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Contents

Wrapping up postmodernism: the subject of consumption versus the subject of cognition

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I

The socialist Greater London Council having apparently resigned itself to its promised abolition by the Thatcher government on April Fools' Day 1986, it was being rumoured in London's alternative press in October of 1985 that the GLCs leader, Ken Livingstone, was planning to balance his council's books by spending what remained in its kitty on a Christmas present for Margaret Thatcher. The rumour had it that County Hall (soon to be vacant) was to be gift-wrapped at a cost of several million pounds by the expatriate Bulgarian artist Christo Javacheff and presented to Thatcher in a parodic gesture of political compliance. If Terry Eagleton is right in suggesting that 'what is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde'[1]—an avant-garde which spurned the notion of aesthetic 'representation' for an art which would be a direct, material intervention in social praxis—then such a gesture on the GLC's part would have amounted to politics parodying postmodernism's parody of a political art. (The rumour, of course, proved apocryphal; the council threw a quarter-of-a-million-pound farewell party for itself instead, and Livingstone embarked on the career of a parliamentarian.)

Meanwhile, in Paris (one of the incubators of what Peter Bürger has termed the 'historical avant-garde'[2]), Christo himself had just added another package to an *œuvre* which, spanning some twenty-seven years, had begun modestly with projects like *Wrapping a Girl* (London, 1962) and progressed to such bolder and bigger parcels as *Packed Medieval Tower* (Spoleto, 1968), *Packed Museum of Contemporary Art* (Chicago, 1969), *Wrapped Coast* (Sydney, 1969) and *Surrounded Islands* (Greater Miami, 1980–3). Completed on 23 September 1985, after a decade of planning, the new work was *Le Pont-Neuf Empaqueté*. For fourteen days the double span of France's most photographed bridge stood wrapped with 75 miles of rope and 444,000 square feet of sewn-to-measure nylon fabric whose sandstone tones reflected those of the weather-washed

façades of the Ile de la Cité buildings and concealed the smog-blackened surfaces of the bridge without obstructing the flow of commuter and tourist traffic either over or under its upholstered arches. Handbills distributed to pedestrians by the artist's uniformed assistants explained of this latest *empaquetage:*

> Le choix d'empaqueter le Pont-Neuf est né il y a dix ans, de ses références historiques, urbaines et artistiques exceptionelles et de sa situation privilégiée qui réunit la rive droite, la rive gauche et l'Île de la Cité, cœur de Paris depuis plus de deux mille ans. La construction du pont a débuté en 1587 sous Henri III et a été terminée sous Henri IV en 1606.
>
> (The decision to wrap up the Pont-Neuf was born ten years ago, because of its exceptional historical, urban and artistic points of reference and because of its privileged position uniting the Right Bank, the Left Bank and the Île de la Cité, the heart of Paris for more than two thousand years. The construction of the bridge was begun in 1587 under Henry III and was completed under Henry IV in 1606.)

While Christo supervised the 500-strong team of helpers (including frogmen, tree surgeons, rock-climbers, bargees, electricians, engineers, builders and students) needed to execute this 'œuvre d'art temporaire et publique', not far away, on the Left Bank, Michel Cachoux's commercial gallery was preparing for a *vernissage,* its shop window eye-catchingly dressed with a 5-foot, non-figurative bronze packaged in transparent polythene and rope and bearing the legend: 'CECI N'EST PAS UN CHRISTO'. Cachoux's own handbills announced: 'CHRISTO emballe le Pont-Neuf/CACHOUX déballe ses Cristaux' ('CHRISTO wraps up the Pont-Neuf/CACHOUX unwraps his Crystals').

II

That the logic of commodification has come to structure every aspect of contemporary life, not least the cultural-aesthetic, is now a commonplace of periodizing theories of postmodernism. Displacing the use values of objects and practices with an exchange value which erases immanent qualities and differences, this universal commodification of our object world is said to have drained things of their independent 'being' and reduced them to so many means for their own consumption, so many instruments of commodity satisfaction.[3] In *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord has argued that the ultimate form of commodity fetishism in contemporary consumer society is the image or spectacle itself ('the spectacle is the *main production* of present-day society'[4]). The familiar example, as Fredric Jameson explains, is that of tourism:

> The American tourist no longer lets the landscape 'be in its being' as Heidegger would have said, but takes a snapshot of it, thereby transforming

> space into its own material image. The concrete activity of looking at a landscape—including, no doubt, the disquieting bewilder ment with the activity itself, the anxiety that must arise when human beings, confronting the non-human, wonder what they are doing there and what the point or purpose of such a confrontation might be in the first place—is thus comfortably replaced by the act of taking possession of it and converting it into a form of personal property.[5]

Given the other-directed nature of contemporary conspicuous consumption, such reifying images (by which 'we consume, less the thing itself, than its abstract idea'[6]) serve in turn to 'speak' their owners for others. Like designer clothes, Cachoux's crystals or the latest-model car, our tourist snapshots of Parisian bridges, medieval towers or Sydney beaches become images for others to have of us, their owners or 'takers'. Obsessively packaging such thoroughly 'mythologized' objects or spectacles as if for consumption, purchase, or mailing back to the tourist's home town, Christo's *empaquetages* (not least his rewrappings of those institutional pre-packagings of art and history called galleries) seem monstrous parodies of the universal commodification which fetishizes history and nature, reducing cultural and natural objects to so many reified images for consumption. In so far as they eclipse the pretext or occasion of art, Christo's parcels seem bold postmodernist negations of a 'representational' aesthetic. Teasingly masking the object from the camera's reifying eye, they simultaneously erase all its distinctive intrinsic features, rendering it just one more anonymous package on the equivalence principle of commodity exchange. Read parodically, Christo's *empaquetages* reactivate the strategies of alienation familiar from the historical avant-garde, repeating on a grotesquely inflated scale such *gestes* of surrealistic defamiliarization as Duchamp's readymades or Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isadore Ducasse* (a packaging in sackcloth and cord of the sewing machine of Lautréamont's celebrated image of alienation: 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table'). Works of 'temporary and public' art, commercially valueless in themselves since ephemeral and freely accessible to the most casual passer-by, Christo's *empaquetages* are clearly the political gestures of an avant-garde refusal of the commodification of art, and of what Benjamin called the 'aura' of the 'authentic', unique and possessable art-work.

What ought to be powerful and critical political statements, however, seem to have lost their disturbing charge. It is as if the quantitative principle of exchange value (as opposed to the qualitative one of use value) had definitively determined that the new and the different—once the very hallmark, now perhaps merely the trademark, of the avant-garde—had become purely a matter of proportion: a sheer size or scale which in Christo's case attests to the complicity of neo-avant-gardiste art with those bureaucracies that the early avant-garde had, precisely, targeted. If modernism, in exalting the unique as the resistive element amidst the universal sameness of things (the homogenizing effects of mass production),

ultimately played into the hands of a culture industry for which novelty, fashion and fad are the very stuff of marketability, then Christo's postmodernism will assert its own distinction by exalting quantity. The spectacular scale of his projects, in attesting to spectacular, 'wasteful' cost and bureaucratic organization, would seem to lay claim to a value which is paradoxical in proportion to its apparent irrelevance to means—end or value-for-money rationality (a value which literally lesser spectacles or works cannot, by definition, claim).

What would seem to distinguish the postmodernist *geste* from its Dadaist or surrealist counterpart, then, is its changed relation to its socioeconomic context. To describe Christo's cultural practice as simply subversive of commodification would be misleading. Just as Leonardo, Vasari and Rubens made preparatory oil sketches of the elaborate 'triumphs' they designed for Renaissance patrons, so Christo makes preparatory drawings, maquettes and photo-collages for his projects, the sale of which through the private gallery system (whose dependence on the 'original' art-work as commodity his populist works of 'street' art would seem to bypass and parody) generates the multi-million-dollar budgets of his parcels. (The budget of *Le Pont-Neuf Empaqueté* was conservatively estimated at 2.6 million dollars.)

It was not until the poster, paperback, record and gallery culture of the 1950s that the densely textured, self-regarding artefacts of high modernism and the anti-art gestures of the avant-garde became institutionalized, canonized and made available for mass cultural consumption. But what took several decades to achieve for high modernism and the avant-garde takes postmodernism a matter of moments. For within hours of Christo's tying the final knot of *Le Pont-Neuf Empaqueté,* mass-reproduced photographic images of the spectacle and its designer's preparatory sketches were available for mailing back to the tourist's home town in the form of postcards for sale in the Left Bank souvenir shops, all such images 'copyright Christo'. Postmodernism's putative parody of commodification is itself commodified and transformed into its own consumable image. Gone, it seems, from postmodernist art are not only the interventionist or revolutionary ambitions of the early avant-garde, but also its scandalous spontaneity and irrationality. After a decade of intricate negotiation, organization and co-operation between Christo and the French civic and political bureaucracies, it was no less an authority than François Mitterrand who overrode any lingering official objection to the Pont-Neuf's wrapping and paid the package a visit in his capacity as President of the Republic. *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali* (1948) detailed its author's plans for the universal demoralization of instrumental reason through staging the appearance, at strategically timed intervals, of freshly baked French loaves, from 15 to 45 metres long, in prominent public spaces in the capital cities of Europe and the USA. ('If such an act could be successfully carried through', Dali thought, it 'would be capable of creating a state of confusion, of panic and of collective hysteria…[and] of becoming the point of departure from which…one could subsequently try to ruin… systematically the logical meaning of all the mechanisms of the rational

practical world.'[7]) What distinguishes Christo's projects from such unrealized surrealist *gestes* of comparable scale is, precisely, their realization.

III

Whatever intrinsic or stylistic features postmodernist art may share with modernism or the avant-garde, then, it would seem, in Jameson's words, that 'the two phenomena…still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital.'[8] 'What has happened', Jameson says, 'is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally.'[9] The projects of both modernism proper and the avant-garde have foundered. Where the modernists sought to affirm the relative autonomy of the 'cultural' sphere—asserting its traditional constitutive values (of creativity, imagination, individuality, autonomy, etc.) against the values of the market-place—the avant-garde sought to undermine the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, to collapse the cultural back into the socio-economic, in order to translate such values into social praxis.[10] (Hence Eagleton's wry suggestion that what postmodernism parodies is the revolutionary programme of the avant-garde.) The historical failure of both projects is, we are told, the determinate condition of postmodernism as a period. Contemporary aesthetic innovation and experimentation have lost their oppositional or subversive potential and are themselves stimulated and catalysed by the culture industry's reliance, for the reproduction of its market, on generating fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming commodities, from clothing to cars to artistic movements—and no less, we might want to add, their situating cultural theories.

Such, at least, is how Jameson, Eagleton and a growing number of American and European commentators have undertaken to define the distinctive cultural logic of the new 'period'. Jameson's own successive attempts to unravel this logic—attempts characterized in his seminal essay, 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism',[11] aiming towards the 'cognitive mapping' of postmodernism—represent only the most subtle and powerful limbs of this swelling body of periodizing theory which takes its bearings from the work of the Frankfurt School theorists and their successors like Habermas and Peter Bürger. But, if such critics are right to ground their period definitions of postmodernism in an altered relation between cultural production and its socio-economic context, then it would seem a properly dialectical strategy to reflect on the relation between such cultural criticism (or production) itself and its putative object of analysis— in other words, its own positioning in the terrain it would map. Including as it does the production of new period definitions, the rereading of history, and the development of interpretative strategies said to be appropriate to the texts of postmodernity, such cultural criticism is itself an instance of cultural production. If the adversarial potential of the 'cultural' sphere has been lost through its penetration by the logic of the commodity, then the question

arises: from where and in whose name can oppositional criticism of Jameson's and Eagleton's own kind be conducted? Among other things, this is a question about the implied subject of their critical discourse, the subject of the knowledge it undertakes to produce—what we might call the subject of cognition as opposed (both epistemologically and politically) to the subject of consumption.

Echoing critics as diverse as Ihab Hassan, Hal Foster, Norman Holland and Eagleton, Jameson himself has argued that what he calls 'contemporary theory—or better still, theoretical discourse—is also itself very precisely a postmodernist phenomenon.'[12] The theory of 'expressive causality'[13] which underwrites this equation (but which, as I shall suggest, Jameson doesn't invite us to employ in situating his own theoretical discourse) hinges largely on the fate of the individualist subject in the postmodern era. Of the two ways of viewing this once scandalously decentred subject, Marxist commentators like Jameson and Eagleton prefer to see it less as the discursive effect of a demystifying literary, linguistic and psychoanalytic theory than as the 'objective' effect of a socio-economic process of which this theory is a mere epiphenomenon. The process in question is the social transition from 'the classic age of competitive capitalism' ('the heyday of the nuclear family and the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the hegemonic class') to an age of 'consumer' or 'corporate' capitalism ('of the so-called organization man'),[14] a transition which has fractured the autonomous social subject of the bourgeois era into what Eagleton describes as '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'.[15] 'Technology and consumerism', Eagleton suggests, have 'scattered our bodies to the winds as so many bits and pieces of reified technique, appetite, mechanical operation and reflex of desire'; 'it is surely arguable that late capitalism has deconstructed…[the monadic] subject much more efficiently than meditations on *écriture*.'[16]

If we were provisionally to accept such a reflexion model of the relation between 'contemporary theory' and its social context, and look for an 'expression' of the logic of consumerism within literary theory, for example, we might find it in those radically 'subjectivist' accounts of reading which have emerged in the wake of a once equally fashionable structuralism. What I have in mind are those forms of reader-response and reception theory which, in representing what we call 'texts' as simply the epiphenomena of reading—as the projections or productions of reading subjects, either individual or collective—would seem to represent something in the nature of a consumers' revolution in the sphere of interpretative theory.[17]

Among the critics associated with this broad tendency in postmodern literary criticism are Roland Barthes, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish and Tony Bennett. Methodologically and ideologically diverse though they are, the problems their reading practices pose for the discerning consumer of literary theories have generally been addressed as problems of epistemology. What I want to do is temporarily to suspend epistemological questions and consider such

theories of reading, which privilege the act of reception/consumption over the act of production, within the perspective of the Marxist historical narrative of modernism and postmodernism currently being elaborated by Jameson and other critics, a narrative to which the category of the commodity would seem central. What I shall be suggesting is that such models, which at once construct and deconstruct the reader as an autonomous subject, have, like Marxist criticism's own discourse of knowledge, both their 'modernist' and their 'postmodernist' moments. In other words, the ideal of aesthetic autonomy which modernism reputedly entertained for itself, and which postmodernism is said to have deconstructed, not only is perpetuated in contradictory forms in certain kinds of supposedly postmodernist criticism, but is in fact inherent in any self-reflexive discourse. The moments I am calling 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' respectively are the moment of imaginary autonomy, transcendence or emancipation, and the moment of knowing complicity, subjection or determination.

To tell the story of the consumer revolution in literary theory is, precisely, to construct *as* narrative a logic whose conclusion will also appear as a historical destiny. ('Construct and deconstruct', we say—rarely the other way round.) But what such narratives historicize or project as a unilinear trajectory in time is, I would suggest, a necessarily incessant oscillation in all interpretative theory between what I have termed its 'postmodernist' and its 'modernist' moments.

IV

What Marx called the fetishism of commodities is the process by which the products of labour come to appear as an independent and uncontrolled reality apart from the people who create them. Commodity production (i.e. production for exchange, not for use by the producer) creates the social division of labour, as a result of which labour appears as private— expended to meet private needs and wants through exchange on the market—rather than as real, complex social relations with other people. Commodity production constitutes a social relationship between producers, but this relationship appears to the latter not as a social relationship between themselves, but as one between the products of their labour. This confusion of relations between people with relations to things is the fundamental contradiction of commodity production.

The moment of this 'reification of social relations' (Marx) within literary theory—a transitional moment in its consumer revolution—is the concept of 'intertextuality', a promiscuous concept whose twentieth-century alliances include Russian formalism, New Criticism, Eliot's Great Tradition and classical structuralism. For the 'intertextualist', the determinate social relations in literary interpretation (and production) are those between texts themselves—apprehended, like the circulation and exchange of commodities, as an independent reality, uncontrolled by their producers. The progressive attrition, in modern criticism, of Romanticisrn's 'author'—his/her demotion to

structuralism's 'scriptor', Wolfgang Iser's 'implied author', Stanley Fish's 'necessary fiction', and finally to Barthes's dispensable trope of reading—corresponds to a progressive alienation and reification of the social relation of writing and reading: a reification of the symbolic *act,* the praxis or production of writing signalled in the now pervasive displacement of the concept 'work' by that of 'text'.

Where the 'work' was grounded in history (the history of its labour of production) to which it thus 'referred', the concept 'text' has the power to suspend both historical and generic definitions. Like commodification itself, the concept 'text' erases the intrinsic heterogeneity of objects, dissolving distinctions between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary', the 'high' and the 'low', the 'aesthetic', the 'cultural' and the 'social', even the written and the non-written. Marking the moment of culture's opacity to history, the Text signals the repudiation of Authority and, with it, of the Oedipal charge that might once have typified the reading experience. With the author's demotion to 'a paper-I' (Barthes), the reader can no longer bring paternity suits against the 'only begetter' of a text: the author who, fathering something on the mother tongue, previously provided a chromosomal key or guarantee of identity to the 'work' and a patronymic label for that legal relation of ownership, the copyright or *droit d'auteur,* which is the relatively recent invention of capitalist publishing.[18] The identity of the text, as distinct from the work, lies in its destiny, not its origin, in the moment of its consumption, not of its production.

No sooner reified and so freed from any intrinsic determination by the mode of its production, however, the text (this reified symbolic act) is itself dematerialized, becoming no more than an image of itself, an 'object-effect' of the consuming subject, the reader of whose autonomy *qua* consumer Barthes was the most eloquent exponent. In 1971 Barthes offered his theory of the *scriptible* as not so much the promise as the record of a historical reparation of the social division of labour between writing and reading, a division which he described as itself a comparatively recent historical phenomenon.[19] In pre-capitalist cultures, according to Barthes, reading and writing were the equal privileges of a single class. Just as in the history of music there was a period when for the numerous class of practising amateurs '"playing" and "listening" formed a scarcely differentiated activity'—i.e. before the delegation of playing to the professional 'interpreter' and the relegation of the amateur to passive listener—so also in literature, Barthes says, 'the coming of democracy' introduced a new social division of roles between producer and consumer.[20] The *scriptible* or modernist text heals over this division and restores the literary commodity—the alienated product of labour—to its producer for consumption, Barthes is the least ingenuous of reader-champions, but his defence in the rhetoric of utopian socialism of the notion of the *scriptible* text as a 'genuinely democratizing' effort to reverse 'the reduction of reading to a consumption' seems a postmodernist parody of Walter Benjamin's prediction in 1936 that, with the expansion of the press, 'the distinction between author and reader is about to lose

its basic character…. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer.'[21] What Benjamin envisaged as a reversible social relation Barthes envisages as a non-alienated, privatized act of simultaneous production and consumption. Acknowledging that consumption has its pleasures, Barthes contrasts these with the pleasures of co-production, not the co-production of the writer and the reader, however, but of the reader and the 'writerly' text.

Illustrating what he calls the 'abolition of critical distance' in the postmodernist period, Jameson argues that the aesthetic of 'expression', which is 'closely linked to some conception of the subject as a monad-like container, within which things are felt which are then expressed by projection outwards', is one which dominated much of what we call high modernism, but which has disappeared in the world of the postmodern.[22] As in the reception theories of Iser, Jauss, Holland, Fish and Bennett, so in Barthes's theory of the *scriptible* text there is a moment when this expressivist aesthetic resurfaces in the poetics of postmodernism. As for Romanticism (and, if we believe Jameson, modernism), the 'expression' in question is still for the postmodernist critic the 'text', but what it is an 'expression' *of* is the subject of reading (consumption), not of writing (production).

Stanley Fish, the coiner of 'affective stylistics', is at once the most radical and conservative exponent of the reader's emancipation as an autonomous subject from determination by its object or other, the text. In *Self-Consuming Artefacts* (1972.) Fish still wrote of reading a work 'correctly'— which was to say, as the writer intended—but, in 'Interpreting the *Variorum*' (1976) and his subsequent work, Fish rejected as 'positivist' the notion that there could be a correct reading of a text or even 'the assumption that there *is* a sense, that it is embedded or encoded in the text'.[23] Affective stylistics begins its de-reification of the text by substituting questions of experience for those of knowledge, questions of response for those of meaning. What we call 'text' is no more than a temporal sequence of mental operations or experiences of which the reader is the subject: strategies of anticipation and readjustment, experiences of unbalancing, reassurance, disappointment, surprise. What the Fishian consumer responds to, however, is not a structure objectively 'there' or inscribed by the producer in the work, as it might be for the merely *semi*-autonomous subject of Iser's and Jauss's reception aesthetics. For Fish, as for Wittgenstein, interpretation is not a two-stage process, a matter of *adding* an identity or response to some neutral sense-datum. What is perceived in or as the text is itself always already an interpretative product. There are no raw materials—whether of meanings, grammar, letters or marks on the page—given before the interpretative labour. If it is not an immanent structure of the work that structures the reading experience, then the determinants and constraints of that experience are immanent in the interpreting mind. What, then, is the other of this reading subject? 'Affective stylistics' liberates the interpreter from determination by the work, only to deprive its transcendent subject of its sovereignty. Having dematerialized literature, Fish's criticism dematerializes the reader, turning him/her into an