

Frank Kermode, "Are We Moderns or Post-Moderns? The Present State of the Arts"

The habit of talking about historical periods, whether in the arts or in general history, is an interesting one that we don't often enough consider. They are necessary, in a way, because history is such an untidy bundle that it is very useful to have formulae which reduce it to manageable shape. Perhaps it couldn't be handled otherwise, for the same reason that we have canons of literature and canons of paintings and so on, because there's just so much of it that if we try to handle it all we'll go mad.

But one of the real difficulties that arises is that in choosing periods and devoting study to them, inside and outside the academy, we tend to give them automatic valuations. We do this sometimes by adding the suffix -ism to the name of the period, so "modernism" is on the whole thought to be either a good or a bad version of something that would otherwise be neutral: namely, just modern.

The other difficulty, which I will be illustrating rather fully, is that once you've got a historical formula of any kind it tends to get away from you and comes to mean almost anything that anybody wants it to mean. Let me give you an example that came to my notice quite recently and which many of you will certainly be on terms with, because almost everybody in the room will have a idea of what is meant by the expression dissociation of sensibility. It was a term coined by the French critic Remy de Gourmont and applied to the psychology of the individual poet, but of course we all know it in the sense that it was given by T.S. Eliot in a famous essay in



lost all its original sense and become a sort of empty space in which you can push any kind of idea that you want, provided that you don't care in the least about the history of ideas.

There is no law against this kind of thing. You can't preserve original senses. You can't

which we were supposed to divide equally. At the end of 21/2 hours Professor Fiedler was still talking, and I had made a 6,000-mile journey for absolutely no purpose whatsoever.

However, it was a privilege to be present on this occasion. What Fiedler did -- and it actually became quite famous - - was to predict a great widening of the generation gap and the formation of an entirely new culture, or counter-

says, "exhausts itself in the search for novelty and must therefore eventually collapse, because its challenges and experiments produce ever- diminishing returns into anomie."

That's the general, large, gloomy, sociological diagnosis of post



collaborate with a repressive official culture that sets store by what used to be called truth and by the past. So there's not a lot of point in arguing about it. If you claim that they're ignorant, then they'll say, "Well, we know that. That's part of our charm, so to speak."

The American critic Edward Mendelson was shocked into writing a piece in which he looked at some art in a post-modernist exhibition in New York, which was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and which he thought to be a collection of trivial and disgusting objects. He said that for the National Endowment for the Humanities to give subventions to a tame avant-garde which is concerned only with gratuitous gestures, empty concepts, visions of anomie and helplessness without external cause, lumpen disgruntlement and historical amnesia can only be explained by the fact that it suits our masters very well to hand out some money to these people.

In other words, the post-modernists, in spite of them believing exactly the opposite, are themselves unwitting collaborators with a repressive system. They're the victims of what Marcuse used to call "repressive desublimation." Of course, it would be easy to bring in some large guns to support this view of the matter -- Terry Eagleton, associating post-modernism with commodity fetishism and reflecting the long-standing Marxist suspicion of nearly every kind of modernism, all of it being, for them, "bourgeois disintegration, decay, decadence and aimless anarchist revolt," to quote Eagleton. That's something that would have been said about this kind of art in the 1930s and later.

Marxists, of course, are very interested in history, and therefore to them, as to some of the other people that I've mentioned, it seems quite wrong to take this attitude to the past. But the enthusiastic post-modernists, of course, would simply regard complaints of this kind as

testimony to the obsolete bourgeois views of history and art which are taken by adherents of a largely forgotten 19th-century ideology.

There's a hostile group of comments on the idea of post- modernism. It seems to be another of those period descriptions that help you to take a view of the past suitable to whatever it is you feel you want to do. It ceases to be attached to any particular historical moment, by the way, because although you might think that post- modernism came after modernism, it's sometimes regarded as being coeval with modernism (so that Dada, for example, is post-modernist) and sometimes as even preceding modernism, on the view that you can't have a modernism until you've had a post-modernism.

It's possible now, for example, to describe the artist Marcel Duchamp as a post-modernist, although even 20 years ago he was regarded as a very important manifestation of a certain kind of modernism. He's said now to have made an all-out frontal attack on the esthetic principles of modernism. You'll remember the famous case of Robert Rauschenberg erasing a drawing by Willem De Kooning, which most of us would regard as perhaps some kind of a joke, perhaps not a very good joke: this is now described as "marking the nascent drive of a new spirit to cleanse itself from the painterly and critical constraints of modernism." So the ultimate in post- modernism in that view is actually to delete works of art completely.

As I suggested, any explanation of this use of the term would have to be historical and therefore cannot be given by the post- modernists themselves. A clue to the character that it would have, I think, can be found in a remarkable essay by Paul de Man, which he wrote in 1969 and in which he doesn't actually use the word post- modernism, but that's what he's talking about. The essay is called *Literary History And Literary Modernity*, and you find it in *Blindness and Insight*.



He says that "literature, which is inconceivable without a passion for modernity, also seems to impose from the inside a subtle resistance for this passion." He goes on to say, "The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails, and in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence." He further observes that "a partisan and deliberately pro-modern we can read 'post-modern' stance is much more easily taken by someone devoid of literary sensibility than by a genuine writer."

What de Man is talking about is a recurring historical situation where there's always a tension between what is modern and what belongs to what we call literature; and that tension between history and the value of "modern" is therefore constitutive of all literature, so that to suppose that the present situation is unique and uniquely interesting because it represents a tremendous intellectual crisis is simply, in de Man's view, wrong. It arises from a partisan desire to advertise only half the truth and to emphasize discontinuity and novelty, but not that folding-back that he mentioned.

Duchamp showed that if you take some ordinary object like a shovel or a urinal and place it in an esthetic space, whether physical or intellectual, which is conventionally appropriate to art, then the object acquires some of the privilege of art objects. That was an interesting discovery, but it's now taken to mean that anything is art, if you say it is. In the same way, John Cage greatly developed the idea of chance, which is present in all art, with his aleatory experiments in a quite interesting way. We are therefore now asked to believe that all art should



literature and the arts, whereas 'modern' legitimates itself with reference to something outside it."

We've had that idea before, which he calls a meta-discourse, some grand narrative outside it. "The post-modern is defined by an incredulity towards meta-narratives. The post-modern deals in particles, which are heterogenous elements in language games, not in the validating totality of some meta-language. Consequently, all knowledge is reduced to marketable bits." I know there are a lot of computer experts here because I've talked to some, but I have a feeling that there's an elementary confusion here between bits in terms of computers and bits in terms of fragments: they don't seem to be the same thing at all.

Anyway, knowledge is reduceable to marketable bits, and modernist art used its techniques to make visible something that was really outside it and beyond it; but post-modernist art is not concerned with that invisible and absent thing. It deconstructs modernism. It denies itself, says Lyotard, "the solace of form," and it has absolutely nothing to do with totalities. It must always be a collection of fragments. Lyotard says we should be glad to see the end of totalities. "We have paid a high enough price," he says, "for the nostalgia of the whole and of the one. Let us wage war on totality. The fragment is the symbol of our condition and of our authenticity."

I haven't time to explain that Lyotard's purpose is partly polemical. His little book is based partly in fact on Habermas's views. Habermas thinks of modernism as having a kind of traditional rationality which we should try and recover. It's an attack on that. Instead of doing that, and to give you some relief and perhaps even pleasure, I'll now digress and read to you what I take to be a good piece of prose about fragments. I'll read you a passage from a novel which is about fragments, really:

“Before reaching Knightsbridge, Mr. Verloc took a turn to the left out of the busy main thoroughfare, uproarious with the traffic of swaying omnibuses and trotting vans, in the almost silent, swift flow of hansoms. Under his hat, worn with a slight backward tilt, his hair had been carefully brushed into respectful sleekness; for his business was with an embassy. And Mr. Verloc, steady like a rock -- a soft kind of rock --

inscription placed above the ground- floor windows by whatever highly efficient authority is charged with the duty of keeping track of London's strayed houses.”

That passage is from Conrad, of course, from the novel *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907. Some say that human nature changed in 1905, some say that human nature changed in 1910; so this is a good sort of median date. The idea of the city as full of flashing discontinuities and irrational intrusions and bewildering fragments and absurd juxtapositions was far from new, even in 1907. The rediscovery of Bakhtin has lately given a lot of currency to the idea of the carnivalesque, and we should hardly hesitate to assign this bit of Conrad to that mode. Walter

As the last book of Proust transformed the memories scattered about the earlier books, Benjamin believed that "aura" owed its existence to capitalist oppression but also that it stood for an essential wholeness for the correspondences between parts or fragments that make up the

the half-witted boy Stevie are like the lines of longitude, in a way. They're crazy human fictions, but they're required for the commerce and the communications of a world centred on London. It doesn't mean that the totality of London or of the world is a beautiful or admirable totality: the heart of the world is dark. Whitehall is just a ditch running through the darkness, but it is a totality, the kind of totality that we understand. It's also full of fragments, and fragmentariness is part of its essence. It's made up of a million randomnesses, sometimes horrible, like the scattered parts of the boy Stevie when he is blown up, but sometimes just eerily facetious: the story of the collapsing old cab horse slowly crossing London, or of the beer cellar with its absurd murals and its mechanical piano and also its absurd revolutionaries, all these fat revolutionaries. (The book is full of obese people, "pregnant with death," as indeed Bakhtin would have said.)

These combinations of revolutionary politics and fatness, the encounter between Verloc and the policeman (Verloc, after all, is an agent provocateur, and yet he's in close association with the police), the collocation of the policeman with the lamp-post, of the cat which feels guilt as the human beings don't feel guilt: these combinations, as Bakhtin would say, of top and bottom, thin and fat, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom, are very characteristic of carnival thinking. Verloc's London is uproarious and quiet at the same time, trotting and flowing, wide and narrow. Mr. Verloc's fatness is that of a "soft rock": it's an oxymoron. Inorganic nature gives birth to a cat. Knockers gleam brightly, and windows gleam darkly. All these deliberate contrasts, rather like the baiting of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* or like Beelzebub in the mummings' plays, are an ancient tradition of carnival now assimilated to the genre of the novel. It's a development of that strain of facetiousness which has always been present in the English novel and which is very strong, of course, in Dickens, but which Conrad has somehow made into a genuine philosophical factor in the construction of his fiction.

I need say no more about these images of ruin, destruction, fragmentation, chaos, except to say that they belong to a book which is in its way a totality and, we would say, a beautiful whole. It could be blown to pieces. It's rather like a bomb in a way, this book: it is the professor's bomb (because it doesn't go off on the last page) that holds the plot together in the form of a book. There's a good example in that novel of Conrad's of the understanding on the part of an artist of the complementary quality of the antithetical ideas of wholeness and the fragment. A much finer, imaginative and intellectual grasp, we would say in our conventional way, than anything that you find in the Dada carnival only a decade or so after that book.

Dada is interested only in fragments. It is programmatically anarchic and fragmentary. It is meant to be the equivalent in art of the professor's bomb, a bomb which will go off in a street full of men. It disowns the past and in doing so disowns totality, disowns what Benjamin called "aura" (he hated Dada, of course) and disowns anything like a Proustian or Conradian recovery of it. It is all about dispersion, babble, unrelated happenings, shock, arcane tomfoolery, carnival, nothing else.

The point really is first that you can't do that: that is the program of Dada, not its achievement, because historically it owes a good deal to other movements such as Cubism and Futurism. It professes to have no interest in the past. And the other thing is that simply by claiming incessantly to be independent of the totality represented by history, you constantly suggest that there is some other dynamic pattern to which you do belong: interpenetrating aspects of reality, for example. So the fragment in the end apparently is difficult to achieve without suggesting some kind of wholeness. That's the contradiction that haunts the philosophy of the fragment that is so important to post- modernism.



Proust spoke in a letter of a kind of blending into a transparent unity in which all things, losing their first appearance as things, come together and arrange themselves in a sort of order, bathed in the same light, seen in terms of each other without a single word that resists this assimilation and stays outside the pattern. That's a good modernist view of the relationship of parts and the whole. I will now quote a very well known modern commentator on Proust (and, I might say, post-modern commentator), Gilles Deleuze, commenting uneasily on this question of totalization in Proust:

"We have given up seeing a unity which would unify the parts, a whole which would totalize the fragments, for it is the character and nature of the parts or fragments to exclude the logos both as logical unity or as organic totality. But there is, there must be, a unity which is the unity of this very multiplicity, a whole, which is the whole of just these fragments, a one and a whole which would function as effect -- effect of machines, instead of principles; a communication, which would not be posited as a principle but which would result from the operation of the machines and their detached parts, their non-communicating fragments."

You see how he's struggling to keep the idea of the fragmentary and yet to acknowledge that they will form some kind of new whole, perhaps in the way in which a motor car forms a whole because it's made up from bits of mechanical fragments. The point is simply that over the philosophy and propaganda of fragment there broods this shadow of totality, and therefore I want even at this late stage to introduce you to something really tough on this subject, the most abstract and philosophical modern meditation on fragments that I know of and certainly the most abstract and difficult that I wish to know of, which is in Maurice Blanchot's book *L'Écriture du désastre: The Writing of the Disaster*.

It's no doubt possible to think about fragments in an unfragmented way. You shall shortly see that it is, but Blanchot likes to meditate fragmentarily on such subjects as fragments. In the course of this very difficult work the fragments about fragments tend to come up at irregular

people, Friedrich Schlegel, the inventor of the abstruse fragment. This epigram expresses the whole antimony perfectly. This is what Schlegel says: "To have a system, that is what is fatal to the mind. Not to have a system, this too is fatal, whence the necessity to observe, while abandoning the two requirements at once." I don't think that any post-modernist has put it as well as that. There are more robust ways of tackling this business of the fragment. I'm harping on it because it is generally thought to be the absolute determining factor. In fact, since I wrote the notes for this lecture, I have come across an absolutely fire-new essay by the great public-relations post-modernist, Ihab Hassan, in which he says that the most important thing is fragmentation: "The post-modernist only disconnects; fragments are all he trusts." So that's why I'm going on about fragments, even before Ihab Hassan said it was all right to do so.

Roger Shattuck, who is a more robust commentator on fragments than Blanchot, distinguishes between three sorts of fragments, and I'll just mention what they are and then shut up about fragments, because at least you can tell what Shattuck is talking about. He says that the pebble in Sartre's *La Nausee* is an example of what he calls an "absolute" fragment. By definition it cannot belong to any larger order of things: it is a "nauseating fissure or vortex in the real through which the universe will leak out." It has a purely negative relationship to any kind of universe. I don't think that example really works. If you have such a pebble, and if the universe can leak out through it, it obviously has a relationship with the universe. Still, it's hard to imagine an absolute fragment, and that's a way of putting it.

The next kind of fragment is called the "implicate" fragment, and that's a fragment that has a positive relationship to a system. For example, the piece of pottery that an archeologist finds, which he knows can be related to a larger system, namely a pot or a whole era of pots, the single bone from which Baron Cuvier could deduce the form of an animal, or a piece of the true

cross are other examples. These fragments testify to an order, to a universe which is potentially full of correspondences, the sort of universe Blake imagined; the sort of universe that we imagine the Bible represents; the sort of universe that certain novels deliberately try to represent.

Then there's the third kind of fragment, which is neither absolute or implicate but both. It is sort of within the system and also without it, and the example that Shattuck would give for this kind of fragment is the objects you would see in a Cubist painting, in which the lines and planes both isolate and connect the everyday motifs that they manipulate.

Here again, we are at that stage of the philosophy of the fragment where we want to somehow retain the idea of fragmentariness without giving up the idea of totality. The truth of the matter probably is that you can. If you value wholeness, as the modernists - - the pre-post-modernists -- certainly did, you will either produce some sense of things as wholes or you will induce people to regard them as wholes, and the classic example of this is *The Waste Land*, which can be said and still is said by some people just to be a sequence of poems without any particularly close interrelations, but we have all been persuaded for two or three generations to see it as some kind of extremely radiant totality.

On the other hand you can say that of the Cantos of Ezra Pound (or you might not want to say it of the Cantos of Pound), which are often taken to be the first works of post-modernism. It

modern movement and now has written a very odd one indeed as second thoughts, in which he says, for example, that the fragments in Eliot's works are what he calls "off-cuts," and you're

say. It's true that we've become very conscious of the built-in obsolescence of our procedures. It is very extraordinary in the field of literature how many waves of new creeds have come in, even in my lifetime, from the old historicism to the new criticism and on from the new criticism to the phenomenology of structuralism and the post-structuralism, the new historicism and goodness



This address is substantially the last chapter of a book by Dr. Kermode, *History And Value*, to be published next spring by Oxford University Press.