THE WAKE OF IMAGINATION

Toward a postmodern culture

RICHARD KEARNEY

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There expand by now 1001 stories, all told, of the same…
But the world, mind, is, was, and will be writing its own
wrunes for ever, man, on all matters that fall under the ban of
our infrarational senses.

(James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*)

…I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the world again.

(Wallace Stevens—on imagination)

For Sarah, my daughter

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After Imagination?

'Imagination is the irrepressible revolutionist'   (Wallace Stevens)

Where do we go from here? How may we hope to ever escape the endless self-parodying of postmodernism which announces the 'end' of everything but itself? And if postmodernism subverts the very opposition between the imaginary and the real, to the point where each dissolves into an empty imitation of the other, can we still speak of imagination at all? Does imagination itself not threaten to disappear with the disappearance of man? Is there life, for the human imagination, after deconstruction? Has the very notion of a postmodern imagination become a contradiction in terms?

There is, I think, a danger that the postmodern obsession with the demise of imagination may consolidate the growing conviction that human culture as we have known it—that is, as a creative project in which human beings have an ethical, artistic and political role to play—is now reaching its end. As we have seen in our last two chapters, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the death of imagination also implies the death of a philosophy of *truth* (along with the corresponding notions of interpretation, meaning, reference, narrative, history and value). Such apocalyptic implications are strikingly illustrated in a recent deconstructionist document entitled *After Truth: A Post-Modern Manifesto,* a text which usefully summarizes many of the points made by the contemporary critiques of imagination we have been examining. The following is a selection of some key passages from this representative, if somewhat alarmist, document:

We must learn to live after truth… In front of us is an abyss. We cannot 'know' what lies there because it is 'knowledge' that we leave behind… We tell a tale of nihilism in two stages: relativism and reflexivity. When we consider the status of our theories and our truth, we are led to relativism. Relativism, in turn, turns back on itself and disappears into the vicious spiral of reflexivity. Nothing is certain, not even this… This is no ordinary time. The modern age opened with the destruction of God and religion. It is ending with the threatened destruction of all coherent thought. The age was held on course by stories of progress and emancipation… But these stories are now exhausted. There are no new stories to replace them… The paradigm for constructing paradigms is now collapsing… We are entering a period of 'abnormal' thought… The only political ideals left are those of the cynical and the paranoid. Such disillusion has lurked in the wings of European culture for two centuries. Now it can command centre stage. We are paralyzed by the performance and we cannot leave the theatre. All the exits are blocked.[1]

Trapped as we are in this labyrinth of endless play, the only remaining strategy, the authors suggest, is one of *active nihilism*. But can such a programme of lucid disruption and disillusionment really serve as a guideline for meaningful thought or action? Is it possible for the human imagination to remain *human* once truth has been completely erased from the scenario of existence?

It is no doubt salutary to debunk the more naive aspects of the humanist imagination: e.g. its belief in the inevitability of historical progress and its almost messianic claims for the idealist subject. It is no bad thing that we cast a suspecting glance at the proverbial humanist vision of man as a 'free and sovereign artificer' determining his own nature 'without constraint from any barrier'.[2] But we should be wary of slipping from such healthy scepticism to denying the creative subject any role whatsoever in the shaping of history. Deconstruction too has its limits and must acknowledge them. So that while accepting that the 'humanist imagination' does indeed require decentering–in so far as it tends to sustain the untenable claim that the autonomous individual is the sole master and solitary centre of

all meaning –we must insist on the possibility, in the wake of deconstruction, of restoring some notion of a properly *human* imagination. Given the specific characteristics of postmodern culture, which daily confront us and which cannot be wished away, such a revised version of imagination will differ of necessity from its humanist predecessors. We cannot eschew this task of revision. For the alternative is to submit to the corrosive rhetoric of an apocalyptic pessimism which not only encourages feelings of paralysis but points, in the longer term, to the possible demise of humanity itself.

1 Towards an ethical imagination

To resist such an alarming view of things is an ethical responsibility. If the deconstruction of imagination admits of no *epistemological* limits (in so far as it undermines every attempt to establish a decidable relationship between image and reality), it must recognize *ethical* limits. We reach a point in the endless spiral of undecidability where each one of us is obliged to make an ethical decision, to say: *here I stand*. (Or, at the level of collective responsibility, *here we stand*). Here and now, in the face of the postmodern logic of interminable deferment and infinite regress, of floating signifiers and vanishing signifieds, here and now I face an *other* who demands of me an ethical response. This call of the other to be heard, and to be respected in his/her otherness, is irreducible to the parodic play of empty imitations. It breaks through the horizontal surface of mirror-images and, outfacing the void, reintroduces a dimension of depth. The face of the other resists assimilation to the dehumanising processes of commodity fetishism. Contesting the cult of imitation without origin, it presents us with an image which does indeed relate to something: the ethical existence of the other as an *other*–the inalienable right to be recognized as a particular person whose very *otherness* refuses to be reduced to a mimicry of *sameness*. Beyond the mask there is a face. Beyond the anonymous system, however all-encompassing it may appear, there is always what

Emmanuel Levinas has termed, the resistant ethical relation of the 'face to face'.[3]

We do not *know* what the 'face' is. Its epistemological status remains undecidable; but our inability to grasp the other on our terms, i.e. in our cognitive projects, does not prevent us from acknowledging, ethically, that we are being addressed here and now by another—a person with concrete needs—in and through the image of the face. An other in need makes the ethical demand upon me—'where are you?' before I ask of the other the epistemological question—'who are you?' And this ethical priority entails a correlative priority of praxis over theory. We are responsible for the suffering of the other before we know his or her credentials. Ethics has primacy over epistemology and ontology. Or to put it less technically, the good comes before the question of truth and being. At the most basic level of pre-reflective lived experience, the ethical face discloses a relationship to an other before knowledge and beyond being.

This does not of course mean that our response to the face which appeals to us in and through the image is *indiscriminate*. Ethical action does not mean uncritical action. On the contrary, it demands constant discernment. For quite clearly it is one thing to respond to the face of a dictator (e.g. Hitler) and another to respond to the face of a slave (e.g. a holocaust victim). In the former we discern an image of ruthless power; in the latter an image of powerlessness. Only in the second case is the ethical exigency unconditional. And such basic acts of discernment occur at an ethical level, long before we attempt to explain these distinctions in epistemological deductions, foundations or systems. When a naked face cries 'where are you?', we do not ask for identity papers. We reply, first and foremost, 'here I am'.

Even the 'terrorist' knows this. Hijacking the mass-media and holding its viewers to ransom, the 'terrorist' has learnt to exploit the ethical dimension of the image. He knows that the most effective way of securing his demands is to hide his own face and allow the terrorized face of the hostage to be relayed across the world's TV screens. Or else the 'terrorist' turns round, removes the mask, becomes a martyr, goes on hunger-strike, opts to suffer

rather than do wrong, to endure violence rather than inflict it on others (as it may well have been inflicted on him). As Terence McSwiney, the Irish Republican hunger-striker remarked: 'The contest is not one of vengeance but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer.'

However controversial the progagandist use of the face may be, one thing is clear: it assumes the possibility of an ethical response to mass-media images. Even here the ethical power of the powerless manifests itself. Whatever our response to such images in practical or ideological terms, we are haunted by the destitute face of hostage or hunger-striker. But this primacy of the ethical response in no way dispenses us from the task of critical discrimination; it requires it. Without such critical discrimination our ethical response of empathy might be manipulated for unethical purposes. For the sake of others, we must always be discerning in our response to the other.

To respond to the ethical dimension of images does not mean turning one's back on the postmodern condition. There is no return ticket to the humanisms of yesterday—short of ignoring the present time in which we live. Nor would such a return be desirable. The humanist cult of autonomous subjectivity tended to exclude the other to the point where the self was ultimately defined as an act of pure negation (e.g. Sartre). A more fitting response to the postmodern dilemma is to radically reinterpret the role of imagination as a relationship between the self and the other. We may thus take stock of what deconstruction has to offer: a dual dismantling of imagination as i) a humanist cult of the transcendental self and ii) an onto-theological imitation of the imperialist other. Having thus demystified the excesses of the premodern and modern paradigms of imagination, we may be in a position to discover another kind of relation between self and other—one more human than humanism and more faithful to otherness than onto-theology.

What we are calling for is an ethical reinterpretation of imagination capable of responding to the challenge of postmodernism. Debunking the conventional models of imagination as either a sovereign master or a mimetic servant of

meaning, we find that our inherited notions of self and other have become undecidable. But this moment of deconstructive critique is only the first step towards an ethical imagination.[4] We must go further. The deconstructive critique must itself be subjected to critique out of ethical respect for the other. Only by thus submitting deconstruction to ethics can we prevent it degenerating into an apocalyptic nihilism of endless mirror-play. The deconstruction of self and other as fetishized 'origins' must ultimately serve the emergence of an ethical relation between self and other.

But where are we to find the golden thread which leads beyond the deconstructive labyrinth of parody towards such an ethical relation? We find it in the face which haunts imagination: the ethical demand to imagine *otherwise*. This demand is the irrepressible residue of even those images of the other transmitted through our global communications network. The ethical imagination is responsible because it is first a response to the other. It is an imagination able to respond *here I am,* even in the midst of the euphoric frissons of apocalyptic mirror play. But this notion of ethical responsibility is in no way to be taken as a moralizing censorship of images as 'evil'. It does not endorse a puritanical disdain for the new technological media. On the contrary, an ethical imagination alert to both the liberating and incarcerating potentials of postmodern culture, would be one determined to use all available technologies to pursue its concern for the other. Are there not impressive examples of this? As when television reports of the Vietnam war actually managed to 'conscientize' a sufficient part of American public opinion to end the war? Or when Bob Geldof and the other rock musicians in the Live Aid for Africa Concert in 1985 demonstrated how a broadcast, motivated by TV images of Ethiopian famine victims and transmitted worldwide through the satellite channels of the mass-communications system, could succeed in soliciting an ethical response from millions of people.

While it is true that media images often banalize and anae-sthetize our perceptions, they can also do the opposite—enlarge our imaginative horizons and extend our sympathies by putting us in contact with other people in other places. This expansive

potential of the media image allows, furthermore, for the possibility of a *democratization* of knowledge and culture. Our mass-communications culture is radically altering the inherited notions of literacy. But the challenge is to use the media image to supplement, rather than supplant, the civilization of book and canvas with another civilization of communication where, as Josef Beuys put it, everyone has the chance to become an artist. The particular task of the ethical imagination in such a civilization of postmodern communications is to ensure that a democracy of images avoids superficiality and remains dialogical, i.e. attentive to the demands of the other.[5]

If deconstruction has committed an error it is, above all, its tendency to eclipse the ethical dimension. It sometimes forgets that the images of all signifying systems of play and parody, of *difference* and dissemination, of aporia and apocalypse, remain ultimately answerable to the concrete ethical exigency of the *face to face relation*. Behind and beyond the image a face resides: the face of the other who will never let the imagination be. Perhaps this is what Levinas had in mind when he spoke of the ethical role played by the other in a postmodern world which can no longer see beyond its own paralysis,

not because everything is permitted, and by means of technology, possible, but because everything has become indifferent. The unknown is immediately rendered familiar and the new habitual. There is nothing new under the sun. The crisis spoken of in Ecclesiastes is not due to sin but to *ennui*. Everything becomes absorbed, engulfed and immured in the Same…. Everywhere one suspects and denounces the machi-nations of spectacle, the transcendence of empty rhetoric, play. Vanity of vanities: the echo of our own voices, taken as a response to what few entreaties remain to us; everywhere fallen back onto our own feet, as after the ecstasies of a drug. Except the other who, in all this *ennui,* one cannot abandon.[6]

Despite the somewhat alarmist tone of this passage, the basic point is clear: we cannot subscribe to apocalyptic emptiness because we cannot renege on our responsibility to the other. Or to put it more simply—we cannot let imagination succumb to the vicious circles of pastiche because the other simply will not allow

us. It is here in the everyday claim of the face to face relation that we discover the still small voice which bids us continue the search for an ethical imagination–even when it is being pronounced dead.

2 Towards a poetical imagination

A postmodern imagination responsive to the ethical dimension of things would be *critical*. But it would also be *poetical*. I use this term in the broad sense of 'inventive' making and creating carried by the word *poiesis*. If the ethical imagination is not to degenerate into censorious puritanism or nostalgic lamentation it must also give full expression to its *poetical* potential. The imagination, no matter how ethical, needs to play. Indeed one might even say that it needs to play *because* it is ethical–to ensure it is ethical in a liberating way, in a way which animates and enlarges our response to the other rather than cloistering us off in a dour moralism of resentment and recrimination.

From its earliest beginnings and throughout the various stages of its genealogical development, the western understanding of imagination has been marked by these two fundamental dimensions, the ethical and the poetical. The fortunes of each dimension, and of their mutual interrelationship, have shifted from one time to another. Whereas Platonic and Judeo-Christian teaching tended to give priority to the ethical, the modern philosophies of romanticism and existentialism almost invariably championed the poetical. Thus while Socrates banned the poet from his ideal theocentric republic, Shelley and Schiller, for example, hailed the poet as the unacknowledged legislator of mankind, declaring morality subordinate to art. But whatever the particular emphasis, the imagination in both its premodern and modern variations maintained some basic link between the claims *of ethos* and *poiesis*. This formative bond must be retained and explored in our postmodern culture.

Aware of a certain deconstructionist tendency to dismiss ethics as an anachronism (i.e. an ideological leftover of bourgeois humanism or of Western metaphysics generally), I have stressed

the urgency of retrieving an ethical perspective for the postmodern imagination. But it is important not to weigh down one side of the balance in our efforts to redress the other. The postmodern imagination is as much in need of *poiesis* as *of ethos*. It needs to be able to laugh with the other as well as to suffer. And here is perhaps the place to concede that the deconstructionist habit of foregrounding the idiom of 'play' has, despite its frequent abuses and excesses, something very valuable to offer. We have, during the course of our preceding analyses, had numerous occasions to observe that the metaphor of play has enjoyed a privileged status in postmodern philosophies. We have seen how this was especially the case with Derrida, Lyotard, Lacan and Barthes. There is also an abundance of references to the motif of 'play' in contemporary art, ranging from the use of the chessgame metaphor by Beckett (*Endgame*) and Canetti (*Auto da Fè*) to the significant role played by the player/clown figure in the works of Böll (*The Clown*), Grass (*The Tin Drum*), Mann (*Mephisto*), Fellini (*Ginger and Fred*), Wenders (*Paris, Texas*), Herzog (*The Ballad of Bruno*) and Godard (*Pierrot le Fou*). And in recent years, the exponents of both Artificial Intelligence Research and the New Physics–e.g. Hofstadter, Prigogine–have been repeatedly stressing the pre-eminence of play and dance models as expressive of the essentially indeterminable character of matter. Suffice it to remark here that the predominance of the play paradigm is not simply reducible to an intellectual Parisian fashion, but corresponds, in some respect, to a general rediscovery of the *poiesis* dimension of our world.

If we have been inclined, in preceding chapters, to interpret the postmodern paradigm of play in its negative apocalyptic aspects it is perhaps important to affirm at this point some of its more positive implications. The ex-centric characteristics of the play paradigm may be construed as tokens of the poetical power of imagination to transcend the limits of egocentric, and indeed anthropocentric, consciousness–thereby exploring different possibilities of existence. Such 'possibilities' may well be deemed impossible at the level of the established reality: a point made by Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* when he defined play as a cathartic power to make what is impossible at the empirical level

of existence possible at a symbolic level.[7] And it is assuredly this same capacity for imaginative play that Joyce celebrated in *Finnegans Wake* as the tendency of 'nighttime consciousness' to have 'two thinks at a time', to deploy *itself* freely and creatively 'between twosome twiminds'.

Here we are no doubt touching on the radical discovery of the unconscious which has so informed our contemporary culture. Psychoanalysis revealed the unconscious as a playground of images and symbols which defy the laws of formal logic. "The alternative "either-or" cannot be expressed in the process of dreaming', noted Freud, 'Both of the alternatives are usually inserted in the text of the dream as though they were equally valid.'[8] This logic of the imaginary is one of *both/and* rather than *either/or*. It is inclusive and, by extension, tolerant: it allows opposites to stand, irreconcilables to co-exist, refusing to deny the claim of one for the sake of its contrary, to sacrifice the strange on the altar of self-identity. This unconscious discourse of imagination is most immediately obvious as a play of words— *double-entente, jeu de mots,* slips of the tongue (*parapraxis*)—or indeed any instance of language laughing at its own contradictions, refusing to take itself too seriously, having the humility to go on playing even when its consciously intended meaning is humiliated, its will to power exposed, its ego wounded or deflated. Such unconscious discourse has been aptly termed by Lacanians as 'the discourse of the Other'. And for this reason: it occurs when the controlling censorious ego is off-guard, taken by surprise, overtaken from behind by that *otherness* which precedes the sense of self and subverts the priorities of selfpossession.

This language of the unconscious, expressed at the level of the imaginary and the symbolic, is the portal to poetry. Poetry is to be understood here in the extended sense of a play of *poiesis;* a creative letting go of the drive for possession, of the calculus of means and ends. It allows the rose—in the words of the mystic Silesius—to exist *without why*.[9] Poetics is the carnival of possibilities where everything is permitted, nothing censored. It is the willingness to imagine oneself in the other person's skin, to see things *as if* one were, momentarily at least, another, to

experience how the other half lives. Is this not what occurs in drama or fiction, for example, when we are transported into another person's mind and body existing in another time and place in another culture and society? Then we experience the world as if we were Oedipus, Hamlet, Anna Karenina. But not just the world of heroes and heroines. The poetical imagination equally empowers us to identify with the forgotten or discarded persons of history. It invites excluded middles back into the fold, opens the door to prodigal sons and daughters, and refuses the condescending intolerance of the elite towards the preterite, the saved towards the damned. The poetical imagination opposes the apartheid logic of black and white.

The space of the Other, safeguarded by the ethical imagination, by no means precludes the poetical imagination. On the contrary, it may be seen as its precondition. The Other which laughter brings into play, transgressing the security fences of self-centredness, is a catalyst for poetical imagining. Otherness is as essential to the life of *poiesis* as it is to that *of ethos*. In both cases it signals a call to abandon the priority of egological existence for the sake of alternative modes of experience hitherto repressed or simply unimagined. Indeed without the poetical openness to the pluri-dimensionality of meaning, the ethical imagination might well shrink back into a cheerless moralizing, an authoritarian and fearful censorship. And, likewise, a poetical imagination entirely lacking in ethical sensibility all too easily slides into an irresponsible *je me en foutisme:* an attitude where anything goes and everything is everything else because it is, in the final analysis, nothing at all. This is where the poetical readiness to tolerate the *undecidability* of play must be considered in relation to the ethical readiness to *decide* between different modes of response to the other (e.g. between those that transfigure and those that disfigure, those that care for the other in his/her otherness and those that do not).[10] And here, once again, we would stress that it is not a question of sacrificing the poetical to the ethical. It is rather a matter of ascertaining the mutually enhancing virtues of both aspects of imagination. Each is indispensable to the other.

Ethics and poetics are two different but complementary ways

in which imagination can open us to the otherness of the other. By deconstructing our pseudo-images of selfhood into a play of undecidable possibilities, the poetical imagination can bring us to the threshold of the other. It can shatter not only the chains of imposed reality, but also the *imagos* which enslave us in selfobsession, fixation and fear. So doing, it releases us into a play of desire for the other. In this way, the poetical imagination discloses the language of the unconscious as the desire of the other. And in its movement toward self-disposession and self-surpassing it may even offer what some might call a mystical or sublime intimation of alterity. But it cannot go further. Poetics cannot actually transcend the symbolic projects of my unconscious desire and *encounter* the other in his/her otherness. It is here that poetical imagination defers to its ethical counterpart. The face of the other, addressing me ethically here and now, cuts across the image-chain of desire and says 'come'. The image of the face is that which sets my desire for the other in motion in the first place. But it is the other disclosed through the image of the face which also bids me go *beyond* my desire and become responsible to and for the other. If a poetics of imagination is what keeps desire alive as an interminable play of possibility, it is an ethics of imagination which distinguishes between the desire which remains imprisoned in my subjective projects and the desire which responds to the otherness of the other's face (i.e. not the other that I envisage but the other that envisages me).

Finally, a poetical imagination attuned to the dilemmas of our postmodern condition, also needs to commit itself to the invention of an alternative *social* project. Such a project would seek to overcome both the humanist fallacy of wilful mastery (voluntarism) and the onto-theological fallacy of submissive obedience (quietism). What is more, it would directly confront the inflation of pseudo-images which paralyzes our contemporary social consciousness (consumerism). This kind of project might be engendered by a poetical imagination prepared to explore different possibilities of social existence. 'The possible's slow fuse', as Emily Dickinson wrote, 'is lit by the imagination.' Resisting the pervasive sense of social paralysis, the poetic imagination would nourish the conviction that things

can be changed. The first and most effective step in this direction is to begin to *imagine* that the world as it is could be *otherwise*.

Such possibilities of socio-political invention are of course correlative, if by no means identical, with new possibilities of artistic invention. For art, as an open-access laboratory of imaginative exploration, is one of the most powerful reminders that history is never completed. As such, art can remain the most persuasive harbinger of a *poetics of the possible*.[11] But in order to realize this promise, it must continue to believe that a poetic imagination can play a liberating role in postmodern culture. The importance of such a rediscovery is dramatically underlined by Ihab Hassan in the conclusion to his study of postmodernism entitled *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971). Postmodern art, he insists, must refuse to allow 'imagination to abandon its teleological sense: change is also dreams come true'. And such a refusal is itself inseparable from the hope that 'after self-parody, self-subversion and self-transcendence, after the pride and revulsion of anti-art will have gone their way, art may move toward a redeemed imagination'.[12] But such sentiments are no more than pious wishes unless we take full stock of the considerable obstacles which oppose the poetical task of imagination in our postmodern age. It is not enough to state *what might be done*. We also have to reckon with the practical factors which militate against us doing it.

3 Postmodernism and late capitalism

One of the most daunting obstacles is undoubtedly the economic one. The consumerization of the image does not spring from nowhere. It is symptomatic of an ideology of empty imitation intimately related to the dominant economic system of consumerism that has now achieved almost worldwide proportions.[13] Faced with such a global system, it may even seem futile to try to unmask its omnipresent effects; for to do so merely adds, some would argue, to the sense of its ineluctable power. The society of the pseudo-image becomes all the more imposing with our every effort to debunk it.[14] Even moral judgements about a

new culture of superficiality and depthlessness are deemed increasingly inappropriate: there is a common feeling that the contemporary consumer is no mere manipulated victim but actually conspires with the whole production system of commercialized images. Daniel Boorstin makes this point in his book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*:

The fantastic growth of advertising and public relations together with everybody's increasing reliance on dealers in pseudo-events and images cannot–contrary to highbrow clichés–accurately be described as a growing superficiality. Rather these things express a world where the image, more interesting than its original, has itself become the original…. Advertising men, industrial designers and packaging engineers are not deceivers of the public. They are simply acolytes of the image. And so are we all. They elaborate the image, not only because the image sells, but also because the image is what people want to buy…. We are sold it and we buy it and enjoy it for its image and how we fit into the image. The language of images, then, is not circumlocution at all. It is the only simple way of describing what dominates our experience.[15]

Whereas liberal social commentators such as Boorstin tend to speak of this global phenomenon in terms of a general *Americanization* of contemporary existence, other more ideologically oriented critics call it by the more specific name of 'late capitalism' (Jameson, Eagleton) or 'the ideology of advanced industrial society' (Marcuse, Touraine). But the introduction of an ideological dimension, often from a radical or neo-Marxist perspective, does not by any means lead to a more optimistic assessment of contemporary culture.

In such works as *One-Dimensional Man* or Eros *and Civilization* (particularly its 1966 Preface), Herbert Marcuse warns of the erosion of criticism in a society increasingly devoid of any genuine *opposition*. The emergence of a mass advertising culture entails the association of merchandise with pseudo-images of the libidinous unconscious. The power system governing the new affluent society no longer even needs to justify its domination, so effective is its 'social engineering' of imagination, its ability to deliver fetish goods which satisfy its consumers. 'Like the

unconscious, the destructive energy of which it so successfully represents', writes Marcuse, the commodity system is 'on this side of good and evil, and the principle of contradiction has no place in its logic'.[16] Advanced industrial society thus manages to contain all moves towards qualitative change. Its achievements appear so total as to stifle any critical rationale for transcending this society. Marcuse's overall verdict is pessimistic. He is even prompted to designate this system as insurmountable and totalitarian:

In this society, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations. It thus obliterates the opposition between the private and public existence, between individual and social needs. Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion. The totalitarian tendency of these controls seems to assert itself in still another sense–by spreading to the less developed and even to the pre-industrial areas of the world, and by creating similarities in the development of capitalism and communism.[17]

The technology of commodity images is not a neutral process. It is inseparably bound up with a political ideology which appears to have infiltrated the contemporary world experience to the point of no return. Its project of domination has become so extensive, indeed, that the possibilities of imagining, not to mention enacting, alternative projects of social existence seem entirely remote–perhaps even non-existent. Hence Marcuse's despair:

As the project unfolds, it shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture. In the medium of technology, culture, politics and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilize the society and contain technical progress within the framework of domination. Technological rationality has become political rationality.[18]

The fissures of despair, already evident in the writings of Boorstin and Marcuse in the sixties, have widened into a gaping abyss by

the time the cultural commentators of the seventies and eighties take their soundings. In his formidable essay on 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984), Frederic Jameson analyses some of the main signs of the apocalyptic nihilism identified as a hallmark of the postmodern crisis. 'The last few years', he writes,' have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future…have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the crisis of "Leninism", social democracy, or the welfare state etc., etc.): taken together all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism.'[19] The postmodern turn is frequently predicated upon a radical break or *coupure* with the terminal expressions of modern humanist culture– e.g. existentialism in philosophy, the great *auteurs* genre in cinema, abstract expressionism in painting, or the 'modernist' poetry of Yeats, Eliot, Pound and their post-war disciples. What replaces these modern movements from the sixties onwards is a counter-culture of self-parodying forms. To our own selection of six such postmodern forms (examined in our last chapter), we may now add Jameson's own shorthand list:

Andy Warhol and pop art, but also photorealism, and beyond it, the 'new expressionism': the moment, in music, of John Cage, but also of the synthesis of classical and popular styles found in composers like Phil Glass and Terry Riley, and also punk and new wave rock; in film, Godard, post-Godard and experimental cinema and video, but also a whole new type of commercial film; Burroughs, Pynchon, or Ishmael Reed, on the one hand, and the French *nouveau roman* and its succession on the other, along with alarming new kinds of literary criticism, based on some new aesthetic of textuality or *écrittire*.[20]

And architecture too, of course, bears witness to its own brand of *coupure:* the rise of a postmodern populism (as outlined for example in Robert Venturi's manifesto *Learning from Las Vegas*) which sets itself firmly against the high modernism of the International Style and its 'charismatic Masters', Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe.

Thus, at all levels, postmodernism effaces the dividing line between High Culture and Mass Culture. It playfully embraces

those very aspects of the Consumer Culture Industry which the critical ethos of modern humanism–from existentialism and the Frankfurt School to the American New Criticism–had repudiated. The one-dimensional wasteland of consumerist society so vehemently denounced by the Adornos, Marcuses or Bellows, provides postmodernism with its chosen materials of both form and content. 'The postmodernists', as Jameson explains, 'have been fascinated by this whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV serials and Readers Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of Gothic and Romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and science-fiction or fantasy novel.'[21]

The postmodern celebration of mass-media culture is, to a significant degree, a symptom of today's multi-national capitalism. It is not just one more style of fashion, but a 'cultural dominant' inextricably related to the socio-economic dominant of our time. Our society has now reached a point where aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally.[22] And one of the most serious consequences of such a merger is the new facility of the established commercial culture to recuperate or neutralize the 'oppositional' power of art. Thus while much of modernist art and literature prided itself on its capacity to negate the established view of things–to *épater la bourgeoisie*–one finds that even the most offensive aspects of postmodernist parody or anti-art are easily assimilated by the official culture. Hence, for instance, Warhol's attempted exposure of the consumerism of media culture and its manipulative images of desire and nostalgia, became so revered by the consumer culture itself that, in the words of one critic, 'his work is no more subversive than a catering service and as such fits the age of Reagan nicely'.[23] Subversion yielded to sedation.

This is as true of Warhol's billboard series–now celebrated icons of consumer pop culture–as it is of Beuys' so-called 'artless' collages, which have become, despite the artist's antiestablishment stance, prime cultural assets of the German government and coveted exhibits of major international banks. This convertibility-

into-cash syndrome has given rise to a new fetishism of cultural objects. Late capitalism, with its tax-exemption laws for art patronage and its promotion of the investment market of the gallery-dealer system, has effectively demolished the radical intent of the 'art for 5 kopeks' manifesto of the *avant-garde*. The price spiral in art trading, as Robert Hughes sardonically observed, has led to a disconcerting paradox:

Works of art, once meant to stand apart from the realm of bourgeois luxury and display their flinty resistance to capitalist values, (are) now among the most eagerly sought and highly paid for…. Even the conventions of art appreciation become, in the face of a spiralling market, a dead language, analogous to advertising copy and producing the same kind of knee-jerk reverence in a brutalized culture of unfulfillable desire.[24]

The deconstructionist would probably want to avoid such talk of a 'cultural dominant' and its rapport with the 'ideological dominant' of late capitalism. He would tend to see such a political interpretation as another example of the old humanist/historicism which attempts to reduce the play of cultural *differences* to the overall simplicity of some Master Narrative. Jean-François Lyotard appears to advance this kind of argument in his study, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Lyotard does not dispute the fact that there is an intimate link between the demands of consumer capitalism and the kitsch nature of postmodern culture. Indeed, he offers a graphic account of this very complicity:

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns….[25]

But rather than resort to the *antimodern* solution (as he puts it) of moral or political denunciation, Lyotard prefers the *postmodern* solution offered by a new 'aesthetic of the sublime'. Such an aesthetic resists the temptation to reconcile the multiplicity of language games which prevail in our culture; it refuses to totalize them into 'a real unity'. The price to be paid for such totalization, Lyotard claims, is terror. We are counselled, accordingly, to abandon the humanist nostalgia for a whole picture or global narrative—which would seek to explain the *real* truth of our times. The business of the postmodernist, urges Lyotard, 'is not to supply reality but to invent allusions…which cannot be presented'. The only solution is to embrace the deconstructionist vow: 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.'[26]

The postmodern sublime is thus hailed as a privileged experience of heterogeneity, a limitless allusiveness which defies the rules of hermeneutic interpretation or reflective judgement. The resulting experience of the sublime conveys an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that what we witness exceeds presentation and the pain that this excess exposes the aesthetic inadequacy of 'imagination and sensibility'.[27]

But what, we may ask, does it mean when such supposedly 'sublime' works as Rauschenberg's *Oracle* or César's *Compression II* present us with a heap of mechanical wreckage which replicates the reflections of anonymous cityscapes with 'hallucinatory splendour'? What are we to make of the inanimate vacuity expressed by Warhol's soup cans or by Doug Bond's polyester figures which convey the fetishization of the human body as pure surface? How are we to respond to the sublimity of postmodern parodies where the debris of urban squalor and alienation is exhibited as a glossy mirage without depth or density? Or, finally, to cite what is considered by some as the very emblem of postmodern art, Lucas Samara's *Mirrored Room:* what is the distinction between sublime irrepresentability and consumer narcissism in a room just large enough to enter, with mirrors on every surface reflecting the viewer into an indefinitely expanding series of fragmented copies?[28] Is the postmodern aesthetic of the sublime not itself, and perhaps in spite of itself, a symptom of the 'cultural dominant' of our present technological world system?

While Jameson does not advert to the celebration of the sublime in the recent writings of Lyotard and the deconstructionists, he

does attribute the term 'the hysterical sublime' to the general postmodern cult of excess and fragmentation. And he argues that the contemporary tendency to reduce the historical present to a mere collage of random forces (whose effectivity is both undecidable and unpresentable in terms of a global historical narrative), merely reinforces the ideology of 'depthlessness'. The cult of the hysterical sublime betrays the emergence of a 'new culture of the simulacrum…whose erosion of the link with history is itself a symptom of its complicity (intended or otherwise) with the new world space of late multinational Capital.'[29]

Unlike the romantic notions of the sublime outlined by Burke and Kant, the postmodern notion is not concerned with the experience of Nature or Transcendence (i.e. as powers incommensurable with human consciousness and inducing feelings in us of awe or terror). In the postmodern experience of the sublime, the unfathomable mysteries of Nature and God have been replaced by those of technology and mass communications. Now the sentiment of the sublime is one intimately linked with our sense of powerlessness before the faceless inhumanity of multinational Capital. Its very *unpresentability* is an expression of man's self-estrangement, his sense that history and society, or even art, have ceased to provide him with a meaningful model of understanding or action. The cult of the hysterical sublime thus feeds off the contemporary sense of helplessness—of being everywhere exposed to that enormous 'anti-natural power of dead human labour stored up in our machinery': an alienated power which turns back against us in unrecognizable shapes and paralyzes all projects of collective as well as individual praxis. Posturing as some mysterious sublimity, the technology of mass consumerism appears to exist timelessly in its own right. In short, one of the most sinister aspects of postmodernism has been, arguably, its failure to critically identify and analyse the intrinsic rapport between the dehumanizing power of this technology and the historical development of late capitalism.

Convinced of the necessity to remedy this postmodernist eclipse of historical reference, Jameson relates the various modern phases of cultural development to parallel stages in the socio-economic history of the West.[30] Following the model

sketched by Mandel in *Late Capitalism,* he correlates nineteenth-century realism with the stage of market capitalism, modernism with the stage of monopoly capitalism, and postmodernism with the contemporary stage of late multinational capitalism. Whereas certain modernist movements—e.g. Malevich's and Meyerhold's constructivism, Marinetti's futurism, Le Corbusier's utopianism or Leger's socialist expressionism—continued to affirm the positive potential of mechanized industry for a Promethean reconstruction of human society, this no longer seems a viable option for postmodernism. The postmodern phase of consumerist culture bears witness to an unlimited expansion of capital—aided by the proliferation of the media, advertising and computer industries—into hitherto uncommodified areas of experience, e.g. the worlds of domestic privacy and even, as Marcuse noted, the unconscious itself.

This last postmodern phase corresponds to the fact that consumer capital deploys machines not just of *production* but, more and more frequently, of *reproduction.* The electronic media of TV and mass communications function by reproducing form on form rather than producing form from matter; they transmit audio-visual forms through the electrical forms of invisible waves, waves which articulate nothing as such but carry flattened image surfaces within themselves. And this perhaps explains why postmodern works, which seek to represent such *unpresentable* modes of reproduction, frequently induce in us the feeling of the *technological sublime.* For in so far as postmodern works increasingly resort to a play of surface mimesis in order to speak *about* their own process of reproduction (i.e. film, video, TV, print or sound recordings), they end up in a kind of self-parody—a form of self-deconstruction whose undecidable paradoxes leave us breathless and, as it were, totally mystified. Moreover, this experience is, as we have noted, by no means confined to art museums and literary texts. It is also powerfully evidenced in the postmodern architectural spaces which are growing up around us, spaces where 'the distorting and fragmenting reflection of one enormous glass surface to the other can be taken as paradigmatic of the central role of process and reproduction in postmodernist culture'.[31] Everywhere we

look we find signs of the technological reproduction of the simulacrum.

4 Strategies of resistance

How then are we to combat this expansion of the technology of the simulacrum into both our inner and outer spaces? Where are we to find a place of critical distance where we may begin to imagine alternative projects of social existence capable of counteracting the paralysis which the 'technological sublime' induces in us? It is not sufficient to merely *know* that the technological colonization of images is a symptom of a globally computerized network of 'third stage' multinational capital. For a simple awareness of the ominous equation of culture and capital might just exacerbate the prevailing 'high tech paronoia'. The bald claim that contemporary existence is dominated in all its aspects by the omnivorous Logic of the Simulacrum may well serve to *consolidate* the power of late capitalism, rather than diminish it. An oppositional project of action is also needed. Knowledge must be converted into strategies of resistance.

So we are back with the double question: what is to be done and how is it to be done? The pessimistic conclusions of most postmodern commentators would incline one to the view that there is nothing to be done. Or that even if there were, there would be no way of doing it. A few thinkers have, however, come up with suggestions.

Marcuse for example suggests, in his later writing, that some refuge may be found if we can save art from anti-art and rediscover its 'aesthetic dimension' of formal distance and transcendence. In this way, art might serve as an antidote to the antihumanism of contemporary culture.[32] Marcuse declines, however, to indicate how this retrieval of a lost aesthetic dimension could be translated into a project of ethical or social practice.

A quite different kind of strategy is outlined by Umberto Eco in *Faith in Fakes* (1985). He calls for 'cultural guerilla warfare'. There is, Eco says, no point in trying to expose some ideological conspiracy *behind* the new mass-media culture. This media

network has become its own ideology. In other words, we can no longer speak of an identifiable message being transmitted through the airwaves. All we have is a series of random and conflicting meanings which cancel each other out, leaving us with nothing but a flux of surface images. Eco explains:

> Regardless of what is said through the means of mass communication, when the recipient is surrounded by a medley of communications which simultaneously reach him through different channels, the nature of the information communicated has little importance. What counts is the progressive and uniform bombardment of information in which the different contents flatten out and lose their difference.[33]

Unlike the means of production which governed industrial society, the means of communication governing 'post-industrial' society (to use Daniel Bell's term) are no longer controllable by the will of the individual or indeed of the collective. And in the face of such a faceless communications system we are all of us, 'from the director of the CBS chain to the President of the United States, passing by Martin Heidegger and the most humble peasant of the Nile Delta, the new proletariat'.[34]

But Eco staunchly refuses, even in the light of this admission, to succumb to the postmodern drift toward paralysis and paranoia. He insists that some mode of resistance must be found. The first move is to eliminate false solutions. We must rule out the possibility of trying to take control of the global media network, for if this were achievable—which is by no means certain—it would merely result in a 'totalitarian' control of public opinion from above. Nor does any hope lie in the strategy of using one form of the media to criticize another (i.e. newspapers against cinema or cinema against TV and so on); for such a mirror-play of inter-media critiques is condemned to an infinite regress. Nor does the answer lie in a back-to-nature movement which seeks to opt out of postmodern society altogether, returning to the uncontaminated pasturelands of transcendental meditation and macrobiotic vegetarianism. For even such optingout strategies are compelled to employ the means of technological communication if they are to communicate their message (e.g. pop music, 'alternative' magazines, radio or

television). Concluding therefore that there is no possibility of redirecting the mass communications system from *within,* and no possibility of finding a way *out,* Eco recommends what he sees as the only remaining solution: a cultural guerilla campaign.

Those who wish to launch an effective resistance must abandon all vain attempts to change the media at the point of *transmission.* They must concentrate instead on the opposite end of the system–the point of *reception.* The new resisters will become, in Eco's words, 'provos of Critical Reception' committed to a 'door to door guerilla campaign'–a campaign which encourages each human recipient of our mass media culture to develop his own critical capacities for interpreting and discriminating between codes of communication. Eco sketches this blueprint for the semiological guerrilla movement:

The universe of technological communication would become traversed by guerilla groups of communication who would reintroduce a critical dimension into passive reception. The threat posed by a situation in which the *medium is the message* would henceforth be converted, in the face of the media and the message, into a return to individual resistance. To the anonymous divinity of Technological Communication our answer could be: 'Not Thy, but *our* will be done'.[35]

Eco's proposal thus assumes the form of an anarchistic individualism: a strategem where each victim of the mass media conspiracy says *no* to the system, interpreting the transmitted multiplicity of images in whichever way he chooses. But if this is for Eco the 'only solution for free human beings', it is one with serious shortcomings. By affirming the right of each media recipient to give his own meaning to the images and sounds which surround him, are we not in fact leaving the basic system of media consumerism intact? Are we not simply transforming mindless consumerism into mindful consumerism? The individual may well be free to *interpret* commodity images as he wishes; but he is not free actually to *produce* alternative kinds of images. Anything goes at the level of reception, while the system of transmission continues unchallenged. And it is not certain, furthermore, that such a liberty of critical consumption could provide any helpful equivalent in political action. Unless, perhaps,

one wishes to advocate some form of armed guerilla resistance to the powers that be. (A prospect which Eco himself does not entertain.) But recent examples of such resistance movements in contemporary Western society–e.g. BaaderMeinhof, Action Directe or the Red Brigade–hardly inspire confidence. For quite apart from the carnage, such militant anarchist groups depend very largely on media coverage to communicate their oppositional views. Here again the message becomes one with the medium, a mass spectacle in its own right, another simulacrum in the Civilization of Images.

Yet another strategy of resistance to the contemporary paralysis of Western culture takes the form of a neo-marxist programme of dialectical materialism. Frederic Jameson, Louis Althusser and Terry Eagleton offer three recent versions of such a project. For reasons of economy, however, most of our remarks will be confined to the first of these. The neo-marxists are determined to combat the postmodern eclipse of critical opposition. This is reflected in Jameson's insistence, for example, that the *aesthetic* of postmodernism be related to an *historical* perspective where we can grasp its significance as the cultural dominant of late capitalism. But Jameson dismisses all ethical condemnations of postmodernism made in the name of a free human imagination. (A dismissal which would appear to apply as much to a humanist critique à la Marcuse as to an anarchist critique à la Eco.) What is to be deplored, he says, is not the abolition of the human subject as such, but the absence of a dialectical model able to situate this abolition in historical terms. The danger with postmodern culture in this regard is that its 'image addiction' serves to reduce historical reality to Visual images, stereotypes or texts': a reductionism which effectively precludes 'any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable catacylsm'.[36] Jameson is adamant that this reductionist tendency should be understood not *ethically* but *dialectically*–as an inevitable part of the unfolding logic of late capitalism. Any attempt to comprehend it in terms of 'moral or moralizing judgments' is deemed a 'category mistake',[37] a fall-back to old value systems now defunct. 'The

cultural critic and the moralist', writes Jameson, 'along with the rest of us, is now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories, that the luxury of the old fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable.'[38]

Thus dismissing ethics as a sort of humanist anachronism, Jameson invokes a post-humanist (Althusserian) model of Marxist materialism—one capable of thinking the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically as *both* catastrophe *and* progress. But, we may ask, does this move away from a critical individualism to a dialectical collectivism provide us with a satisfactory answer? Does its implicit assertion that postmodernism is an historical inevitability not also in fact *augment* our sense of helplessness before the anonymous laws of the consumer society? Surely the total denial of a semi-independent cultural space, where a critical and poetical imagination could contest the dehumanization of humanity and project alternative possibilities of existence, condemns us once again to inertia?

Jameson is not unaware of this dilemma. But such is his commitment to a global dialectic of historical evolution and mutation that he seems unable to come up with any viable answer. He feels compelled to deny the option of critical distance in a society of the simulacrum where, by his own admission, the respective domains of culture and capital have become so inflated as to become co-extensive. The ability to establish some kind of distinction between the imaginary and the real—which the idea of critical distance presupposes—no longer appears possible in a culture which dissolves the 'real' into pseudo-images. The postmodern conflation of imagination and reality seems to rule out the existence of some alternative *topos* outside of the 'massive Being of capital'. We seem to be deprived of any such Utopian breathing space from which to launch an effective critical assault. The potential for such distance is, says Jameson, annihilated by the omnipotent reign of postmodern superficiality: 'we are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volume to the point where our now post-modern bodies are…incapable of distanciation'.[39] In such a world, it would seem that nothing can avoid the fate of co-optation. Every effort to

contest the system or create alternatives is condemned to failure before it begins. Even the countercultural experiments of local resistance and guerilla warfare, Jameson concedes, 'are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it'.[40]

His back to the wall, Jameson decides to make a dialectical virtue of necessity. He concludes that it is the very demoralizing condition of postmodern culture which actually constitutes its moment of truth. Reverting implicitly to the idea of the postmodernist sublime (which he had earlier criticized), Jameson declares that the world system of multinational capitalism confronts us with an 'unrepresentable totality', one which calls for a new science of 'cognitive mapping'. Such a science will take the form of a renovated version of dialectical materialism, a version capable of grasping the forms of postmodern parody as accurate descriptions of the present historical predicament of late capitalism. Paradoxical as it may seem, says Jameson, such parodic forms may be read as 'peculiar new forms of realism (or at least of the mimesis of reality) *at the same time* that they can equally well be analysed as so many attempts to distract and divert us from that reality or to disguise its contradictions and resolve them in the guise of various formal mystifications'.[41] And with a final flourish of dialectical daring, Jameson even suggests that the reign of a multinational collective space in which everyone and everything is implicated may itself be construed as the dialectical pre-condition for the elaboration of a new type of 'internationalism'.

But where, we may reply, is one to find the critical basis for such a science? And how can one continue to talk of 'realism' and 'reality' at all, if one grants the postmodern abolition of the distinction between the imaginary and the real? As mentioned, Jameson sought to ground his appeal for a new science of cognitive mapping on the anti-humanist model outlined by Althusser. And this implies the acceptance of an absolute break between the ideological notion of the *imaginaire* and the Marxist-scientific notion of *knowledge*. Thus refusing any recourse to a hermeneutic model of the human imagination with an interpretative 'point of view',

Jameson appears to endorse the Althusserian view of a science capable of 'knowing' the totality of the world abstractly—even though this totality remains sublimely 'unrepresentable' for the human imagination as such. Not surprisingly, Jameson (like Althusser) remains vague about the precise contents of such theoretical knowledge. All we can be sure of is that such a science of mapping will start from the 'truth of postmodernism', i.e. the world space of multinational capital. But we cannot go further. We cannot say exactly what kind of positive socio-political form, if any, such a science will take: 'The political form of postmodernism, *if there is any,* will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping.'[42] To put it in plainer terms, the task of this new theory will be to invent a new theory!

It is hard to imagine any dialectical science, however postmodern, which could make sense of such tautologies. The postmodern logic of circular parody appears to have contaminated even the most masterly of postmodern commentators—Jameson himself. And perhaps he admits as much when he states, paradoxically, that the basic 'truth' of postmodernism to be expressed by the new science of mapping is that 'there are no true maps'.[43]

5 Beyond the labyrinth?

Are we to conclude then that every attempt to think through postmodernism is condemned to the postmodern disease of endless circularity? It is certainly unlikely that any amount of 'knowledge' about the falsehood of our experience is going to help us think or act in a more effective or liberating way. A form of pedagogy, however accurate and scientific, which does no more than explain the intricate mechanisms of our enslavement offers little consolation. It is not enough to provide a new cartography of our postmodern imprisonment. We also need to find ways within the labyrinth which lead *out* of it.

This is where we return to our appeal for an ethical-poetical imagination. Such an imagination could not be content with merely mapping the logic of postmodern culture. Taking full

heed of such descriptions, it would also strive to i) open us to the concrete needs of the other in the postmodern here and now, and ii) explore how we might effectively engage in the transformation of our social existence. The ethical-poetical imagination refuses to wait around for 'the dialectics of development to work themselves out'. And it repudiates any cognitive model which dismisses morality, and by extension human rights and needs, as an ideological leftover from bygone days.[44]

This does not mean that we blithely conjure away postmodernism; nor that we revert to the humanist model of an anthropocentric imagination (i.e. one which wilfully negates reality and conjures up anti-worlds out of its own solitary subjectivity). The ethical-poetical imagination we are advancing accepts that there is much to be learned from the postmodern deconstruction of the humanist subject and its pretentions to mastery. Such a deconstruction may indeed prove, if we acknowledge its limits, to be a healthy *dispossession* of the ego-centric subject. But only on condition that we understand such dispossession as a *via negativa,* a purgation which is not an end in itself but a point of departure for something else. After the disappearance of the selfsufficient imagination, another kind must now reappear—an imagination schooled in the postmodern truth that the self cannot be 'centred' on itself; an imagination fully aware that meaning does not originate within the narrow chambers of its own subjectivity but emerges as a response to the *other,* as radical interdependence.

Several important consequences flow from this. The *alienation* of man in our one-dimensional society need not be taken as an unequivocal signal of the end of humanity. (Though it might well mean this if we refuse the ethical option altogether and submit to the impersonalizing sway of late capitalism). The phenomenon of postmodern alienation may also be construed, ethically, as a sign that man cannot tolerate the Logic of the Simulacrum without ceasing to be human. Passing through the dark night of undecidability, we eventually decide for a practice of imagination capable of responding to the postmodern call of the other reaching towards us from the mediatized image. On the far side of the self-reflecting looking glass, beyond the play of masks and

mirrors, there are human beings who suffer and struggle, live and die, hope and despair. Even in those televisual images which transmit events from the furthest corners of our globe, we are being addressed, potentially at least, by living others: the Columbian girl buried up to her neck in the mud of avalanche, the emaciated skeleton of the Ethiopian famine victim, the gaze of hostage or hunger-striker, the running body of the Vietnamese infant covered in napalm, the tormented casualties of Afrikaner apartheid and all those oppressed faces of geo-political power games. Are not those of us who witness such images (as well as those who record and transmit them through the communications network) obliged to respond not just to surface reflections on a screen but to the call of human beings they communicate? Are we not bound to insist that moral conscience is much more than a symptom of some outdated humanist ideology?

A deconstructionist might object that there is no way of discriminating between images since the status of the image is undecidable—i.e. since one cannot determine a representational relationship between the image and its original. But epistemological undecidability does not necessitate ethical undecidability. Perhaps we have to renounce the traditional habit of establishing ethical judgements upon epistemological foundations. For even where epistemological distinctions no longer seem available, we are still compelled to make ethical distinctions. (This raises the question of an ethical hermeneutics touched on below.) Most of us would grant, for instance, and for ethical reasons, that there *is* a significant difference between the status of the following three images: 1) the face of the TV starlet in the commercial for a well known brand of soap; 2) the face of Marilyn Monroe in Warhol's serigraph; and 3) the face of the Vietnamese girl burnt by napalm on CBS news. While each of these images shares the same status as a technical reproduction of a mass communications system, they are different at an ethical level. The soap opera starlet speaks to us here not as another person but as a fetishized effigy of streamlined consumerist dreams. The Warhol image of Monroe, repeated fifty times, addresses us at yet another level—that of a multiple parody of the Hollywood *imago;* (but if this implies, arguably, an ethical

dimension of critique in its mimicry of the vacuity of consumer images, it does not yet relate to an *other* who makes a positive ethical demand upon us). The third image of the napalmed girl, by contrast, features a face which cuts through the chain of empty simulacra and asks—'where are you?'

Some people may be so desensitized by the mass media logic of pseudo-events and empty imitations that they do not respond to this appeal—either because their sensibility has become banalized to the point of being incapable of reacting at all; or else because the only reaction they are capable of is a sensational thrill at the shock quality of the image. But the image of the Vietnamese girl speaks to us even if we do not listen or respond. It demands moral outrage. It demands that we sit up and say, 'this must end'. In short, the ethical dimension of the demand is in no way diminished by the failure of many of us to respond ethically to this demand.

If interpreted ethically (rather than just epistemologically), the postmodern crisis and its attendant sense of impending catastrophe may be seen as a sort of protest against the inhumanity of our times. And perhaps the recent debunkings of the humanist claims for sovereign subjectivity may themselves be read as a veiled ethical demand for a new recognition of the irreducible alterity of the other. Viewed in this light, we would be in a position to say that after Virtue there is still the possibility of ethics, that after Man there is still the possibility of humanity—and more than a self-parodying post-man wandering about in an anonymous communications system devoid of real senders or addressees. But the ability to grasp such possibilities remains the task of an ethical-poetical imagination, an imagination radically de-centred in the sense of being opened to the demands of the other in the postmodern here and now.

The hermeneutic task

Such an imagination is not reducible to paradigms of *mimesis, production* or *parody*. It does, however, draw some basic truth from each of its historical configurations. It is prepared to learn from its own history, to listen to the lessons of its own stories.

From the *mimetic* paradigm of onto-theology it learns that imagination is always a response to the demands of an other existing beyond the self. From the *productive* paradigm of humanism it learns that it must never abdicate a personal responsibility for invention, decision and action. And from the *parodic* paradigm of its own postmodern age, it learns that we are living in a common Civilization of Images—a civilization which can bring each one of us into contact with each other even as it can threaten to obliterate the very 'realities' its images ostensibly 'depict'.

It is not because an image is *mimetic, productive* or *parodic* that it is good or bad. Its ethical status does not derive from its being sacramentalized by the icon maker, humanized by the romantic artist or technologized by the media producer. No image is either good or bad but interpretation makes it so. And we understand 'interpretation' here in the primary sense of a pre-reflective praxis, a way of reading the demand of the other by responding to it. We 'interpret' images in this respect in the same manner as an actor 'interprets' a role (i.e. as a mode of relating to others). The question of *theoretical* interpretation comes afterwards. It is at the secondary level of reflective interpretation of the primary interpretation of praxis that the epistemological problem of 'knowledge' arises. What is needed therefore is a critical hermeneutics capable of identifying the interests which motivate the interpretation of images in a given context. The aim of such a hermeneutic is to discriminate between a liberating and incarcerating use of images, between those that dis-close and those that close off our relation to the other, those that democratize culture and those that mystify it, those that communicate and those that manipulate.

This requires in turn that imagination undertakes a hermeneutic reading of its own genealogy: one which critically reassesses its own traditions, retells its own stories. Thus instead of conforming to the official censure of imagination in premodern thought, such a hermeneutic reading would brush this tradition against the grain, allowing repressed voices to speak out, neglected texts to get a hearing. So, for example, in tandem with the biblical condemnation of Adam's transgression,

it might cite the biblical affirmations of the 'good *yetser* or of other creative activities of play and dance—e.g. the *sophia* which plays like a child before the face of the Father on the eve of Creation (*Prov.* 8, 30); David and the House of Israel dancing before their Lord (Sam., 6:5, 21); or the popular doctrine of Christ as 'Lord of the Dance', one who prefers the playful openness of infants to the cunning calculations of Pharisees and Inquisitors. These Scriptural motifs of creative play are celebrated in the spiritual writings of such diverse figures as St Jerome, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor and certain mystical thinkers.[45] And here, as well as in certain passages in the Talmud and Kaballah, we find evidence of what might be described as a counter-current to the official on to-theological tradition: neglected movements which highlight the positive eschatological role of imagination as the property of *homo ludens* co-creating a Kingdom with a *deus ludens*.

In similar fashion, one might chose to read the Greek tradition of imagination in a different light. One could, for instance, contrast the punitive version of the Prometheus legend (as reported by Plato and other classical commentators) with the liberationist reading of the same legend, or also with the analogous legend of Hermes—the child god who first explored the possibility of creative art by transforming an empty shell into a musical instrument. As the legend goes, the boy Hermes emerged from his cave one day to find a discarded tortoise shell which he interpreted as a means of producing music and song, once equipped with strings and accompanied by rhymed verse. Whence Hermes' role as messenger of the gods and inventor of human signs and symbols (lending his name indeed to the term 'hermeneutics'—the science of interpreting signs). It could be argued accordingly that Hermes, the child of *poiesis* and play, is as important an ingredient of Greek mythology as Prometheus, the hero of crime and punishment. And it is perhaps useful to recall here Plato's observation in the *Protagoras* (322c) that Hermes was the one chosen by Zeus to supplement Prometheus' gifts to man with the art of justice (*dikē*) and respect for the other (*aidōs*). Finally, an alternative reading of the Greek tradition would also lay greater emphasis on those marginal and often

ignored passages in Plato and his followers which make mention of the visionary and ecstatic power of images.[46]

Rather than construing the premodern and modern interpretations of imagination as *either/or* alternatives, our postmodern hermeneutic would seek ways of integrating them–combining the ethical emphasis of the former with the poetical emphasis of the latter. A new alliance would be forged where the hidden or officially neglected dimensions of each paradigm (premodern and modern) might converge and breathe new life into an ostensibly dying imagination. Moreover, the openness to alterity–exacted by both the ethical and poetical needs of imagination–may well signify a timely aptitude to also look beyond the narratives of Western culture. Then we might genuinely begin to appreciate what 'other', non-Western cultures have to offer. For it is certain that the Third World cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin-America provide us with *different* stories of imagination, with rich narratives hitherto unexplored and unimagined by Western civilization. Here again we are reminded that the poetico-ethical imagination we are advancing is above all an empathic imagination: versatile, open-minded, prepared to dialogue with what is not itself, with its other, to welcome the difference (*dia-legein*), to say even to its sworn adversary–*mon semblable, mon frère*.

The historical task

The kind of imagination required to meet the challenge of postmodernism is, then, fundamentally *historical*. It is one capable of envisioning what things might be like *after* postmodernism. And also, of course, what things were like *before* it. As such, it pursues the critical task of exploding the fetish of a timeless present which paralyzes contemporary culture. It reminds us that humanity has a duty, if it wishes to survive its threatened ending, to remember the past and to project a future. We cannot even begin to *know* what the postmodern present is unless we are first prepared to *imagine* what it has been and what it may become.

To abandon the imaginative quest for historical *depth* would

be to surrender to the prevailing positivism which declares that things are the way they are and cannot be otherwise. And this would be tantamount to embracing the postmodern cult of 'euphoric surfaces' which dissolves the critical notions of authenticity, alienation and anxiety in a dazzling rain of 'discontinuous orgasmic instants'.[47] The gravest error of anti-historical postmodernism is to neglect the hermeneutic task of imaginative recollection and anticipation, to dismiss such a task as no more than a 'pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depth'.[48] This renunciation of historical interpretation and change must be resisted.

The historical imagination seeks to transfigure the postmodern present by refiguring lost narratives and prefiguring future ones.[49] Moreover it feels *obliged* to interpret historically in this way; for it is aware that the project of freedom can easily degenerate into empty utopianism unless guided in some manner by the retrieval of past struggles for liberation. Hence the necessity for what Paul Ricoeur has called a 'depth hermeneutic' of historical imagination. Such a hermeneutic would be committed to the reinterpretation of our cultural memory. It would thus be in a position to counter the apocalyptic aporias of postmodernism by introducing an 'oppositional' perspective nourished by the recollection of the struggles for a just society reaching right back to the very beginnings of Western history–to the Greek search for the good life or the biblical stories of exodus and emancipation from bondage. Back indeed, to the foundational myths of Prometheus and Adam.

An ethically responsible imagination does not, of course, invoke tradition as some kind of Master Narrative to be reimposed on the present. It resists the authoritarian idea of a Narrative of narratives which totalizes historical experience and peremptorily reduces its diversity to a single, all-embracing plot. But it does insist on the need to record the formative narratives of the past as invaluable archives of human suffering, hope and action. In a sense, one might even say that the ethical critique of postmodernism *presupposes* the 'critical distance' afforded by the remembrance of past narratives. 'Critique is also a tradition', as Ricoeur has it.[50]

Any project for future alternatives to the paralysis of the present needs to remain mindful of the narratives of the past. The ethical imagination demands such an 'anticipatory memory'—in order to reread history as a seed-bed of *prefigured* possibilities now erased from our contemporary consciousness. The concrete struggle to transfigure our one-dimensional society cannot dispense with the hermeneutic services of such an historically attuned imagination. 'The authentic Utopia', as Herbert Marcuse has stated, 'is grounded in recollection.' And this means that the *forgetfulness* of past sufferings and aspirations makes life more tolerable under a dehumanizing system. By contrast, the remembrance of things past may become a 'motive power in the struggle for changing the world': a reminder that the horizons of history are still open, that *other* modes of social and aesthetic experience are possible.[51] Viewed in this perspective, postmodernism may be reinterpreted as an opportunity to experiment with a radical pluralism which combines a wide variety of historical traditions and projects in a manner which answers the particular needs of each particular culture. A postmodern imagination, ethically and poetically attuned to the lost narratives of historical memory, may offer ways of breaking the stranglehold of the dominant modern ideology of progress—an ideology which has tended to reduce the multiplicity of historical experiences to a single totalizing doctrine.[52]

The narrative task

But if the narrative imagination recalls the forgotten 'others' of history, it equally calls for a reinterpretation of the notion of the 'self. Postmodern philosophy, as we have seen, rejects the model of the humanist subject. Structuralism denounced it as an ideological illusion or surface play of unconscious signifiers. And some post-structuralists went further still in declaring the human self to be a 'desiring machine' which exults in schizophrenic disorder. One thus finds the self being portrayed as, for example, a 'dispersed decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral

function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion'.[53]

An ethical imagination responsive to the demands of the other, refuses however to accept that the self is nothing but a heap of reified technique or commodified desire. The ethical imagination bids man to tell and retell the story of himself. And it does so not to shore up the illusion of self-sufficiency, but out of fidelity to the other. It is above all the *other* who demands that I remain responsible. For if there is no longer a self to abide by its promises, there is no ethical relation possible. Ethics, in other words, presupposes the existence of a certain *narrative identity*: a self which remembers its commitments to the other (both in its personal and collective history) and recalls that these commitments have *not yet* been fulfilled. This narrative self is not some permanently subsisting substance (*idem*). It is to be understood rather as a perpetually self-rectifying identity (*ipse*) which knows that its story, like that of the imagination which narrates it, is never complete. It is because it is inseparable from the activity of a poetical-critical imagination which sustains it, that the self's commitment to the other—the other who addresses me at each moment and asks me *who I am* and *where I stand*—is never exhausted.

The identity of the narrative self is, consequently, one that cannot be taken for granted. It must be ceaselessly reinterpreted by imagination. To reply to the question 'who?', is to tell one's story to the other. And the story is always one which narrates a relation to the other, a tale of creation and obligation that never comes to an end. This is why the model of narrative identity, in contrast to that of egological identity (permanent *sameness*), includes change and alteration within selfhood. Such a model constitutes the self as the reader and the writer of his own life. But it also casts each one of us as a narrator who never ceases to revise, reinterpret and clarify his own story—by relating himself in turn to the cathartic effects of those larger narratives, both historical and fictional, transmitted by our cultural memory. The notion of personal identity is thus opened up by the narrative imagination to include that of a *communal* identity. The self and the collective mutually constitute each other's identity by

receiving each other's stories into their respective histories. Selfidentity, in whatever sense, is always a 'tissue of narrated stories'.[54]

We would say, finally, that narrative identity is a *task* of imagination, not a *fait accompli*. And here the poetical and ethical aspects of this narrative task point to a political project. In telling its story to the other the imaginative self comes to recognize more clearly its *unlimited* responsibility to others. This responsibility extends beyond my personal history (and also beyond the secluded intimacy of an I–Thou dialogue) to include a collective history. But it does not derive from some abstract duty, some pious 'ought'. It is a responsibility solicited in each hour of the historical present by others who address and obsess me, reminding me that the self is never sufficient unto itself. Narrating itself to the other, the imagination realizes that it is forever in crisis; and that this very crisis of conscience is a revelatory symptom of its inability to reduce others to the representational form of any given image–be it *mimetic, productive* or *parodic*. This is why we feel bound to continue the search for a postmodern imagination, one willing to accept that whatever particular narrative it chooses or whatever image it constructs, there is always some dimension of otherness which transcends it. And, needless to say, this narrative quest for something always other entails radical possibilities of political praxis.[55]

The narrative relation of self to other–which imagination recollects from the historical past and projects into the historical future–is a story which cannot be brought to an end. It is a story irreducible to both the fiats of transcendental subjectivity and the globalizing Logic of the Simulacrum. We must go on telling it if we are to make the postmodern imagination *human* again. To abandon this story would be to condemn ourselves to the circles of empty imitation which predominate today, to renounce all hope of imagining alternative forms of cultural and political practice. It is here and now, in the very darkness of the postmodern labyrinth that we must begin again to listen to the story of imagination. For it is perhaps in its tale of the self relating to the other, that we will discover a golden thread which leads beyond the labyrinth.

Postlude

After imagination, is there not still imagination? Are there not signs of life to be found even in the postmodern images of a dying culture–Travis' enigmatic smile at the end of *Paris, Texas* as he drives through the maze of billboarded, neon-lit freeways; Ben Vautier's anti-art mimicries; Warhol's pop reproductions of media stars; Beckett's moribund figures in *Imagination Dead Imagine,* whose breathing almost imperceptibly mists the glass? Disinherited of our certainties, deprived of any fixed point of view, are we not being challenged by such images to open ourselves to *other* ways of imagining? Is our bafflement at the dismantling of any predictable relationship between image and reality not itself an occasion to de-centre our self-possessed knowledge in response to an otherness which surpasses us: a sort of *kenosis* whereby our subjective security empties itself out, dispossesses itself for the sake of something else? Might we not surmise here an ethical summons lodged at the very heart of our postmodern culture? And also a poetic summons: to see that imagination continues to playfully create and recreate even at the moment it is announcing its own disappearance?

Even when it can't go on, the postmodern imagination goes on. A child making traces at the edge of the sea. Imagining otherwise. Imagination's wake. Dying? Awaking?

commentary 'On Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in *Eidos,* vol. IV, no. I, 1985, pp. 103–19.

70 For further discussion on postmodernism and architecture see K. Frampton, D.Porphyrios and J.-F.Lyotard in *ICA Documents,* 4, 1986.

Conclusion: after imagination?

1 *After Truth: A Post-modern Manifesto,* published by the 2nd of January Group, Inventions Press, London, 1986.

2 The phrase is from the Renaissance humanist, Pico della Mirandola, quoted by K.Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism,* p. 14.

3 E.Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* Duquesne U.P., Pittsburgh, 1969. See our development of this theme in 'Ethics and the Postmodern Imagination' in *Thought,* Fordham University, New York, 1987. The Czech philosopher Jan Patocka also analyses the role of ethics in contemporary mass-media society in 'Les Fondements Spirituels de la vie Contemporaine' in *Etudes Phénoménologiques,* no. 1, 1985, pp. 72, 78–80. We understand the term 'ethics' here in the broad sense of a personal and social responsibility to others. This should not be confused with the more limited sense of 'morality' as a dogmatic system of abstract 'oughts'. It is also important to stress that in the ethical phrase 'here I stand', a 'we' is always implicated in the 'I' and a 'there' in the 'here'. We are not advocating an individualist moralism of sentimental relations: what Levinas rightly dismisses as an *égoisme à deux.* The ethical statement 'I stand' surpasses the epistemological statement 'I think', in that it *includes* the 'other' as its indispensable precondition (whereas the *cogito* does not). In contrast to the *cogito* which excludes all otherness in its primary gesture of self-foundation, the 'I stand' is to be understood in the sense of 'I stand up for and in for the other'–i.e. as an ethical obligation to safeguard the other, even to the point of substituting oneself for the other. Far from affirming the priority of the self over the other, the 'here I stand' actually deposes the pretence of selfsufficiency– acknowledging that my ethical identity as an 'I' derives from the call of the other ('where are you?'). The I does not precede the other–founding itself first and then going on to found the other (as the modern epistemology of the *cogito* and transcendental ego argued). In this light, one might argue that when the deconstructionist asks 'who is this I?' it may well–perhaps unbenownst to itself–serve the ethical purpose of de-centering the

epistemological subject as self-position, thereby opening it to an awareness of its debt and duty to the other-than-self. Here we might recall the original sense of *ethos* as *dis-position.* The face-to-face is a relation of disposition rather than of position. It is not a matter of two selfconstituted subjects entering into a rapport of mutual presence. On the contrary, the face-to-face entails an ethical proximity of self to other which undercuts the comfortable notion of a co-presence. It transcends the exclusiveness of I–Thou intimacies. This ethical relation also diffuses our natural tendency to acquire a *total knowledge* (i.e. as expressed in the traditional categories of presence: *logos, adaequatio, actus purus,* correspondence, representation, position, appropriation, etc.). The face-to-face can never be a complete or closed relation. The face of the other is always irreducible to my relation to it, or my representation of it. It dis-possesses me, decentres me, and by extension, dis-poses me to be an ethical subject-in-process (in Kristeva's sense)–a self always imbricated in a narrative temporality wherein its difference from itself, and the difference between itself and the other as face, is essential. We shall be returning to this point in our discussion of the 'narrative self in the final section of this conclusion. Suffice it to say here that the face is never seen as such–that is, as a presence to be represented and thus appropriated by me as a knowing-positing-founding subject. The alterity of the face remains irrreducible to both the presencerepresentation dialectic and the subject-object dichotomy of modern epistemology. As such, it institutes an historical ethical imagining wherein the 'I' is always obliged to project beyond its *imagos* of selfidentity in the wake of an other who perpetually transcends such *imagos.* It is clear, finally, that this notion of the ethical subject as a dis-position before the face of the other is radically social and political in its implications (see note 55 of this conclusion). For a defence of deconstruction against charges of being anti-ethical, see R.Bernasconi 'Deconstruction and the possibility of Ethics' in *Deconstruction and Philosophy,* ed. J.Sallis, Chicago University Press, 1987, pp. 122–39.

4 This point is made by E.Levinas, for example, in 'Un Dieu Homme?', *Levinas: Exercises de la Patience,* no. 1, Obsidiane, 1980, p. 74; 'the contemporary anti-humanism which denies the primacy of being enjoyed by the person taken as an end in itself has perhaps opened a space for the (ethical) notion of subjectivity as substitution …the infinite patience and passion of the self whereby being empties itself of its *own* being'. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond*

Essence, Nijhoff, The Hague, 1981, Levinas makes a similar point when he states that 'humanism must be denounced only when it is not sufficiently human'. It should also be pointed out that many of the 'anti-humanist' thinkers have acknowledged an ethical motivation to their deconstruction or dismantling of the humanist subject, e.g. Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard and Nancy. Although their critique of humanism has frequently been interpreted as a renunciation of ethical concern, most of these thinkers have gone to considerable pains to argue that this is not the case. The question remains however as to how a post-humanist ethics is to be justified, if at all. My suggestion in this conclusion is that the work of E.Levinas offers one of the most cogent efforts to establish the indispensability of ethics in a post-humanist culture.

5 The idea of a dialogical imagination has been suggestively explored by the modern Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin champions the prospect of a popular-democratic culture typified by what he calls 'carnivalesque freedom'. 'Carnival is not seen by the people', he writes. 'They *live* in it and *everyone* lives in it, because by its definition it involves all of the people.' To participate in the carnival of democratized culture is to realize that our self-identity is not a given certainty but is always beholden to others. 'Dialogism' is for Bakhtin an ethical aspect of communication where the popular subverts the ruling ideology whose end is exploitation and control. The clown and fools of the carnivalesque imagination use the popular-democratic idioms of laughter and deflation to demystify the rigid status quo. They exult in the multi-faceted nature of discourse—*heteroglossia*—flaunting the uniformity of standardized language. Bakhtin's celebration of the democratizing potential of genuine popular culture is also evident in his claim that the life of imagination is to be found 'outside the artist's study…in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages'. The dialogical imagination is an agent of the poetics of the possible: it nourishes a culture of popular laughter which subjects the dominant ideology to a 'comic operation of dismemberment' and 'delivers the object into the fearless hands of the investigative experiment…' See Bakhtin's *The Dialogical Imagination* (Austin, 1981) and Ken Hirschkop, 'Bakhtin, Discourse and Democracy' in *New Left Review,* no. 160, 1986,

6 E.Levinas, 'Idéologie et Idéalisme' in *De Dieu qui Vient à l'Idée,* Vrin, Paris, 1982, p. 31.

7 C.Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques,* Atheneum, New York, 1971. On this theme see our note 42 to chapter 7.

8 S.Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Penguin, New York, 1976.

9 Heidegger makes much of this example in his analysis of poetry (e.g. *Der Satz vom Grund,* 1957). One might also mention here Keats' notion of 'negative capability' which he defined as an imaginative-poetic readiness to 'experience mystery, uncertainty and doubt without the irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

10 See our hermeneutic analysis of the distinction between ethical transfiguration and disfiguration in *Poétique du Possible,* especially chapters 7–10.

11 Ibid., pp. 174–99.

12 I.Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus,* p. 258. See also R. Hughes' defence of certain aspects of the modernist heritage against the excesses of postmodernism in *The Shock of the New,* p. 409: 'The signs of that constriction are everywhere today—in the small ambitions of art, in its lack of any effort towards spirituality, in its sense of career rather than vocation, in its frequently bland occupation with semantics at the expense of the deeper passions of the creative self. Perhaps the great energies of modernism are still latent in our culture, like Ulysses' bow in the house of Penelope; but nobody seems able to string and draw it. Yet the work still speaks to us, in all its voices, and will continue to do so. Art discovers its true social use, not on the ideological plane, but by opening the passage from feeling to meaning—not for everyone, since that would be impossible, but for those who want to try. This impulse seems to be immortal. Certainly it has existed from the origins of human society, and despite the appalling commercialization of the art world, its flight into corporate ethics and strategies, and its gradual evacuation of spirit, it exists today.'

13 See, for example, D.Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America,* and A.Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society,* Random House, New York, 1971, especially the chapter entitled 'Tomorrow's Social History; Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society'.

14 Boorstin, *The Image,* p. 194.

15 Ibid., p. 206.

16 H.Marcuse, 1966 Preface to *Eros and Civilization,* Beacon Press, Boston, 1966.

17 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society,* Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, p. XVI.

18 Ibid., p. XVI

19 F.Jameson, 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', p. 53.
20 Ibid., p. 54.
21 Ibid., p. 55.
22 Ibid., p. 56.
23 Robert Hughes, 'Andy Warhol: 1928–1987, in *Time Magazine,* March 9, 1987, p. 90.
24 R.Hughes, *The Shock of the New,* p. 384. Hughes elaborates on some of the reasons for this commercialization of art in our contemporary consumerist culture, pp. 390–2: 'The American tax laws, in their benevolence towards the visual arts, have created the largest and most powerful institutional-framework that living art has ever enjoyed within its own culture…and so destroyed the *outsider* status of what used to be the vanguard…. Art would conquer the provincialism of America, smooth its frontier brutality, refine its shellback materialism, and take the raw edges off new capital. The idea of social improvement through art struck a responsive chord in the American rich, who proceeded to pour millions upon millions of dollars into the construction and endowment of museums and the getting of collections that would eventually fill them…. In so doing they set in motion a formidable system of cultural patronage…. Until then, the words "museum" and "modern art" had seemed, to most people, incompatible. "Museums are just a lot of lies". Picasso had said. "Work for life", Rodchenko exhorted his Constructivist comrades, "and not for palaces, temples, cemeteries and museums!"…. From now on, modernism would tend to seem noble and exemplary rather than tense and problematic. The *avantgarde* no longer needed to fight the Academy; it was the Academy.'
25 J-F.Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* Manchester U.P., 1979, p. 76.
26 Ibid., p. 82.
27 Ibid., p. 81. See also Lyotard, 'Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime' in *Artform,* no. 20, 1982, pp. 64–9. One might also note here the interest in the 'sublime' shown by other deconstructionist thinkers, e.g. Derrida in 'Economimesis', and J-L.Nancy, 'L'Affront Sublime' in *Poétique* nos. 30–34, 1984–85. On Foucault's interest in the sublime see J.Rajchman, *Michel Foucault,* pp. 17–22.
28 R.Hughes, *The Shock of the New,* p. 398.
29 F.Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 58. For a more positive interpretation of the social and economic implications of postmodern

culture see *Postmodernism and Politics,* ed. J.Arac, Manchester, U.P., 1956.
30 Ibid., p. 77.
31 Ibid., p. 79.
32 Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension,* Beacon Press, Boston, 1978.
33 U.Eco, 'Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare' in *Faith in Fakes,* p. 136.
34 Ibid., p. 141.
35 Ibid., p. 144.
36 Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 85.
37 Ibid., p. 85.
38 Ibid., p. 86.
39 Ibid., p. 87.
40 Ibid., p. 87. See also R.Hughes, *The Shock of the New,* p. 394: 'The work of art no longer had a silence in which its resources could develop. It had to bear the stress of immediate consumption'.
41 Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 88.
42 Ibid., p. 92.
43 Ibid., p. 90.
44 See D.Latimer's critique of Jameson's position in 'Jameson and Postmodernism' in *New Left Review,* no. 148, 1984, p. 127. Michel Foucault explicitly acknowledged this problem in his later writings and began to explore the possibility of a new 'ethic of subjectivity" in our postmodern age. See J.Rajchman, *Michel Foucault,* pp. 36–8. Lacan was also preoccupied with the role of 'ethics' in psychoanalysis in *Le Séminaire VII, L'Ethique de la Psychanalyse* ed. du Seuil, Paris, 1986.
45 See our analysis of these commentaries in *Poétique du Possible,* pp. 267–72.
46 See in particular the Platonic references to ecstatic images and holy madness in *The Timaeus* and *The Phaedrus,* eexamined in the third section of our second chapter. Perhaps it is with a similar scruple in mind that Umberto Eco sets out in *The Name of the Rose* to rediscover the spirit of the hypothetically lost book of Aristotle's *Poetics,* that is, the book of laughter, the *comedy* without which the *tragedy* remains incomplete. The poetical imagination is mindful that the emblem of drama has two faces, gaiety and anguish.
47 D.Latimer, 'Jameson and Postmodernism', p. 121.
48 T.Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism' in *New Left Review,* no. 152, 1985, p. 70.
49 See our outline of a philosophy of figuration in *Poétique du Possible.*

50 P.Ricoeur, 'Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology' in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* Cambridge U.P., 1981, p. 100. Ricoeur adds: 'I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection. Perhaps there would be no more interest in emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and Resurrection were effaced from the memory of mankind….'

51 Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension,* p. 73. The phrase from Horkheimer and Adorno is taken from their *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Herder, New York, 1972, p. 230.

52 Charles Jencks makes this point in relation to postmodern architecture in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture,* Academy Editions, London, 1977, p. 7.

53 See Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', p. 71. He would seem to have Deleuze, Guattari and Barthes especially in mind. Eagleton outlines the following critique of the postmodernist rejection of an ethical or political subject, p. 70:

> For postmodernism there cannot be a rational discourse of ethical or political value, for values are not the kind of thing which can be in the world in the first place…. The dispersed, schizoid subject is nothing to be alarmed about after all: nothing could be more normative in late-capitalist experience…. There is really nothing left to struggle against, other than those inherited illusions (law, ethics, class struggle, the oedipus complex) which prevent us from seeing things as they are…. Postmodernism commits the apocalyptic error of believing that the discrediting of a particular representational epistemology is the death of truth itself, just as it sometimes mistakes the disintegration of certain traditional ideologies of the subject for the subject's final disappearance.

54 P.Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit III: Le Temps Raconté,* éd. du Seuil, Paris, 1985. Our exposition of narrative identity is indebted to Ricoeur's illuminating discussion of this theme, pp. 354–7.

55 The political implications of our project for a postmodern imagination are important. As we noted in our discussion of the ethical imagination above, the postmodern project requires a new relationship between theory and praxis. And this means that an 'imagining otherwise' entails, at the socio-political level, an 'acting otherwise'. It would be a mistake therefore to assume that the emphasis in our conclusion on the ethical/poetical dimensions of the postmodern imagination represents an eclipse of the political. On the contrary, the postmodern project we are advocating, marks a radical challenge to the conventional models of political power as 'sovereignty'–i.e. centralized nation-states and geo-political blocks. A postmodern politics, compatible with the ethical-poetical imagination we are proposing, would be one of radical decentralization–one which fosters difference, plurality and otherness. It would resist what critics like Foucault, Lyotard and Kristeva denounce as the 'totalizing' tendency of political power. This would involve a movement from the centre to the periphery– or indeed a dismantling of this very dichotomy–a movement beyond the hegemonic nationalisms of 'nation-states' and the multi-nationalisms of military-industrial alliances, towards a *regional pluralism* in all societies. Such a postmodern movement, as the later Foucault realized, may well begin with particular commitments to 'local struggles', e.g. unemployment, anti-nuclear protest, environmental and energy campaigns, minority and women's rights, anti-discrimination protests, economic decentralization programmes and so on. Renouncing the temptation to propagate a New Universal Theory to resolve the global crisis of contemporary society, a postmodern politics would seek to pluralize and differentiate the activity of resistance. In this sense it would seek to distance itself from the 'ethnocentrism' of most modern ideologies of change emanating from the West. The king's head needs to be cut off in political theory, as Foucault remarks (*Power/ Knowledge,* Pantheon, New York, 1980, p. 121). The challenge is to go beyond the fetish of power as centralizing sovereignty, and its attendant notion of 'global theory', in favour of a 'local' struggle and criticism. This in turn entails an 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' disqualified from the hierarchy of the established scientific knowledges. Such localization and differentiation of criticism should not, argues Foucault, be taken to mean that its qualities are those of an 'obtuse, naive or primitive empiricism', nor a 'soggy eclecticism' that opportunistically laps up any and every kind of theoretical approach; nor does it mean a 'self-imposed asceticism' that would degenerate into the worst kind of theoretical impoverishment. What the local character of criticism implies is, rather, a 'noncentralized kind of theoretical production…whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought' (*ibid.* p. 81). This in turn requires that the postmodern intellectual ceases to view him/ herself as a 'master of truth', as a *salvator mundi* who will redeem the world by fiat, by an act of inspired genius or will. Postmodern politics requires 'specific' rather than 'global' intellectuals. As Foucault puts it, 'A new mode of the connection between theory

and practice has been established. Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the "universal" and the "exemplary"…but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family and sexual relations). This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles. They have met here with problems which are specific…' (*ibid*. p. 126). And one might add to this list the equally 'specific' problems of apartheid, famine, third-world struggles, etc., which, while not necessarily being immediately part of our lived environment, are nontheless made part of our imaginative environment by means of communications technology and media. All this points towards an alternative kind of political theory and praxis–regional, differential, committed to concrete circumstances. We are not, of course, endorsing some kind of spontaneous or adhoc anarchism. The notion of 'regional struggles' is always predicated upon an 'historical knowledge of struggles', a genealogy which brings together the specialized areas of erudition with the disqualified areas of popular knowledge. As Foucault notes: 'What emerges out of this is something one might call a genealogy, or rather a multiplicity of genealogical researches, a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts. And these genealogies…could not even have been attempted except on one condition, namely that the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges of a theoretical avant-garde was eliminated. Let us give the term *genealogy* to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today.' And what this requires is that we attend to discontinuous, localized and often illegitimized knowledges and practices 'against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of…some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science' (*ibid*. p. 83). The project of localized resistance and praxis has been developed by a number of postmodern theorists. Lyotard, in his debates with Habermas and in his correspondences in *Le Postmoderne* (Gallillee, 1987), defends postmodernism against the charge of neo-conservative nihilism and argues for the political recognition that 'Grand Theory' has had its day and that we now all belong to minorities of resistance. This point is also addressed by Hal Foster in his introduction to *Postmodern Culture* (Pluto, 1985):

here he distinguishes between radical and conservative postmodernism, promoting the former as a 'critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them'. This he describes as a 'postmodernism of resistance' which arises as a 'counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the "false normativity" of a reactionary postmodernism…it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations' (*ibid*. p. xii). A postmodern politics of differential/local struggle has also received much input from recent developments in Continental feminism–in particular the poststructuralist thinking of Julia Kristeva, Helène Cixious and Luce Iragaray, which champions the feminine as an historical subject-in-process, as a differentiation and dissemination of desire for otherness. A new generation of critical commentators has emerged in recent times in support of a postmodern politics of decentralized practice and revolt. We might mention here the work of Gregory Ulmer whose *Applied Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins U.P., 1985) argues for a 'postmodernized pedagogy' in our era of communications technology; Thomas Docherty who campaigns for a 'chrono-political criticism…able to forge a future through the interpretative parodying of historical narrative' (*After Theory,* Blackwells, 1988); Jonathan Arac who provides a discriminating overview of the debate in *Postmodernism and Politics* (Manchester U.P., 1986); and David Tracy who outlines a 'postmodern hermeneutic of resistance and hope' in *Plurality and Ambiguity* (Harper and Row, 1987). One might also mention here our own modest attempts to adumbrate and apply such a postmodern hermeneutic in an effort to retrieve 'subjugated knowledges' by brushing the official readings of Irish colonial history against the grain–e.g. *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Wolfhound/Manchester U.P., 1987); *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions* (Wolfhound/Humanities Press, 1984); *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (vols 1 and 2, Wolfhound Press, 1982/1987); 'Myth and Motherland' in *Ireland's Field Day* (Hutchinson, 1985); and 'Postmodern Ireland' in *The Clash of Ideas* (Gill and McMillan, 1988).

In summary we might say that a postmodern politics of local resistance would be (1) *post-centrist* (a regionalized mode of praxis informed by the decentralizing and pluralizing potential of the new communications technology and transcending the rigid frontiers of nation-states and geo-political blocks); (2) *post-patriarchal* (a feminist-

allied praxis attentive to the hitherto suppressed dimensions of alterity, difference, marginality); (3) *post-egological* (a communalist praxis surpassing the confines of narcissistic individualism and its extension as *egoismes à deux*); (4) *post-logocentric* (a practice of 'double-coding' which enables us to have 'two thinks at a time', in Joyce's phrase—that is, to enter into dialogue with what is different and other, to welcome the difference (*dia-legein*) by exploding the fetish of a totalitarian Grand Theory and by opening ourselves to history as a 'bringer of plurabilities').