: a contingent and inescapably intertextual history. To write this off as pastiche and nostalgia and then to lament that our contemporary social system has 'begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present' (Jameson 1983: 123) seems of questionable validity. Postmodernist film (and fiction) is, if anything, obsessed with history and with how we can know the past today. How can this be an 'enfeebledment of historicity' (Jameson 1986: 303)?

Writing as I do in an Anglo-American context, I think that Jameson's blanket condemnation of Hollywood for its wholesale implication in capitalism (made from within an academy that is just as implicated) is what is behind his distrust of irony and ambiguity, a distrust that binds him to the possibilities of the potentially positive oppositional and contestatory nature of parody. Postmodern film does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of production, because it knows it cannot. Instead it exploits its 'insider' position in order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak. The difference between postmodern parody and nostalgia—which once again I do not deny is part of our culture today—lies in the role of this double-voiced irony. Compare the ponderousness of Dune (which takes itself most seriously)
with star wars' irony and play with cultural conventions of narrative and visual representation or with ōno's cultural inversion of both the traditional western (e.g. Shane with its lone hero helping needy widow) and the Italian 'spaghetti western' into what might literally be called a 'noodle eastern.' What postmodern parody does is to evoke what reception theorists call the horizon of expectation of the spectator, a horizon formed by recognizable conventions of genre, style, or form of representation. This is then destabilized and dismantled step by step. It is not accidental, of course, that irony has often been the rhetorical vehicle of satire. Even a relatively 'light' parody such as De Palma's Phantom of the Paradise offers irony working with satire, ranging in target from the sexism of Hugh Hefner-like harems (Swan's — with ironic echoes perhaps of du côté de chez swann) to the interpellation of the star by the public and its taste for extremes. The vehicle of this satire is multiple parody: of the bird man of akron (transported to sing sing — a more appropriate site for a singer-composer), psycho (the knife replaced by a plunger; the female victim by a male), the picture of dorian gray (the painting updated to video tape). Despite the obvious fun, this is also a film about the politics of representation, specifically the representation of the original and originating subject as artist: its dangers, its victims, its consequences. The major intertexts are Faust and the earlier film, the phantom of the open, here transcribed into rock music terms. This particular parodied text and only this can explain such otherwise unmotivated details as the organ overtones to the protagonist's opening piano playing. The Faust parody is overt as well, since the phantom writes a rock cantata based on it. And of course his pact with the demonic swan is signed in blood.

Multiple and obvious parody like this can paradoxically bring out the politics of representation by barring and thus challenging convention, just as the Russian formalists had suggested it could. Metacinematic devices work in much the same way. The mixing of the fictive and the historical in Coppola's cotton club warns the spectator to beware of institutionalized boundaries, to refuse to let life and art get either too separate or totally merged, so that when the club's stage acts echo and foreshadow the action of the main plot, we do not miss the implications. For instance, the dance of the light-skinned lila rose and the darker sandman williams prefigures on stage their tortured relationship for she, but only she, can pass in a white world. Genre boundaries are structurally analogous to social borders (here racially defined) and both are called to account.

This parodic genre-crossing between the discourses of fiction and history may well reflect a general and increasing interest in non-fictional forms since the 1960s. In film, popular works such as the Return of Martin Guerre and (somewhat more problematically) amadeus would support such an interpretation of the orientation of much current culture. But a film like maximilian schell's marlene can also parody the documentary genre in a postmodern cinematic way. It opens asking 'who is dieterich?' and the question is revealed as unanswered. The postmodernist investigation of subject-formation combines here with one of the forms that the postmodern challenge to historical knowledge has taken: the one that operates in the realm of private history, that is, biography. Novels like barnville's Kepler or wiebe's the temptation of big bear or kennedy's legs all work to present a portrait of an individual and yet to subvert any stability in or certainty of ever knowing — or representing — that subject. This is what marlene is also about. The much photographed dieterich remains off-stage, never represented visually. She is only a querulous voice, a cantankerous absent presence.

Schell turns this to postmodern advantage by making this into a film about trying to make a documentary about a willfully absent subject, one who refuses to be subjected to the discourses and representations of others any longer. dieterich has her own version of her life, one which, as the metacinematic frame makes clear, is itself a fictionalized one. She claims at one point that she wants a documentary without criticism: what schell should do is show archival pictures of, for instance, the boat on which she arrived in america. Schell then immediately offers us these very pictures and the effect is both humorous and revelatory: the archive may be real but it tells us little about the subject. The portrait of dieterich that emerges here is of a woman of contradictions, business-like yet sentimental, self-denigrating yet proud, rejecting almost all her work as rubbish yet moved to enthusiasm by watching schell in judgment at nuremberg. The suggestion is that all subjectivity would be as radically split as this if we were to examine it closely, that the humanist ideal representation of a whole, integrated individual is a fiction — a fiction that not even the subject (or her
biographer) can ever successfully construct. Schell’s despair is as much at this as at Dietrich’s stubborn inaccessibility to his camera. He can edit her films all he likes (and we watch him do so), but she remains elusive and forever contradictory.

Makene is the kind of film I would label as postmodern: parodic, metacinematic, questioning its constantly contradictory, doubled discourse calls to our attention the issue of the ideological construction – through representation – of subjectivity and of the way we know history, both personal and public. Very few films have managed to raise these particular issues as obsessively as has Peter Greenaway’s *A Zed and Two Noughts*. Everything in this movie is doubled, from the characters to the parodies. The master intertext is the (‘photographic’) realist representation of Vermeer’s paintings (the lighting techniques of which are echoed directly in the filming). But even this overt intertext becomes problematic. Within the film’s narrative there is a surgeon named Van Meegeren. This is also the name of Vermeer’s principal forger, the man who successfully convinced Goebbels (and the rest of the world) that there existed more than the once accepted twenty-six authenticated Vermeer paintings. As in Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, the real and the fictive or the authentic and the fake cannot be separated. And, by means of one character’s personal sense of loss, the entire history of the human species is placed in the context of evolution and devolution: Charles Darwin becomes both a biological historian and an ingenious storyteller.

*A Zed and Two Noughts* seems to me to be a borderline case, however, a case limite of the postmodern film. Its challenges to the spectator’s expectations are more radical than those of any of the other films I have mentioned. While its contradictions are not really resolved, they are certainly stylized in the extreme. Postmodern film, as I see it, would be more compromised than this. Its tension would be more deliberately left unresolved, its contradictions more deliberately left manifest. This constant double encoding – inscribing and subverting prevailing conveniences – is what causes some critics to reject such films utterly, while others acclaim them enthusiastically. This discrepancy may be caused by the fact that if only one side – either of the postmodern contradiction is seen (or valued), then the ambivalent doubleness of the parodic encoding can easily be resolved into a single decoding. Postmodern film is that which paradoxically wants to challenge the outer borders of cinema and wants to ask questions (though rarely offer answers) about ideology’s role in subject-formation and in historical knowledge. Perhaps parody is a particularly apt representational strategy for postmodernism, a strategy once described (Said 1983: 135) as the use of parallel script rather than original inscription. Were we to heed the implications of such a model, we might have to reconsider the operations by which we both create and give meaning to our culture through representation. And that is not bad for a so-called nostalgic escapist tendency.
as 'colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths' (1993: 8). He further argued that 'the great imperial experience of the past two hundred years is global and universal; it has implicated every corner of the globe, the colonizer and the colonized together' (1993: 259). In short, globalization is not new to late capitalism; European imperialism of earlier centuries had already created a 'web of global commitments' (Hall 1997: 174; see also Appadurai 1996: 279) to rival anything electronic communications and transnational capital can produce today. The postmodern and the postcolonial have both played a role in this important historicizing, though theorists in each area might well disagree on the political efficacy of their actions.

**IRONY VERSUS NOSTALGIA: POSTMODERNISM AND QUEER THEORY AND PRACTICE**

The issue of political efficacy surfaced early in the theorizing of the postmodern, most often provoked by the use of irony as a discursive strategy. For some, the irony of postmodern historiographic texts was what saved them from tumbling into a kind of sanitizing nostalgia to which some versions of antiquarian historicism certainly can fall prey. Where Jameson has perceived irony as trivializing historical representation, I continue to see it as offering a critical edge to ward off precisely the debilitating nostalgia Jameson rightly locates in certain 'fashion-plate historicist films' (1991: xvii). But as Anne Friedberg has pointed out, what Jameson is really protesting in these films when he laments the 'enfeebling of historicity' (1990: 130) is not postmodernism at all but the distanced relation of every film from its historical referent (1991: 427). In other words, at least in this case, it is the medium itself and not the postmodern that gives the illusion of a 'perpetual present interminably recycled' (Friedberg 1991: 427).

However, nostalgia commands a complex position in Jameson’s influential theorizing: it is definitely used as a negative when describing certain theories, films, and novels. But his own rhetoric and self-positioning have themselves at times sounded strangely nostalgic, as he has repeatedly expressed a desire for a return to what he has always called 'genuine historicity.' Even on the left, some have occasionally found this yearning for a 'lost authenticity' in itself either regressive or defeatist (see Frow 1991: 135; During 1987: 32–35). But, does the idealizing of an earlier, more stable, pre-late-capitalist (read: modernist) world necessarily imply an aesthetics (or a politics) of nostalgia? If so, it would be one shared with his predecessor (and important influence), Georg Lukács, for whom it was not modernism, of course, but realism that constituted that implied 'moment of plenitude' (JAMESON 1971: 38) in the past around which literary historical nostalgia revolved. Either way, it is the present that is deemed unacceptable, whenever that present is actually situated. Michael Bérubé has argued that the left in America has at times seemed paralyzed by dreams of days when things were better: 'it was only the repeated interventions of women, ethnic minorities and variously queer theorists that finally shattered the pernicious sense of nostalgia to which so many men on the antipostmodern left fell victim' (1991: 14). If the present is indeed considered unsalvageable and irredeemable, we have no choice but to look either backward or forward, and (not surprisingly) the nostalgic and the utopian both figure prominently in Jameson's interpretation of the late-twentieth-century American scene.

Lacking, alas, even the semblance of a nostalgic bone in my body, I have instead always felt that, despite the temptation of comparison, the end of the twentieth century actually bore little relation to the end of the one before it. Yes, they had common doubts about progress, shared worries over political instability and social inequality, and comparable fears about disruptive change (Lowenthal 1985: 394–96), but so did many mid-centuries too. Nostalgia was an obvious consequence of the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle panic, as 'manifest in idealizations of rural life, in vernacular-revival architecture, in arts-and-crafts movements, and in a surge of preservation activity' (Lowenthal 1985: 396). If the urge at that time was to turn nostalgically to the historical novels of Walter Scott and to Gothic Revival architecture, the cultural tendency at the end of the twentieth century also seemed to be to 'look back' — but this time with irony — as in the historiographic metafiction of Timothy Findley or Salman Rushdie, or in the provocative architecture of Bruce Kuwabara or Frank Gehry. Gone is the earlier sense of the belatedness of the present vis-à-vis the past; the act of ironizing worked to undermine modernist notions of originality, authenticity, and the
burden of the past (all so central to Jameson's theorizing), even as it
acknowledged their continuing (but not paralyzing) historical validity
as both aesthetic and 'worldly' concerns. Parody, postmodernism
taught, can historicize as it contextualizes and recontextualizes.

It is here that the postmodern overlaps with the ironic and reflexive
cultural phenomenon of camp. Pamela Robertson has argued that camp is
'productively anachronistic and critically renders specific historical
norms obsolete. What counts as excess, artifice and theatricality, for
example, will differ over time' (1999: 267). She admits that camp is
nostalgic, but only insofar as it is also 'a critical recognition of the
temptation to nostalgia, rendering both the object and the nostalgia
outmoded through an ironic, mocking distanciation' (267). To other
theorists, camp actually perverts nostalgia to its own ironic ends (Cleto
1999b: 304). While admitting the oppositional value of this act, most
also admit the political possibility of complicity (e.g., Ross 1989b);
such is the danger inherent in postmodern practices. Yet Laura Doan
has contested the necessity of falling into this danger, as indeed had
other feminist theorists before her, pointing out that the postmodern
has already offered lesbian theorists and artists 'multiple strategies
of resistance' (1994: xi) - such as 'self-reflexivity, ambivalence,
contradiction, subversion, and the parodic' (x) in its 'valorization of
difference, sexual plurality, and gender blurrings/blending' (x).

It is interesting that Doan deliberately uses the term 'lesbian' and not
'queer' - as one might expect in a discussion of the postmodern, since
it has most often been queer theory/practice and postmodernism that
have been seen as sharing ends and means. Both are based in poststruc-
turalist theory; both use irony and parody in their artistic practices.
Of course, the larger issue here that is of relevance to 1990s postmodern-
ism is the distinction between the politics of gay and lesbian perspec-
tives and the politics of queer theory. Despite their similar challenge
to the boundaries of normative heterosexuality, their differences surface
in their attitude to power and their strategies for social change (Bred-
beck 1995: 478) - as symbolized to some extent in their very act of
nomination. While one might say that 'gay' was the name chosen by
gays themselves, 'queer' was originally a term of abuse within the
dominant discourse. Turning it into a self-nomination enacts one of the
main modes of queer theory and practice: counter-discursive irony.

Gay and lesbian politics have involved an activist, interventionist
dimension, in part enabled by feminism as a program of both social
change and cultural theory (Bredbeck 1995: 474; see also Savoy 1995),
in part provoked by a need to mobilize when AIDS appeared on the
scene; queer politics have, instead, meant enacting 'a constructivist
model of identity, framing both sex and gender, against essentializing
approaches as results of ideological interpellation' (Cleto 1999a: 14).
Another way to put the difference would be to stress 'two of the
defining features of queer, in contrast to gay: its preoccupations with
discourse and with performativity. ... [W]here gay studies focused on
the relationship between lived historical experience and text, queer
theory is interested in the intersection between various kinds of
discourses' (Martin and Piggford 1997b: 9).

Like postmodernism, then, queer theory and practice attempt to
demystify, subvert, undo - and often through irony. Eschewing the
'gay and lesbian' binary, they also inscribe 'the homo/hetero binary
within a wider design of (semiotic, and pragmatic) subordination on
the axes of ethnicity, class, and gender' (Cleto 1999a: 15), 'leaving
themselves open to the accusation of over-inclusivity and of obscuring
the power relations among these different axes. The work of Judith
Butler, as mentioned earlier, has been significant in articulating the
performative relationship between postmodern parody and issues of
gender and sexual identity. And just as Foucault's theories underpin
much of the discourse analysis done under the auspices of the post-
modern, so too are they clearly also relevant here - as they would
continue to be in the postmodernism debates of the 1990s, in part
through the Foucaultian interventions of critics such as Edward Said.

THE WORLD, THE TEXT, AND THE CRITIQUE

My title is clearly a parodic echoing of Said's book The World, The Text,
and the Critic (1983), with a new emphasis placed on the more complicit-
ous act of postmodern critique. The trickiness of the politics of post-
modernism is not only because of irony; it is also related to the broader
issue of textualization. The negative argument would be that the self-
consciously textual cannot 'act' in the world, that is, it is funda-
mentally different from what Said calls the 'worldly.' The positive