

Literary Theory and Intellectual Kitsch

Denis Dutton

That postmodernism is a general cultural mood and a style in art, architecture, and literature is uncontroversial. But does postmodernism present a coherent *intellectual* doctrine or theory of politics, art, or life? In the discussion which follows, I will concentrate on two aspects of the intellectual pretensions of postmodernism. First, I examine the postmodernist claim to justify the idea that the postmodern world is characterized by a general indeterminacy of meaning. Next I will look at aspects of the postmodernist contention that the present age has witnessed the decline of individuality.

If there is an intellectual core to postmodernism, it will be found in French-derived poststructuralist thought. At the centre of poststructuralism is the idea that the Enlightenment has run its course, that the seventeenth century's grand narratives, its ambitions to provide universal keys to reality, have failed. Such postmodern talk of the end of the Enlightenment is premature. Of course, there is no question that many of the grand narratives which captivated the imaginations of our forebears have indeed collapsed. The seventeenth-century idea that the study of matter in motion would eventually allow us to predict not only the motions of the planets, but even human behaviour is dead—as dead as the idea that the will of God dramatized by the passion and resurrection of Jesus could explain all of human history. Marxism, the grand narrative which gave shape to the intellectual aspirations of youth of many French poststructural literary theorists, has also fallen into its own decline, at least as an all-encompassing theoretical scheme, as has the dream that unchained capitalism would lead mankind into a golden age. But the erosion of these particular 'ultimate answers' does not necessarily spell the end of every Enlightenment hope.

Poststructuralist critics of the Enlightenment have sometimes faulted it for the faith that history is moving toward some sort of omega point, an optimism which poststructuralist thought has sensibly given up. But at the same time, the spirit of prophecy is not

entirely gone from poststructuralism, as is shown by the fondness of some poststructuralists for the phrase 'late capitalism'—as though *they* could know that the present economic arrangements of the Western democracies is just about over; this pseudo-prophetic usage is the intellectual's equivalent of walking the streets with a sign proclaiming the imminent end of the world. Philosophers are not seers, and when they try to assume a prophetic tone—as Heidegger on technology—they risk simply being ridiculous. Nevertheless, poststructuralism is certainly correct in questioning great intellectual schemes which promise to install utopia on earth or make sense of all human life and relations. But, after all, in so doing they are perfectly in tune with the spirit of the Enlightenment's own attack on the Christian metanarrative.

Nor has poststructuralism's treatment of everybody's grand narratives been consistent. Freud's general account of human reality is perhaps as grand as any, yet he has been treated most leniently by poststructuralists: criticized, called into question, but never thoroughly debunked and rejected. And even where totalizing narratives have been scoffed at, it is remarkable to consider the extent to which they have been replaced by other, just as totalizing, poststructuralist narratives: Michel Foucault's theory of power and oppression, for instance, which has much of the dramatic appeal of the stories of sin and redemption which captivated Christendom.

But while inconsistency about the usefulness of grand narratives on the part of postmodern thought is problematic, it does not indicate the deeper frivolity of the poststructuralist dismissal of the Enlightenment. Consider postmodern theory in relation to the history of natural science for the last three centuries or so. What does one get from poststructuralist theory on the subject of natural science? Except for feeble clichés about quantum mechanical indeterminacy or paradoxes of relativity theory, practically nothing. Episodes in the history of science in the twentieth century are used as a sort of mythology to help poststructuralists support their rejection of the totalizing tendencies of Enlightenment. These poststructuralist myths have exactly as much philosophical weight as post-Einsteinian claims of seventy years ago that Special Relativity might tell us something important about cross-cultural 'relativity' in morality. Moreover, if one pays any attention to the actual state of natural science as the twentieth century nears its close, it is not surprising that postmodern theorists have little of significance to say on the subject. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century has accelerated

into the twentieth, bringing levels of comprehension and technological power older generations could not even dream of. For the current state of natural science testifies not only to the persistence of one of the totalizing tendencies of the Enlightenment, but of its astonishing success.

In his good-natured and enthusiastic attempts to make sense of the postmodern temper, Ihab Hassan has discussed natural science in relation to postmodernism.¹ He does not fail to appreciate the problems of bringing the two topics together, admitting outright that 'current analogies between science, culture, and sundry artistic and spiritual phenomena can prove too facile,' (p.63) that it may be that scientific concepts 'should not be confused with cultural metaphors and literary tropes.' Still, this doesn't stop him from promoting those very analogies, using scientific concepts as metaphors and tropes in the most facile manner (having it both ways—to be critical of shallow comparisons yet make them all the same—is itself symptomatic of the postmodern mood). It was 1905, Hassan tells us, the year of the appearance of Special Relativity, that science reached the turning point: 'As Einstein succinctly put it: "There is no absolute motion"' (p.55). The inadequacy of this as a summary of Einstein will be apparent only to readers who know physics, but there will be thankfully few of these among those humanists who study Hassan's article. And on he goes with the name dropping, through Reimannian space and the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, and Bohr's Principle of Complementarity. Heisenberg, he declares, shows that 'Mechanism, determinism, materialism recede before the flux of consciousness, a kind of noetic Heraclitean fire ... In such rarefied realms of reason, a humanist, modern *or* postmodern, gasps for breath' (pp. 58, 60). (It shouldn't surprise us to find poststructuralists gasping for breath as they attempt to come to terms with the physics of seventy or eighty years ago—one must know a considerable hunk of mathematics and have some background in classical physics to understand relativity and quantum mechanics. We have, however, no evidence that most of the major names of poststructural theory—Lyotard, for example, or Derrida—know very much about natural science beyond what they might remember of their school days.)

The invocation of physics in this way to support postmodern attitudes may seem to add lustre or weight to postmodernism, but the

1 Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Athens, Ohio, 1987, esp. pp. 46-83.

effect is yet another illusion. First, the science Hassan invokes, along with its attendant paradoxes is very old by any postmodernist standard. It is, in fact, exactly what textbooks tend to call 'modern' science. What is more important to appreciating the futility of Hassan's discussion is the irrelevance of quantum mechanics to the actual state of science in this postmodern time. The paradoxes of quantum mechanics have no effect whatsoever on well over 99 per cent of the actual conduct of the physical and biological sciences in the late twentieth century. The paradoxes are intellectually stimulating material for philosophers of science, subatomic physicists, and cosmologists, but they have no effect on work done in almost every other area of science. Let us remind ourselves for a moment of the sort of things science as it is currently practised can accomplish. The story of modern science since the seventeenth century is not a story of increasing uncertainty, but just the reverse. The astonishing achievements in controlling or eradicating disease, the inventions of electronic technology, the discoveries of space and planetary science, the emerging techniques of genetic engineering, all illustrate a situation in contemporary natural science completely contrary to the view Hassan purports to describe with his myths of quantum indeterminacy. The totalizing ideals of the Enlightenment really are succeeding in natural science—there clearly is progress in understanding and controlling the material world. While postmodern humanists talk to themselves about the failure of the Enlightenment, it buzzes past, unaffected by the empty tropes and metaphors.

When Hassan claims that relativity and uncertainty are concepts that 'constitute our [presumably postmodern] cultural languages; they are part of a new order of [presumably postmodern] knowledge ...', he is engaging in a form of intellectual *kitsch*. This German word (*verkitschen*, to make cheaply, to cheapen) is often used to refer to any form of popular art or entertainment, but it has especially come to designate objects which pretentiously borrow their sense of beauty, emotion, or profundity from elsewhere. The perfect example of kitsch is the religious souvenir: ugly taken by itself, it begs for acceptance by reason of its associations, the meanings it derives from spirituality. In this sense, kitsch objects are parasitic. But kitsch is also designed to appeal to a self-image of its viewers or consumers. In his long meditation on the concept of kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera characterises kitsch as calling forth 'the

second tear.' The first tear we shed out of pity or some other worthy emotion; the second tear we shed in recognition of our own worthy feeling of pity. Kitsch is designed to appeal to an image we have of ourselves, and our response to kitsch is very often essentially self-congratulatory.

That is why it is not merely in the area of religious or sentimental art that we find kitsch, but in philosophy and intellectual discourse as well. It is plain that a strong sense of self-congratulation and attempted self-justification is at work in the invocations of Heisenberg, Bohr, and Einstein by postmodern theorists. Scientific ideas and jargon are used by them as an exercise in intellectual parasitism; the essential function is not to inform us of what Heisenberg might have said relevant to postmodern cultural conditions, but to soothe and flatter postmodern cultural theorists, to give their theories *prestige*. I remarked that the kitsch object does not deepen our understanding of emotions or ideas, but is limited to reminding us of great works of art, deep emotions, or grand philosophic, religious, or patriotic sentiments. In this way, I view Hassan's invocations of quantum mechanics as kitsch: they speak only of postmodern theory's nervous longing to achieve intellectual respectability. There is something touchingly middle-class about postmodern theory in its eagerness to be all up-to-date, even *avant garde*, but at the same time respectable. Just as some middle-class people own expensively bound copies of classic books which they display in their lounges but never read, so do postmodern theorists love references to Einstein and scientific theories (real theories) which, alas, they do not understand.

But if borrowing uncomprehended and undigested physics is a form of kitsch, what about borrowing undigested and barely comprehended poststructuralist thought as a way of trying to give respectability to postmodernist art and culture? After all, as popularly conceived, postmodernism is supposed to include the idea that we can borrow from any and every culture—in our food, our dress, our jewellery, our architecture, and our hairstyles. To recall Lyotard, we 'listen to heavy metal rock, watch Hollywood westerns, eat American fast food for lunch, local cuisine for dinner, wear Paris perfume in Tokyo, and recycled cloths in Hong Kong'.² It includes and celebrates the global reach of media, especially television,

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition*, tr. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Minneapolis, 1984, p.63.

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the informational society, and recreational shopping. It features entertainment as a dominant ideology (to call entertainment an 'ideology' is already pretentious), along with consumerism and the art of exhaustion. At the same time validating a cynical acceptance of all this, postmodernism is in some accounts even supposed to deliver a political critique of it—for example, the politically correct, and oh-so-pricey art of Barbara Kruger.

Given the vast confusion of ideas and attitudes postmodernism is supposed to incorporate, it would be unrealistic to expect poststructuralism, or any other purportedly coherent philosophical theory, to supply an intellectual underpinning for it. Poststructuralist theory gained currency back in the 1960s as a critique of prevailing ideas of conservative literary French establishment. Barthes's *nouvelle critique* was intended to debunk the idea that the author/ god was a controlling presence that determined the meaning of a text, or that texts had fixed meanings at all which it was criticism's job to ascertain. But we have to ask ourselves whether this bit of *literary theory* can be imperialistically expanded into a cultural theory in general, or at least one that somehow supports or validates something as chaotic as postmodernism. I do not think so. In fact, the use of poststructuralist theory to provide a philosophical rationale for postmodernism is just another exercise in borrowing your respectability from somewhere else—another form of *kitsch*.

Seen in this light, postmodern culture presents us with a veritable chain of kitsch borrowing. At the top of the chain are physicists, innocently going about their work in subatomic physics and making incidental statements about the limits of what can be known about elementary particles. Next come poststructuralist philosophers, who, though they understand no physics, remove from their original context such words as 'indeterminacy' and appropriate them to give an aura of prestige to their theories of literary criticism. Next we have postmodern artists and their salesmen, who, though they do not understand it, are happy to borrow poststructuralist/postmodern philosophical rhetoric to give an intellectual sheen to their wares. Finally comes the buyer of the work of postmodern art, who doesn't understand the work, or the philosophy which validates it, or the physics which validates the philosophy, but who places it in his living room (next to the leather-bound books), certain that he has made the right investment.

The kitsch use of the prestige of science to lend respectability to postmodernism as an intellectual phenomenon is in my view simply silly. But what of the actual positive pronouncements philosophical postmodernism makes in its own account? One of its most publicized contentions involves that so-called death of the subject. This idea of an end of a special place for subjective individuality in the postmodern era parallels the poststructuralist attack in literary theory on any sort of privileged place for authorship and with it such associated concepts as artistic genius, the importance of art as individual expression, the controlling presence in criticism of authorial intention, and so forth. The thesis is that in the context of art modernism was essentially a form of aesthetic expressionism, that it was, as the postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson puts it, 'predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint ...' In the modernist view, this was 'linked to the conception of a unique self and a private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can generate its own unique vision of the world and forge its own unique, unmistakable style.' Against this, Jameson says, scholars and 'those of us who work in the area of culture and cultural and formal change, are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past ...' Jameson holds that in light of the emergence of corporate capitalism, and the rise of state and business bureaucracies, 'that older bourgeois individual subject no longer exists'.³

The idea Jameson presents has become very widespread among cultural theorists of late. One finds, for example, another instance of it in Michael Heim's *Electric Language*, a book which discusses the increasingly widespread use by authors of electronic word processors, instead of typewriters or pen and paper. Heim argues that the interconnectedness of word processing machines—the simple fact that they can be wired into each other—will lead to an erosion of the sense of private authorship, of the writer seen as a unique private individual.⁴ And more generally, Ihab Hassan has taken 'self-lessness' as a mark of the postmodern moment: 'Postmodernism vacates the traditional self ... postmodernism suppresses or disperses and sometimes tries to recover the "deep" romantic ego, which remains

3 Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society,' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle, 1983, pp. 112-15.

4 Michael Heim, *Electric Language*, New Haven, 1987.

under dire suspicion in poststructuralist circles as a “totalizing principle”.

It would be difficult to overestimate the emptiness of these proclamations of the death of the individual in the postmodern era. I concentrate on this question because it illustrates the tendency of the theorists of postmodernism to convince themselves of ideas that are plainly false. In fact, there is no evidence whatsoever that subjective individuality is on the wane in the present-day world; if anything, the status and place of the individual in the postmodern era—in the arts and in public life in general—is increasingly just the reverse of what postmodernist philosophers claim.

Consider Heim’s claim that in a computer-driven age authorship will be diminished as a private event, so to speak—this on account of the connections between computers. My telephone is interconnected in principle with virtually every other telephone in the world, but I have not noticed with this condition any loss of my individuality or that of anyone else. Of course, computers can be connected with each other, but they need not be, and in any event, there is no reason to suppose that this fact need have bearing on the place of individuality. There is no evidence whatsoever that by using computers to write, contemporary authors are facing increased anonymity. The machine simply makes the expression of individual style that much easier. Here as elsewhere when postmodern theorists start to talk, reality is soon ignored in favour of uncritical acceptance of the fashionable clichés.

And what of the more general contention that the integrity, the unique individuality of the artist or literary author is eclipsed in the postmodern era? One has only to pick up any current art magazine to see the preposterousness of this claim. The interest of audiences in individual artists is as great as it ever was in the arts—and this concern is not limited to consumers of painting, where the cash value of the work may intensify attention to the identity of the artist. When one looks at the current state of music, of literature, and of dramatic arts, one sees no dimming of the interest of the audience in the artist’s identity, and no decline on the part of artists in trying to establish Jameson’s ‘unique, private style.’ Of course, as in all other historical times, most artists today do not possess a personal style of expression powerful enough to capture great public attention (lacking, as most do, what Tolstoy referred to as ‘individuality’), but that does not mean that the concept of individuality has suffered a postmodern decline or that there is anything currently unconventional about the

desirability of developing a uniquely personal character in one's art.

If there is change in the attitude toward individuality in the postmodern era, it will be seen to be at its base demographic rather than philosophical. While value continues to be placed on individual identity, the American art schools alone produce, according to Robert Hughes, approximately 35,000 graduates per year, and with similar rates elsewhere in the Western world, the global output of aspiring artists is staggering. To this we may add literary output (in the U.S., there are around 40,000 books published every year, and I was recently told by a Viking/ Penguin author that Penguin published about one new title every working day of the year—five per week). It is in such cold statistics we will find the basis for a lack of overwhelmingly predominant, individual geniuses in the arts today. If there is any element of truth in the postmodernist claims about individuality, it may be simply that in a world with so many working artists who have so much access to the whole history of art and contemporary developments outside of their own culture, there will be an inevitable pastiche, eclecticism, or pluralism, a lack of a clear, identifiable style or the sort we identify in the history of art—when, say, Beethoven or Wagner were dominant in European music. While there is today in the arts no less interest in individuality, there certainly is an overload, an excess of individuals competing for attention and willing to experiment with any and every historical and contemporary style and effect.

Although postmodern theorists are the main exponents of the decline of individual subjectivity in society and the arts, their ideas do rub off on artists: I have frequently heard from artists that the cult of individual genius is dead, so much outdated romantic mythology. While there might for some artists be a small self-serving convenience in the idea (if individual genius doesn't exist, no one can be faulted for not displaying it), there is nothing I can identify in their lives and behaviour that shows they really believe the importance of individuality is in decline. Many artists would give anything to achieve the celebrity and cult status of names like 'Picasso,' 'Warhol,' or even 'McCahon'.

That contemporary artists are as eager as ever for attention as unique individuals is demonstrated by that fact that they tend to treat their work as an expression of individual subjectivity in discussion and documentation. That the privileged position of the author/ artist is not entirely dead in the minds of artists is also indicated by the unceasing tendency of artists everywhere—including those who

style themselves 'postmodern'—angrily to dispute hostile critical interpretations of their work which 'fail to comprehend' their intentions, which 'miss the point' of their work. For many artists, complete freedom of interpretation is fine as a general philosophical theory applied to other people's work, but not to their own.

(And it isn't just the likes of artists and writers of creative fiction who fail to act on the theory that private authorship is a thing of the past, but also, if I may add a personal note, academic theorists themselves. For fifteen years I have been editing an academic journal, *Philosophy and Literature*, which publishes work written by scholars in many humanistic disciplines. In that time I have not noticed any lack of interest by champions of poststructural thought in identifying the authorship of their own articles—no suggestions of anonymous publication, the use of initials, no hint that so far as they are concerned private authorship is a thing of the past. I have never received an unsigned submission or an article submitted with a request for anonymous publication.)

Where in the advancing late-twentieth century, in lands where the Enlightenment has any kind of hold, do we find evidence to support Jameson's claim that 'we are witnessing the end of individualism as such'? Everywhere we look, and particularly in art and politics, the individual, the unique personal subjectivity, seen either as moral or creative agent, is more important than ever before. This state of affairs in my opinion is yet another achievement of postmodernism's own chosen antagonist, the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment separation of the distinct spheres, science, morality, and art—the basic division is already exemplified by Kant's three great *Critiques*—intimately involved the idea of progress. Progress in science has continued undiminished for three centuries and is today accelerating. The case is similar with Enlightenment notions of moral progress. When we consider human conduct, including politics, we see again that the Enlightenment ideals of respect for individual autonomy within a secular moral system are today more widely appreciated and practised than at any other time in human history. Ugly exceptions to this generalization immediately come to mind, but their very conspicuousness testifies to the fact that in contemporary culture the individual counts more than ever before. Within large, organised societies the Kingdom of Ends envisioned by Kant was, until the twentieth century, limited to a relatively small

circle of the human race; the great mass of humanity laboured without political rights to support the few. But the Kantian notions of freedom and intellectual independence are spreading throughout the world—indeed, almost as rapidly as Enlightenment ideals and practice of science.

We can no longer, for example, view Asia in crypto-racist fashion as comprising mere faceless hoards of humanity. Enlightenment ideals are taking hold there too, with Japan today not only a formidable technological power, but a liberal democracy in the postmodern mould. Its democracy is not our version, as its culture is not ours. But neither is it what Hegel could have called an Oriental despotism. Individuals everywhere in the world count more than they ever have in recorded history, and where European culture has established itself without much penetration of Enlightenment ideals (feudal areas of South America, for example, with their endemic fusion of Indian superstition and medieval Catholicism), it is not only technological backwardness that is a problem, but cultural brutality as well. The changes we are seeing over the postmodern world do not attest to the failure of the Enlightenment; rather, they are a direct expression of the increasing hold that Enlightenment ideals of individual autonomy, or freedom, has on global culture. These ideals, espoused by thinkers such as Kant and Mill, and embodied, whether fulfilled or not, in the American and French revolutions, have a hold on more of the human race than ever before in history. This is not philosophical pipe-dreaming, it is a world-demographic fact.

To observe these things is, however, something of an embarrassment. The mood of postmodernism, at least among intellectuals, is characterized as one of exhaustion, boredom, and narcissism. There is all of this in it, and perhaps a bit of laziness as well. But there is something else which can be identified as *fear*. Theorists who adopt a rhetoric in which reason itself is called 'terroristic' are clearly afraid of something, though it is hard to imagine how it can be reason. Again, rhetoric about the 'totalizing' aspects of science and technology should strike us as strange, in so far as science has proved itself one of the great liberating forces of human history. All of these postmodernist tendencies are, however, epitomized in what the aesthetician Dmitri Khanin has persuasively described as a horror at the wild horizon of history, an anxiety at the very idea that history is capable of progress. It is one thing to reject the notion that history is moving toward a preconceived target—many people would gladly join postmodern theory in giving up that

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conception. But it is quite another matter to reject the Enlightenment idea of progress altogether. Just because we, like every other historical generation, cannot know where history is headed, that does not entail the unreality of progress. Whither we go may be unknown, but we are clearly going some place.

Here perhaps lies postmodernism's greatest failure of nerve: as Khanin puts it, where the modernist posture was one of pathfinder and conqueror, the postmodernist prefers the passive life of a voyeur. The former posture may have been presumptuous, but the latter is senseless. Why this mood of fatigue has so much current appeal in the industrialised world is, I readily admit, mysterious to me. I can only affirm my view that the Enlightenment in its modernist and postmodernist manifestations is still a vital enterprise in science, politics, and even art. Though its completion is nowhere within our sights, it demands our active engagement.

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'*Grevillea Punicea*'.
Scraperboard Drawing

Douglas Albion