

# Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity

## I

Postmodernity has most often been characterized as the end of something (by myself as well as by so many other people): nor is it surprising, when we have to do with the emergence of a whole new mode of living the quotidian, that random indices of change should be seized upon and theorized, in the place of the as yet absent full form. I remember Immanuel Wallerstein, in discussion, inviting us to consider what a bunch of monkish dons might have imagined, in fourteenth-century Oxford, as the lineaments of a high capitalism of the then far future. It is true that we have to ^ do here, not with some new mode of production as such, but rather with a dialectical mutation of a capitalist system already long in place (profit, commodity production, boom and bust, wage labour); and to that degree the tracing of internal narrative lines, the detection of this or that still faintly drawn subplot - such as the one here sketched in, having to do with the destiny of the visual or the image - may not be the most unsatisfactory way of proceeding.

Yet we must also register, not without a certain ruefulness, the return, in the postmodern, of any number of older things we thought we had seen the end of, for good. Let's spend our time on the bad new things, Brecht joyously recommended, and let the good old things bury themselves: yet the passion and the praxis of actuality evidently proves less usable when the very sense of what constitutes actuality becomes confused and aimless. At which point, a certain programmatic 'postmodernism' can help out by reassuring us that the Brechtian new was just a subset of that more general modernist telos of innovation, 'making it new' and the *Novum*, which we are supposed to have unmasked and indicted in our new avatar. The Brechtian new would then, today, turn out to be just another of those 'good old things' he suggested we do away with.

Still, what is presently returning would not seem to offer any of the intellectual excitement of the old modern novelty or the new postmodern kind either. The market, to begin with, whose rediscovery can surely not be much more stimulating than the reinvention of the wheel. (I've argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that what people imagine to be their enthusiasm for this good old thing is most often a mask and cover for the untheorized excitations of a genuinely new cybernetic technology.) But in the conceptual revival of the market and its dynamics, in reality we confront a more general resurrection of philosophy itself, in all its most outmoded academic and disciplinary forms. Even Richard Rorty seems to have forgotten that it was he himself who wrote the death certificate of this 'field' with his comprehensive demonstration of the way in which 'philosophy' constructed a spurious and retroactive history and tradition for itself out of its henceforth timeless themes and problems.<sup>2</sup>

So it is that 'theory's dissolution of the old philosophical disciplines now seems to have been but a passing moment. Now philosophy and its branches are back in force: -with ethics, first of all, as though Nietzsche, Marx and Freud had never existed: Nietzsche, with his once shattering discovery of the aggressivity that seethed through all the old ethical injunctions; Freud, with his disarticulation of the conscious subject and its rationalizations, and the glimpse of the forces that informed and inhabited it without its knowledge; Marx, finally, by flinging all the old individual

ethical categories up on to a new dialectical and collective level, in such a way that what used to look like the ethical must now be grasped as the ideological. For ethics is irredeemably locked into categories of the individual, when not in fact of individualism as such: the situations in which it seems to hold sway are necessarily those of homogeneous relations within a single social class. But only those whose thinking has been irreparably damaged by empiricism can imagine that to pronounce the end of ethics (beyond good and evil!) is tantamount to recommending wholesale violence and the Dostoyev-skian 'anything goes', rather than a sober historical judgment on the inadequacy of certain mental categories.

The revival of ethics also knows its more modish poststructuralist variant, the return to the 'subject'. There is to be sure no little embarrassment in the sounding of the new theme, whose novelty stems largely from its correction of the earlier symmetrical doxa of the 'death of the subject', with the resultant implication that the immense intellectual achievements of 'poststructuralism' generally (to use that irritating shorthand designation) as well as of theory may now be admitted to have been rolled back (along with Marxism or the sixties). But the notions of 'responsibility' that have accompanied this revival of the subject belong back in ethics where they came from; while the other meaning of the death of the subject - namely the end of individualism and of the entrepreneurial capitalism that gave rise to it - might better have spurred us on into new explorations of collective and institutional subjectivity: for Marx was right, after all, whatever they say, and no human society has ever been so collective in its structures than this one, where the Althusser-ian state and ideological state apparatuses reign supreme, like high rises in any contemporary city, and the apparent renewal of interest in 'subjectivity' betrays its more secret motives by an utter disinterest in the psychoanalytic developments (mostly Lacanian) that ought to have centrally attracted its attention and aroused its curiosity. But those things still lie behind the iron curtain of Theory; and do not seem particularly accessible to philosophical and disciplinary classification of the older sort.

Nietzsche has of course been subjected to innumerable rewritings in the last years; Freud himself has been the target of unaccountably passionate denunciations; but it is evidently the discrediting of Marx - his life's work supposedly 'disproven' by the deterioration of any number of state socialisms that appealed to his authority - which has seem to go hand in hand with the elaborations of this or that conception of postmodernism or postmodernity (although not in my own work, I hope it is unnecessary to add). It is therefore into the vacuum left by the new taboos on Marx that the most significant and symptomatic revival of a philosophical discipline has been able to insinuate itself; I mean the return of political philosophy itself. 'Political science' was never much more than an empirical and operational field during the long night of the modern (or Marxian) period, its theoretical heights all borrowed from sociology, its practical endeavours all in one way or another infeodated to statistics, its historical great texts gathering dust in the upheavals of a revolutionary and an ideological age for which they seemed to have little relevance. Now these last re-emerge into the light of academic day, and seem once again to speak to the age of big business with a wisdom usefully committed to moderation. As though Locke or Rousseau, Hobbes or Carl Schmitt all had as their central ambition to make a contribution to the development of something called political science! Or even to that as yet non-existent thing rebaptized political philosophy! Today professionally scanned for useful material on the current four c's of the ideological reequipment of late capitalism - contracts, constitutions, citizenship and civil society - the classic texts, like so many well-worn vagrants newly bathed, shaven and dressed up in respectable new clothes, find themselves reinstated on the syllabus, no doubt with suitable bewilderment. For us they were rich and contradictory texts, with unequalled lessons on the

problems and antinomies of representation; now they are authorities, whose prestige derives from a fundamental category mistake. Indeed, some of the most creative innovations in the anticommunist arsenal - I think, for example, of Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* - drew their force from an assimilation of the forms of state socialism to precapitalist - essentially feudal - structures: all these seemingly modern 'totalitarianisms' were thus argued to be little more than ancient 'despotic' tyrannies of a whole range of archaic types. But such poetic characterizations make for conceptual and historical confusion when it comes to analysing what has pleasantly come to be known as the 'transition to capitalism': and it is precisely under cover of such confusion that the appeal to the classics of political theory can be made plausible.

For those classics all addressed a problem and a situation which is no longer our own, namely the emergence of bourgeois society and institutions from an overwhelmingly feudal universe. The conception of 'civil society' for example, does not designate some timeless value, which the Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) of our own world system somehow reincarnate like the periodic visitations of the hidden god in a benighted humanity: rather, 'civil society' amounts to an attempt to theorize the modes of secularization available within the structures of European feudal society, that is, within the European *ancien regime*. It has no relevance for modern societies, and indeed the great political theorists are themselves to be historically resituated as thinkers of the bourgeois revolution as such. But the bourgeois revolution failed; what happened instead of it was industrial capitalism: which is no doubt to say, as Marx did, that these thinkers attempted to invent political solutions for what were essentially economic problems. And this is also the sense in which one may say, with Habermas, if one likes, that the bourgeois revolution was an 'unfinished project' (or perhaps one should rather say, as Gandhi did on a related occasion, and about the positive and progressive face to be put on Western civilization, that 'it would be a good idea'). Unfortunately, any overview of the contemporary world which takes stock of its possibilities within a global framework is likely to conclude that the bourgeois project will remain forever unfinished, and that we need another one.

But this is also the moment to observe a peculiar intellectual development: namely that the current proliferation of work of all kinds on postmodernism and postmodernity has inspired a return or revival in its own right and specific to it: the renewal of discussions of modernity as such. It might plausibly be thought, or argued indeed, that it is only after this is over and done with that it can adequately be assessed and understood; but this is not at all the position of these postmodern defenders of modernity, who see it in our own future as something still to be achieved and worthy of being achieved, at the very moment in which so many other intellectuals are celebrating its timely passing. The confusion between modernism and modernity is often at stake here, and I will come back to modernism itself in a moment. Otherwise, most of the newer works on that old thing called modernity raise the banner of the various philosophical themes I have enumerated above: the subject, ethics, constitutions, individual responsibility and, to be sure, last but not least, philosophy itself. The difference lies in the historical period being revived: if political philosophy aimed at resurrecting the thinkers of the first bourgeois revolutions, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these renewed theories of 'modernity' wish to resurrect the conceptual baggage of capitalism's second moment, the age of monopoly and industrialization, substituting Max Weber for Locke or Kant. But this is intellectual progress in appearance only. The language of modernization brings an enrichment to the older conceptualizations of bourgeois society and capitalism (that is to say, its complex substitutions bring new contradictions usefully to the surface); but it is also the language of an ideology, or of several of them; and it abuses the

new problems any notion of postmodernity necessarily raises by using this last as the pretext of returning to modernity itself, in order this time 'to get it right'.

Yet, paradoxically, the new return to an older problematic of the modern and of modernity is not really to be grasped as an attack on that of postmodernity: it is itself postmodern, and this is the deeper significance of all the multiple returns and revivals we have been speaking of here. The political determinants of such returns, and of the return of academic philosophy itself, should already have been apparent, in the intellectual aimlessness of a late capitalism universally triumphant but without legitimation, and whose older apologies were all thoroughly discredited and undermined in the now heroic era of ideological struggle. If all that is now past, why not go back to the 'values' and certainties once in place? Why not indeed? Nor would one particularly wish to resurrect another successful formula, however tempting, and characterize the recurrence of once tragic intellectual struggles as farce, since so much of it is too tiresome to offer the joyous liberation of folly (while the rest of it is dangerous enough to promise real enough tragedies to come).

But the theory of postmodernism has a concept particularly apt for resolving this dilemma and it is that of pastiche. The newer work, which seems to rebuke the frivolities of the postmodern by returning to the truly serious older texts of a more wholesome past, is itself postmodern in the sense in which it offers the merest pastiche of those older texts: postmodern pastiches of an older ethics and an older philosophy, pastiches of the older 'political theories', pastiches of the theories of modernity - the blank and non-parodic reprise of older discourse and older conceptuality, the performing of the older philosophical moves as though they still had a content, the ritual resolution of 'problems' that have themselves long since become simulacra, the somnambulistic speech of a subject long since historically extinct. In all this, even repetition itself, in earlier times a vital instinct, is an irrelevant concept, since it is repetition which is here merely represented (rather than being repeated 'for the first time'). Indeed, in this spirit of a somewhat newer development than those ancient ones, for which 'we are spoken by language' and it is some nonpersonal instance which uses us as its vehicle for expression, it might be fairer to say that what was mistaken for language turned out to be the institutions: it is the institutions which are now speaking through us in the form of pastiche, and rehearsing the dead letter of older thoughts in a simulation of reaction.

At any rate, we will shortly be able to verify this evaluation of the 'return' of modernity theory in a specific instance, indeed in that of an academic philosophical subdiscipline not yet mentioned above, namely aesthetics. For the current postmodern age seems also to be experiencing a general return to the aesthetic as such, at the very moment, paradoxically, when the trans-aesthetic claims of modern art seem completely discredited and a bewildering variety of styles and mixtures of all kinds flows through consumer society under its new postmodern dispensation. The older aesthetic traditions were rarely prescient enough to theorize these new works, many of them incorporating new communications and cybernetic technology (film was already developed enough to produce several proposals for a specifically filmic aesthetics, but video, far more generally used and influential, came too late for that kind of theoretical codification). Meanwhile, the discrediting of the older modernist idea of 'progress' - the telos leading to new technical discoveries and new formal innovations - spells the end of evolutionary time in the arts and augurs a new kind of spatial proliferation of artistic modes which can no longer be valorized in the older modernist ways. Finally, the general breakdown of the divisions between the older disciplines and specializations - in this case, the collapse of the once fiercely defended border

between high art and mass culture (let alone daily life) - leaves traditional analyses of the 'specificity' of the aesthetic, of the nature or artistic experience as such, of the autonomy of the work as a space somehow beyond the practical and the scientific realms, in much uncertainty, as though somehow the very nature of reception and consumption (perhaps even the production) of art in our time had undergone some fundamental mutation, leaving the older paradigms irrelevant or at least outmoded. Indeed, we shall see shortly that in a culture so overwhelmingly dominated by the visual and the image as ours has become, the very notion of aesthetic experience is either too little or too much: for in that sense, aesthetic experience is now everywhere and saturates social and daily life in general; but it is this very expansion of culture (in the larger or perhaps the nobler sense) which has rendered the very notion of an individual art work problematic and the premise of aesthetic judgment something of a misnomer. The crisis in reading is, of course, the locus of these new uncertainties and the arguments they generate. The return to the aesthetic may well find its rationale in the expansion of culture, and particularly of image culture, and its greater diffusion throughout the social: still, plausible context does not exempt a strategic reaction from criticism, and we will make a few objections to this particular ideological move later on. Yet a general rhetoric about the need and value of art today and of aesthetic experience in general is far from justifying a wholesale revival of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, about which it would be important to argue, not only that it is singularly ill equipped to deal with the aesthetic dimension of postmodernity, but that it was already significantly problematized and undermined during the preceding period of modernism.

It is an argument that could be reduced and concentrated in the following proposition: what distinguishes modernism in general is not the experimentation with inherited forms or the invention of new ones - or at least it is not that 'outward and visible sign' which captures modernism's essence. Modernism constitutes, above all, the feeling that the aesthetic can only fully be realized and embodied where it is something more than the merely aesthetic. But if you are willing to entertain this idea of an art that in its very inner movement seeks to transcend itself as art (as Adorno thought, and without it being particularly important to determine the direction of that self-transcendence, whether religious or political), then it becomes at least minimally clear that a philosophical aesthetics will always necessarily miss the fundamentals of the modernist work or the modernist mode of production. For it will be able to describe everything about the work of art and its functions and effects, save what transcends all those things and constitutes the work as modernist in the first place. (If the aesthetics in question then seeks itself to assign an extra- or trans-aesthetic direction to the modernist work, then we are in the sheerest ideology or metaphysics; we would not have needed modernism in the first place, if philosophy had been able to solve those riddles and assign those transcendental values in a secular and commercial modern society.)

I want therefore to assert, not that there have not been extraordinary texts produced within the framework of a philosophical discipline called aesthetics, but rather that what gives those texts their power - from Kant's Third *Critique* all the way to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* - is the way in which they blow up the field in which they sought to work, in which they undermine the very framework which justified their project. In Kant, this can be seen in the unaccountable eruption of a theory of the sublime at the end of a standard treatise on beauty, which already had achieved and codified everything that philosophical aesthetics necessarily takes as its programme. But suddenly this unexpected supplement, which Kant musters all his ingenuity to reintegrate into his conception of a philosophical 'critique', yet which somehow cannot be fully mastered, opens up the space for more historical forces that, as yet unrealized, but now liberated for the first time,

make a mockery of such systems. I have suggested elsewhere<sup>3</sup> (I am not the only one to do so) that what Kant calls the sublime will be the very space of modernism in the largest sense, which finds its first groping embodiments in Romanticism and then its fuller deployment in the later nineteenth century and its sequels. As for Adorno, his remarkable (and unfinished, posthumous) speculations take their force from the way in which his keen sense of the historicity of art forms problematizes the attempt to codify and systematize the 'features' of the aesthetic at every point. In this sense, Adorno's aesthetics can be seen as a quintessentially 'modernist' text in its own right, with everything paradoxical and energetic about the contradiction between the aesthetic and the historical 'end' of aesthetics that it does not cease to exasperate. Hegel meanwhile was supremely able to have it both ways, constructing an aesthetics whose very conception of possibility was a frame in which aesthetics as such was seen to have a historical end (the famous 'end of art' with which his *Aesthetik* necessarily concludes, thereby abolishing itself).

In that case, this new form of philosophical aesthetics, beyond the philosophical system as such - this self-cancelling and undermining aesthetics, which now at a second power struggles with itself and the limits of its own concepts - can be expected to be coterminous with the modern movement itself. It will therefore not be surprising that with the end of that movement and the end of modernism itself (if not of the modern), the older 'unfinished' project of a properly philosophical aesthetics and its subdiscipline should re-emerge. But we have not yet grasped the reasons for this re-emergence, or its significance and it is this inquiry that I want to pursue in the following essay, in some beginning and speculative fashion, yet not without the hope that this historical investigation of the role of aesthetics in the postmodern, and what it finds to tell us about the 'return' of aesthetics today, or rather the emergence of the various pastiches of a traditional philosophical aesthetics in recent years, will shed some light on all those other 'returns' enumerated above - political philosophy, religion, ethics and even the old theories of modernity itself in full 'postmodernism'! But I want to come at all this from an angle and not head-on, so the discussion of contemporary aesthetic texts will be preceded by speculation about the transformations of the visual dimension of contemporary culture, and only after that the return of older kinds of aesthetic effects and pleasures inventoried in the area of contemporary film-making, itself a kind of strange and transitional no-man's-land in which an older modernist aesthetic, akin to the modern novel, coexists and overlaps with a flood of newer and more 'postmodern' visual stimuli.

## II

The history of vision and the visible in our time has been told in a number of versions, the most recent being Martin Jay's encyclopaedic *Downcast Eyes*,<sup>4</sup> and Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*,<sup>5</sup> behind which stand rich developments in contemporary film theory. I want to tell this story in a different way, a project which demands two initial comments. The first is that it would be misguided to think that any single historical narrative of this kind is true or correct: the various alternative stories are ways of staging or representing material which is not intrinsically representable in its own right. The second has to do with the use of new philosophical or theoretical concepts as evidence for the emergence of new kinds of perception: the premise here is that what has not yet been articulated in social language does not yet exist in some fuller historical sense; or if you prefer, that the emergence of new formulations announces the active presence of a new experience.

It is a story I mean to tell in three stages: in the beginning was the Look, which appears as a philosophical theme in its own right, dramatically and as though for the first time, in the *Being and Nothingness* (1944) of Jean-Paul Sartre. Indeed, the Look can be taken as virtually his major philosophical innovation, indebted only for its inner conceptual content to the Hegelian master-slave struggle that Alexandre Kojève had reinscribed on the philosophical agenda in the late 1930s, and owing nothing whatsoever to that Heideggerian existentialism of which Sartre has so often been said to be derivative. Indeed, at a time when the matter of Heidegger's Nazism has again come up for much debate, it is perplexing to note that a search for fascist motifs and structures in his philosophy has neglected to scrutinize his feeble theory of the Other (called the *Mitsein*, the being-with-others), in which everything conflictual in my relations with other people is either smothered under the indistinction of what is elsewhere blandly called 'intersubjectivity' or else sublimated into the possibility of some heightened fascist or nationalist sense of community. The extraordinary conceptual innovation of the Sartrean Look is to be grasped against this weakness in the Heideggerian system, and its productivity measured against the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* which will later on develop out of it (but which we will not consider here<sup>6</sup>).

The Look is what posits my immediate relationship to other people; but it does so by way of an unexpected reversal in which the experience of being looked at becomes primary and my own look a secondary reaction. The ancient philosophical false problem of the existence of other people ('que vois-je de cette fenetre,' asks Descartes famously in the *Discourse on Method*, 'sinon des chapeaux et des manteaux, qui peuvent couvrir des spectres ou des hommes feints qui ne se remuent que par ressorts?') is thus at one stroke 'solved' and displaced or abolished by the shame and pride with which the Other's look at me confirms his own existence as a trauma that transcends my own. Yet the Look is at the same time reversible; by returning it, I can attempt to place the Other in a similar position. It thereby becomes the very medium through which the Hegelian struggle for recognition is concretely waged; while the master-slave positions now open my relations with other people up into a perpetual alternation which only the dialectical shift to the collective level can transform. In Sartre, then, the great theme of the Look is bound up with the problematic of 'thingification', or reification in its literal sense, as the becoming object, the making over of the visible - and most dramatically of the visible subject - into the object of the gaze.

Any number of political and aesthetic currents now flow from this first formulation: a new politics of decolonization and race, for example, in Frantz Fanon; a new feminism, in Simone de Beauvoir; and, in a kind of reactive reversal, a new aesthetics of the body and its visible or painterly flesh, in Merleau-Ponty. To resume this first moment overhastily, it would seem appropriate to describe it in terms of that protopolitical phenomenon called domination, insofar as the fact of objectification is grasped as that to which the Other (or myself) must necessarily submit. To make other people over into things by way of the Look thus becomes the primal source of a domination and a subjection which can only be overcome by looking back- or 'returning the gaze': in Fanon's terms, by the latter's therapeutic violence. Perhaps then, in honour of Fanon, and also of de Beauvoir, we may call this first moment that of the colonial or colonizing gaze, of visibility as colonization. On this conception, the Look is essentially asymmetrical: it cannot offer the Third World the occasion of productive appropriation, but must rather be radically reversed, as when Alejo Carpentier turns European surrealism inside out and decrees its Third World equivalent ('lo real maravilloso') to be the primary phenomenon of which surrealism becomes little more than a wish-fulfilment or a form of cultural envy? Magic

realism thus comes first; surrealism is rewritten as a weak European attempt to fashion its own version in a social order in which the reality in question must remain imaginary. This is then the moment in which the Third World, seen as Caliban by the First, *assumes* and *chooses* that identity for itself (to use characteristically Sartrean verbs). Yet this aggressive affirmation of visibility necessarily remains reactive: it cannot overcome the contradiction betrayed by the fact that the identity thereby chosen in Sartrean 'shame and pride' is still that conferred on Caliban by Prospero and by the First World colonizer, by European culture itself. The violence of the riposte, therefore, does nothing to alter the terms of the problem and the situation from which it springs. Europe remains the place of the universal, while Caliban's art affirms a host of merely local specificities.

Michel Foucault's appropriation of the themes of Otherness and reification, beginning with his *Madness and Civilization* and developing idiosyncratically throughout his career, can now be seen as a second moment in our process: the moment of its bureaucratization. Foucault's attempt to translate epistemological analysis into a politics of domination, and to conjoin knowledge and power so intimately as to make them henceforth inseparable, now transforms the Look into an instrument of measurement. The visible thereby becomes the bureaucratic gaze, which everywhere seeks out the measurability of the henceforth reified Other and its henceforth reified world.

This move involves a basic redistribution of emphases, if not a complete inversion, of the earlier Sartrean model of the Look: since here it is the fact of being visible for a henceforth absent look, of the sheer vulnerability to the Look and its measurements, which is generalized, to the point at which the individual act of looking itself is no longer required. Being looked at becomes a state of universal subjection that can be separated out from the event of any specific individual gaze.

Traditionally, power is what can be seen, what displays and manifests itself, and it paradoxically finds the very principle of its power in the movement by which this last is deployed ... In [this new disciplinary world] it is power's subjects that are required to be seen. Their illumination secures the hold of the power exercised upon them. It is the fact of being seen uninterruptedly, of always being able to be seen, which maintains the disciplinary individual in his subjection. Examination, observation, is then the technique whereby power, instead of emitting the sign of its force, instead of imposing its own mark on its subjects, seizes them in an objectifying mechanism . . . The [medical] examination stands as the ceremony of this objectivisation.<sup>8</sup>

The ambiguity of Foucault's multiple positions, but also the consequences of his work generally, is at one with the ambiguity of a rhetoric of the exclusively political, or in other words of domination alone, and which excludes economic structures. A rhetoric of power which omits or shuts out any complementary notion of liberation or utopia feeds back into a Hobbesian notion of the evils of human nature whether it wants to or not. It is certain that Foucault's positions, however incoherent, struck a responsive note in the anti-authoritarian politics which emerged from the 1960s, and which modulated without great difficulty into a feminist politics critical of patriarchal authority and hierarchy on the one hand, or an anarchist politics hostile to institutions and the state generally. Today, with a critical reevaluation of notions of subversion, transgression and negativity or critique underway everywhere (a re-examination in which Foucault's own paradoxical denunciation of the notion of repression, in the *History of Sexuality*, volume I, played no small role), Foucault's work may seem more classbound and less politically productive than it once was.

I make these overhasty judgments on Foucault's positions because it seems to me they offer a clarification of the new role of the Look and of visibility in his work, while reinforcing my assertion that the vision in Foucault is more generally bureaucratic, and thus paradoxically less political than it was in the Sartrean moment, which did dramatically posit a moment of liberation, however mythical. The identification of knowledge with power, of the epistemological with the politics of domination, tends to dissolve the political itself as a separate instance or possibility of praxis, and by making all forms of knowledge and measurement over into forms of discipline, control and domination, in effect evacuates the more narrowly political altogether.

Another way of saying so is that the new regime fatally and tendentially excludes agency as such from the process of visual domination, which becomes an impersonal (and an irreversible) one. In the Sartre-Fanon moment, agency is no doubt at first passive: I register the colonial situation by way of the sheer oppression of being seen. Individual colonists or oppressors need no longer be present, no doubt; but my very visible being testifies to their existence, in a new kind of 'ontological proof'. It is a position very consistent with the situation of colonization as such, where, unlike what so often obtains in domestic or class politics, 'it is scarcely necessary to argue for the existence of the apparatus of colonial domination or that of the colonizers themselves, and when the 'war of national liberation' imposes itself as a self-evident need and an unavoidable 'solution'. A different, radically modified reign of visibility can thereby be imagined - the utopia for my own collectivity, as that is appropriated by my act of resistance: it can still give rise to a utopian space, as opposed to the Foucauldian heterotopia, whose unrelated and radically distinct corners and folds rise from a generalized yet inaccessible spatiality (reflected in Foucault's own characteristically spatial style). So it is that, from the very outset, Aime Cesaire's 'return' to a ruined and colonized 'native land' generates a space beyond it:

Beat it, I said to him, you cop, you lousy pig, beat it, I detest the flunkies of order and the cockchafers of hope. Beat it, evil grigri, you bedbug of a petty monk. Then I turned toward paradises lost for him and his kin, calmer than the face of a woman telling lies, and there, rocked by the flux of a never exhausted thought I nourished the wind, I unlaced the monsters and heard rise, from the other side of disaster, a river of turtledoves and savannah clover which I carry forever in my depths height-deep as the twentieth floor of the most arrogant houses and as a guard against the putrefying force of crepuscular surroundings, surveyed night and day by a cursed venereal sun.<sup>9</sup>

What is at stake in such visions is to be sure a utopia of separatism, a cultural nationalist space swept free of the colonial gaze, in a secessionist (and as we would say today, ethnic) vision easier to sustain and defend during the imperialist period than after decolonization and the accompanying globalization.

Yet it is precisely just such a possibility of Otherness, of a transfiguration of the visible space of domination, which is lost in Foucault, or in modernization theory generally, where archaic social relations are thrown irrevocably into a distant and irretrievable past by the now universal forces of rationalization and calculation. For this new Foucauldian process, a very different kind of literary language seems the appropriate emblem, one locked into the visible and measurable universe without alternative.

This is the paranoiac enumeration of Alain Robbe-Grillet's 'new novel', or 'roman du regard', whose visual data betray only an unformulable underside which marks them as symptoms that must forever remain indeterminable. Detail here no longer awakens the interpretative lust of Dali's 'paranoiac-critical' method, where the very grain of gold sand, the individual beads of perspiration on the limp watches, promise an impending revelation. In Robbe-Grillet, for all the

catastrophic temporality of the accumulated sentences, it is something closer to obsessional neurosis that declares itself, mindless compulsions not unrelated to workaholic efficiency, in which an absent subject desperately attempts to distract itself by way of sheer rote measurement and enumeration, as pre-eminently in his one tropical or 'colonial' novel, *La Jalousie*:

In front of him, on the other bank, stretches a trapezoidal plot, curvilinear on the water's edge, all of whose banana trees have been harvested at a relatively recent date. It is easy to count its stock, where trees chopped for the cuttings have left a 'short stump terminated by a disk-shaped scar, white or yellowish depending on its freshness. A line-by-line count yields the following, from left to right: twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one, twenty, twenty, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Such pages can seem a virtual parody of the Foucauldian theory to the degree to which they seem to express not the supreme omnipresence of the power or the measuring eye, but rather its impotent delirium, its victimization by its own exorbitant power. Yet they convey something of the nightmarish feeling Foucault's own evocations of absolute visibility have often been seen to have for his readers; and they also underscore the peculiar dissociation - in Foucault as well as in Robbe-Grillet - of the sensory and the formerly conceptual, still felt to be active somewhere, impersonally, behind the now denuded sense perception itself.

It is a dissociation also associated, but in a very different way from either of these writers, with what came to be called conceptual art: where a tangible object seemed to offer no toehold for a thinking that continued to turn around it, in endless circles of paradox and categorical self-cancellation. There is no metaphysical or political kinship between conceptual art and the visual theories and practices I have been discussing here: yet its mention usefully dramatizes a moment in the becoming universal of visibility in which the abstract mind seems unable to find its niche or function in this unexpected primacy, of a sense once subordinate to it. Conceptual art also foregrounds the significance of the enigmatic and no-longer-mediatory object itself, as a place of transit (like Descartes' pineal gland) between an impersonal visibility and the equally impersonal and disembodied forces of a universal rationalization and bureaucratization.

The true breakthrough in this second moment, which will prepare and enable a very different third stage, can take place when the enigmatic object itself is replaced by a technological one, and in particular by mediatic technology. Now the silent object itself can once again speak, indeed visibility will find itself transformed into a whole new speech, with momentous consequences for the previous systems. It is a potential transformation whose dimensions can be read in the very ambiguities of the word 'image', which had not yet seemed appropriate for the acts of vision celebrated either in Sartre or in Foucault, but which now suddenly (as in Guy Debord's great book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, where it is announced that 'the image is the final form of commodity reification') imposes itself everywhere, at the same time that it insistently begins to designate a technological origin. This is then the paradoxical outcome of the Foucauldian moment of the bureaucratic eye, which, in the very process of revealing the intimate connection between seeing and measurement or knowledge, suddenly turns out to posit the media as such (and in retrospect the now only too familiar Foucauldian emblem of the panopticon reveals itself as a first form of the media as well). For in our time, it is technology and the media which are the true bearers of the epistemological function: whence a mutation in cultural production in which traditional forms give way to mixed-media experiments, and photography, film and television all begin to seep into the visual work of art (and the other arts as well) and to colonize it, generating high-tech hybrids of all kinds, from installations to computer art.

But at this point, the Foucauldian moment begins to give way to a third stage, which it is appropriate to identify with postmodernity as such. Everything that was paranoid about Foucault's total system or Robbe-Grillet's compulsive enumerations vanishes away, to make room for a euphoria of high technology proper, a celebratory affirmation of some post-McLuhanite vision of culture transmogrified by computers and cyberspace. Now suddenly a hitherto baleful universal visibility that seemed to brook no utopian alternative is welcomed and revelled in for its own sake: this is the true moment of image society, in which human subjects henceforth exposed (according to Paul Willis) to bombardments of up to a thousand images a day (at the same time that their formerly private lives are thoroughly viewed and scrutinized, itemized, measured and enumerated, in data banks) begin to live a very different relationship to space and time, to existential experience as well as cultural consumption.

It seems to me that in this new situation the reflexivity implied by the mixed-media or technological works of art is of very brief duration indeed. For, as I've argued elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> in this new stage the very sphere of culture itself has expanded, becoming coterminous with market society in such a way that the cultural is no longer limited to its earlier, traditional or experimental forms, but is consumed throughout daily life itself, in shopping, in professional activities, in the various often televisual forms of leisure, in production for the market and in the consumption of those market products, indeed in the most secret folds and corners of the quotidian. Social space is now completely saturated with the culture of the image; the utopian space of the Sartrean reversal, the Foucauldian heterotopias of the unclassed and unclassifiable, all have been triumphantly penetrated and colonized, the authentic and the unsaid, *in-vu, non-dit*, inexpressible, alike, fully translated into the visible and the culturally familiar.

The closed space of the aesthetic is thereby also opened up to its henceforth fully culturalized context: whence the critical attacks of the postmodernists on antiquated notions of the 'autonomy of the work of art' and the 'autonomy of the aesthetic' that persisted through the modernist period, or better still, that served as its philosophical cornerstone. Indeed, in a strict philosophical sense, this end of the modern must also spell the end of the aesthetic itself, or of aesthetics in general: for where the latter suffuses everything, where the sphere of culture expands to the point where everything becomes in one way or another acculturated, the traditional distinctiveness or 'specificity' of the aesthetic (and even of culture as such) is necessarily blurred or lost altogether.

The return of the aesthetic, however, has (as has earlier been observed) seemed to go hand in hand with the equally widely trumpeted end of the political in the postmodern era. This paradox demands a dialectical explanation, which has to do with the end of artistic autonomy, of the work of art and of its frame. For once one no longer scrutinizes individual works as such, for their form and inner organization, the tour of the museum calls forth aleatory perceptions, in which glints of colour are collected from this or that surface in passing, fragments of form consumed in Benjaminian distraction, and as though laterally, out of the corner of the eye, textures acknowledged, densities navigated in an unmappable way with space assembling and disassembling itself oneirically around you. Under these conditions aesthetic attention finds itself transferred to the life of perception as such, abandoning the former object that organized it and returning into subjectivity, where it seems to offer a random and yet wide-ranging sampling of sensations, affectabilities and irritations of sense data and stimulations of all sorts and kinds. This is not a recovery of the body in any active and independent way, but rather its transformation into a passive and mobile field of 'enregimentment' in which tangible portions of the world are taken up and dropped again in the permanent inconsistency of a mesmerizing sensorium.

It is this new life of postmodern sensation which has been appealed to as evidence for a renewal of the aesthetic, a conceptual fiction or allusion then transferred back to accounts of newer works that most fittingly serve as pretexts for its shimmering play and exercise. Here the former aesthetic is celebrated in terms of something like an intensification, a heightening upwards or downwards, of perceptual experience: among which can be ranged interesting speculations on the 'sublime' (which has known a new 'postmodern' revival of its own, in a radically modified role than the one it played in modernism), on the simulacrum and the 'uncanny' - now taken less as specifically aesthetic modalities than as local 'intensities', accidents in the continuum of postcontemporary life, breaks and gaps in the perceptual system of late capitalism. Nor is it a question of 'repudiating' this new system of experience, let alone of calling essentially moral condemnation down on it in the name of some value from the past. *Hie Rhodus, hie salta!* as Marx liked to say; this is our world and our raw material, the only kind with which we can work. Only it would be better to look at it without illusions, and get some clarity and precision about what confronts us. Current revivals of the aesthetic have not wanted to do that, but rather to stage an elaborate apology of the tradition and to elaborate complex arguments about its continuing relevance. We will look at some of those now.

### III

The works I have in mind are mostly European, and of very high intellectual quality, which puts to shame reactionary American operations like Hilton Kramer's *New Criterion*. That the 'return to the aesthetic' they propose also has political implications in a rather different European context is unquestionable, for, as with the Kramer journal, they all breathe relief at the end of the sixties, and beyond that, of the Cold War itself, with its obligatory ideological struggles. But they come out of traditions in which reflection on the aesthetic has been philosophically central, and not, as in the anti-intellectualism of American culture, a marginal hobby at best. Thus, Karl-Heinz Bohrer seeks to recover an authentic Nietzschean perception in his extraordinary book, *Plotzlichkeit*,<sup>12</sup> which argues for an existence of aesthetic experience outside historical time, and for the irrelevance of historical thinking in this area, thus turning Adorno against himself, and expertly retrieving the non-historical parts of Heidegger (and even more notoriously in another book, of Ernst Junger).

Thus, these works tend to associate the recovery of the aesthetic with the recovery of great modernism itself; and their arguments thus attempt to validate Jean-Fran<sup>ois</sup> Lyotard's impertinent proposition that 'postmodernism' does not follow modernism but *precedes* it and prepares its re-emergence and some new and, historically unexpected flowering of what was once the New of high modern art. I want to show, however, that it is a rather different 'return' that is at stake here, however deceptive the appearances.

In France, the vital source of the modern and its aesthetic and philosophical theorization does not lie in philosophical texts, but rather in Baudelaire, coiner of the very word 'modernity', whose poetic practice as well as his theory lends an imperishable resonance and gravity to the word modern (in all the European languages). It is thus as a return to Baudelaire that Antoine Compagnon stages his exemplary theoretical move, in a splendid theoretical performance, in which the conventional narratives of modernist literary history are reversed. *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity<sup>TM</sup>* is laid out in bravura Hegelian form, in which the five features of the title become five distinct moments in the historical progression from the first intuition of the modern in Baudelaire all the way to the confused pluralism of the postmodern, in which, however,

Compagnon reserves the right to discern the glimmering of a rebirth of some more authentic return to Baudelaire and to the spirit of the original 'modernism'.

His five themes or moments are the following: 'the superstition of the new, the religion of the future, the theoretical (or theoreticist) obsession, the appeal to mass culture, and the passion of subversion [by which the critical and negative features of contemporary 'theory' are meant]'.<sup>14</sup> One is tempted to read this progression - clearly a gradual degradation - as something like an anti-modernist argument: but this is to reckon without a dialectic of authenticity and perversion, in which, for example, the authentic modernities of Baudelaire and Nietzsche are deformed and their lessons gradually lost. If the position is antimodernist, then, it must also be characterized as being equally antipostmodern, for this last is seen as a superficial, media and decorative production and a fundamentally frivolous moment in the history of art (and even of architecture). The dialectical twist here lies in the way in which the historic mission of the postmodern is said to consist in discrediting the more noxious aspects and developments of the modern itself (as that is conventionally understood). Here then, less prophetically than Lyotard, but more plausibly and ingeniously, Compagnon secures the hope that the postmodern moment may yet pave the way for the return of a more authentic and genuinely modernist aesthetic.

Another crucial dialectical mechanism in Compagnon's argument turns on the phenomenon of the avant-garde which, with Peter Burger, he wishes radically to distinguish from 'normal-paradigmatic' art production: thus the great and isolated modern writers and artists (who follow the example of Baudelaire himself) are to be sharply differentiated from those avant-garde movements whose full form is almost universally identified with the surrealists. But where for Burger the avant-gardes mark the moment in which art breaks through to a selfconsciousness about its own activity and a critique of its sustaining institutions, for Compagnon the avant-garde simply spells a falling off from art itself and a deterioration into that politics of intellectuals which is substituted for it. This is a rather traditional aestheticist view (Adorno shared it, for example) as well as a self-fulfilling and unfalsifiable proposition, for it suffices to enumerate those orthodox surrealist poets and painters to whom Compagnon is prepared to deny all aesthetic merit, and then to subtract the great exceptions - Masson, for example, or Max Ernst - whose achievements are then explained by their having abandoned avant-garde politics for a return to genuine art as such.

At any rate, such distinctions now allow the critic to distinguish between the authenticity of a truly aesthetic production, from Baudelaire himself and Cezanne all the way to Beckett and Dubuffet, and that inauthentic appropriation of art for other purposes, which will be documented by Compagnon's five themes and stages.

The crucial operation in the first moment is the way in which Baudelaire's first institutions of a relationship of art to the present is degraded into a conception of the merely New. A most ambiguous passage from Baudelaire's 'Painter of Everyday Life' is adduced to secure this vital distinction, a passage in which the poet-theorist describes a truly modern art as one which would somehow combine the fleeting reality of the ephemeral historical instant with an equal commitment to the eternal and changeless realm of form: which would in other words (those of Baudelaire himself) 'draw the eternal out of the transitory', with the implication that it is the modern painter who finds the eternal in the transitory in the first place. 'Modernity', declares Baudelaire famously, 'is the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent, the one half of art, whose other half is the eternal and the immutable'. It is therefore a misunderstanding - but one with

momentous consequences - to think that artistic modernity is here defined only by the transitory or the 'new' as such: it is rather to be grasped, following Baudelaire, as the invention and conquest of a certain 'presence to the world'<sup>15</sup> and its artists 'do not seek the new but the present' as such. This is the point at which Compagnon's analysis intersects with Bohrer's (mentioned above), where temporal 'suddenness' (*Plotzlichkeit*) designates just such a presence to the world which cannot be interpreted as a merely historical innovation, even though it may express a kind of 'timeless' Heideggerian historicity. I believe that this kind of argument overlooks the question of the social and historical preconditions for the emergence of such a 'modern' presence to the world, which the other part of the argument presumed to be a novelty of Baudelaire's society, unavailable in that form to earlier historical moments of cultural and social organization. Even the possibility of getting out of history (if it exists) remains a historical one; and it is as though both Bohrer and Compagnon need to forget the historical limits of their discussions of the modern, in order not to open up their 'timeless' aesthetic to the sheerest classicism.

Yet once this initial disjunction between the present and the New is granted, the inevitable stages of a decline, the progressive decadence of an inauthentic modernism, follow logically enough. For the New, and the break it stages with tradition, now quickly un.masks itself as a commitment, not to the present but to the *future*. It thereby generates spurious narratives about the development of art in general, in which the discredited bourgeois value of progress is secretly or not so secretly installed in the aesthetic realm. There emerges thereby what Compagnon rightly calls the 'orthodox narrative of the modern tradition', exemplified in Clement Greenberg and rehearsed in the latter's relations with a post-war North American abstract expressionism (with no reference to the historical necessity of Greenberg's theoretical work, to forge an American teleological myth in order to break the hold of European and in particular of Parisian art institutions in the period of the Marshall Plan).<sup>16</sup> Compagnon's critique of Greenberg here rejoins much of contemporary anti-historicism, with its dissatisfaction with the potted meta-narratives of old and new history manuals and its assimilation of analyses in terms of innovation to the various older genetic and evolutionary accounts. But Compagnon's diagnosis adds the covert apologia for contemporary schools to this wholesale distrust of the historical in art history: "The orthodox narrative is always written in function of the climax it steers for - this is its teleological aspect - and serves to legitimate a contemporary art that wants however to look as though it had broken with tradition - this is its apologetic one."<sup>17</sup>

But now such narratives seem to demand a conceptual content and a thematization to expound them in slogans and lend them an ideological rationale: this is now the function of the avant-garde as such, where the mirage of the future finds support in the sheer polemic violence of their avant-garde mission, in spokespeople like Breton and his followers. There was, Compagnon asserts in what is perhaps his boldest 'paradox', no theory in Cezanne or Baudelaire: 'they did not consider themselves either revolutionaries or theoreticians'.<sup>18</sup> This is a swerve which allows Compagnon to associate his polemic for aesthetics with the current reaction against theory as such, in France as well as in the US. Here the word theory tacitly encompasses everything from radicalism to philosophical speculation, from Marxism to poststructuralism, from literary theory to 'Critical Theory', from sociology to philosophies of history: everything, in short, which today prevents the university work of the humanities from deteriorating into a sandbox operation devoted to harmless and decorative eternal values and formalisms (probably not what Baudelaire meant by 'the eternal and the immutable', as I will show later on).

Two features of Compagnon's diagnosis are plausible and need to be retained: the first is his assertion of a link between theoretical legitimation (by way of the manifesto, for example) and the reduction of artistic production to a 'method', or in other words to a few isolated features or procedures<sup>9</sup> which could then serve as the theme for aesthetic propaganda and be identified as somehow truly revolutionary (whether in the artistic or the political sense, it scarcely matters). But this impoverishment of sheer procedure and technique would then go a long way towards accounting for the one-dimensionality imputed to avant-garde art.

Then, in terms of reception, one can evoke the way in which this kind of art 'remains inseparable from the intellectual discourse which justified it theoretically':<sup>20</sup> here what is posited is not only that avant-garde art comes after the theoretical apologia for it, but also that it finds itself thereby transformed into a mere example of the theory. But I think that Compagnon also suggests here a new kind of reception in which the sensory, the formerly aesthetic, is somehow mingled with the ideational or the theoretical: it would be very interesting to develop a phenomenology of such mingled reactions (indeed, the conceptual art referred to above gives us one distinct variety); yet as with the initial defences of theory generally against empiricism, it is not plausible that there can be imagined to exist forms of reception which are purely sensory or even purely aesthetic. Meanwhile, we have learned to be suspicious of the very idea of the 'pure' or the 'purified' as a norm to be defended and reinforced in its own right.

The last two chapters are more schematic and also more ambiguous, for they quickly bring us down to modern times and at length to postmodernism itself. The first of these suggests that the new acknowledgement of mass culture (let us say, pop art) amounts simply to the coming to consciousness and awakening of a profoundly inauthentic art to its own deep complicity with the market system as such and to the commodity form: the logic rather resembles that of blaming the victim, particularly when one remembers the way in which Peter Burger grasped such reflexivity as a positive moment in the coming to consciousness in modern art of its own conditions of production. Adorno thought, indeed, that the very specificity of modern art lay in its confrontation with the commodity form, albeit on the mode of resisting it and reappropriating its essential reification. But the interpretation allows Compagnon a discreet participation in another contemporary North-American cultural-political debate, namely the assault of the conservatives on the dangers of so-called Cultural Studies. What else can he mean by his ambiguous rhetorical question: 'Does not the illness of modern art, indeed its very curse, lie in the obligation it has always felt to pose aesthetic questions in cultural terms?'<sup>2</sup>

Theory then reappears in the final chapter, in which the final stage of the decadence of the modern is identified with the rhetoric of subversion and critique, this last now also seen as the final form of the 'orthodox narrative' denounced above. Theory thus seems to make two cameo appearances in this story: the first under the guise of the avant-garde manifesto, in which some artistic production (albeit spurious) nonetheless continued to take place; and finally here, in full postmodernity, in which (as one imagines) literature and art have definitively been assigned a second place, if not a purely supernumerary function (it may be permitted to hear echoes here of the standard conservative complaint that our students read Derrida instead of Proust, when, indeed, they read anything at all). But subversion and critique accompanied modern art throughout its lifespan, and can certainly be found in Baudelaire's horror of the bourgeoisie. To introduce the motif so late in the game is to court the ridicule of Hilton Kramer's assertion that the modernist artists were always the 'loyal opposition' of capitalism. The accompanying denunciation of the vested interest of radical intellectuals in such values (i.e. subversion and

critique) is of little more interest than the other face of the proposition which would identify the classic *ressentiment* of conservative intellectuals deprived of their rightful place in a still essentially liberal cultural establishment: both observations have their truth, but it ill behoves an intellectual to make them.

Yet, as has already been suggested, this sorry tale has an at least potentially happy ending: particularly since postmodernism arrived on the scene armed with a repudiation of the modernist teleology as such, and can thus be read as the negation of precisely some of the very features associated by Compagnon, not with true modernism, but with the avant-garde: 'The historical avant-gardes, nihilist and futurist, always guided by some theory or other, believed that artistic development had a meaning; but the pop art of the 1960s, and then the complete aesthetic permissiveness of the [19]70s, have freed art from the imperative to innovate'.<sup>22</sup> So now at last the fetishism of the New, the narrative obsession with the future, the in-fecundation of art theory itself, can be definitely abandoned: 'postmodern consciousness now allows us to reinterpret the modern tradition, without seeing it as a kind of historical conveyor belt, and the great adventure of the New'<sup>3</sup>

The postmodern has thus for Compagnon and others at least one imaginably positive function: to cleanse the modern tradition of its anti- or trans-aesthetic motives, to purify it of whatever was protopolitical or historical, or even collective, in it, to return artistic production to the disinterested aesthetic activity that a certain bourgeois tradition (but not that of the artists themselves) always attributed to it. The other, more progressive features of the postmodern - its populism and pluralizing democratization, its commitment to the ethnic and the plebeian, and to feminism, its anti-authoritarianism and anti-elitism, its profound anarchism, precisely its anti-bourgeois features - these must of course drop out of the picture. Once they have done so, however, the outlines of a whole new aestheticism, a new return to traditional conceptions of the beautiful (as those survive residually even in Baudelaire himself) become visible.

But before taking this final step, it would seem helpful to juxtapose Compagnon's contemporary analysis (which we will finally, and despite his own judgments on the matter, have to class as an essentially postmodern text) with one of the authentic, if belated, dinosaurs of the modern movement, Andre Malraux's *Voices of Silence*, which still makes ultimate claims on the metaphysical nature of modern art (and art in general), in ways utterly inconsistent with postmodern theory and values. It is certain that the ineradicable 'humanism' of Malraux's work ('la force et l'honneur d'être homme') as well as the solemnity of its rhetoric, are not calculated to appeal to a contemporary public. On the other hand, Malraux's pan-aestheticism, his comprehensive and global assimilation of human art since the cave paintings into the new 'imaginary museum' of some world civilization, go well beyond any of the contemporary 'returns to the aesthetic', which are staged, as in Compagnon and Bohrer, under the sign of some resurrected high modernism. The role this last plays in Malraux, however, is far more complex (and it might well also be objected that more contemporary art - abstract expressionism itself, let alone pop art and its sequels - where they are mentioned at all, are simply in Malraux assimilated to the modern paradigm: which is to say that nothing can be found here to correspond to what will later on become the postmodern).

But this very expansion of the corpus of what now counts for us as art (and Malraux's theory of the metamorphosis of forms secures the 'modern' transformation into 'works of art' for us of cultic and religious items that precede any conception of secular art as such) makes for theoretical

problems in Malraux's argument which have no equivalent in the contemporary aesthetic treatises mentioned above. In particular, besides the assimilation of older pre-aesthetic forms into the Western secular categories, there is also the issue, central for him ideologically, of the metaphysical spirit of such pre-Western cultures (and the religions around which they were organized): above all, what is at stake is the distinction between cultures which affirm human life (from the first smiles of the seventh-century Greek Kouroi) and those (like that of the Aztecs, or even the Christianity of the tortured deity) which deny it, and betray a nihilistic impulse apparently at odds with the humanistic principles of the 'imaginary museum'.

Besides this problem of value as such, there are specific features of Malraux's own modernism which seem inconsistent with his scheme, or irrelevant to it (and which are not at all thematized in Compagnon's account of the modern). First and foremost among these is the conviction of the quintessential modernity of the machine or of modern technology: a fascination Malraux shared with many of his modernist contemporaries, from the futurists to Brecht, delighting in the machine age, and celebrating the airplane and the photograph, the tank and the motorcar, the radio and aerial or panoramic perspective. Indeed, I believe it could be plausibly argued that the modernist *Novum* conjoins the Bohrer/Compagnon's 'presence to the world' with a technological excitement alien to them, and an excitement of the machine which imprints the sheer aesthetic innovations of the modern as a secret model or prototype (and I think that this could even be demonstrated in indirect ways for those modern writers like Proust who seem for the most part innocent of technological enthusiasms in their content). It would, however, be crucial to insist on the historical specificity of this particular modernist technology, resulting from the second or industrial stage of capitalism, and quite different in its effects from the cybernetic and atomic technology of postmodernity, despite seemingly analogous infatuations.

The technological paradigm, meanwhile - already present in Baudelaire himself, but omitted from Compagnon's ideal stage of the latter's authentic modernity - persists into Malraux's late, Gaullist and aestheticist, period, and can be observed to be ingeniously woven into the argument and indeed the very conceptual fabric of *The Voices of Silence*. For one thing, as the immense first chapter of this book demonstrates, the very proposition of some new 'imaginary museum' has as its fundamental precondition the existence of photography as a new technological medium. But this initial technological prerequisite is then interiorized and assimilated into the very content of Malraux's historical narrative, not merely in the familiar sense of the competition between photograph and painting in the nineteenth century, but above all in the transformation of the former into the new narrative art of cinema - whose emergence and existence has been crucial to the practice as well as the theory of Malraux - and to which the torch of a hitherto narrative painting will now be passed, with decisive consequences for the art we consider to be modern: 'the first characteristic of modern art is not to tell a story'<sup>4</sup>

From this characteristically negative and positive dialectic the specificity of an at first Western and European modernist art will be deduced, which must now take its place alongside the 'humanist' and nihilist premodern arts as a further complication of Malraux's central theoretical problem: now not only this opposition must be resolved in order to welcome the nonsecular 'arts' of other cultures and religions into the 'imaginary museum', but the very opposition between sacred and secular, between thousands of years of cult objects and this peculiarly modern practice, in which painting takes itself as its own deepest subject matter, and stages a radical and seemingly unbridgeable rupture with all the arts of the past. But so do the world's religions: thereby adding the fact of ineradicable historical discontinuities to Malraux's theoretical difficulties.

It is by the way of the notion of the 'Absolute' that Malraux cuts across these various knots: the Absolute considered, very much as in *La Condition humaine*, as any authentic confrontation by human beings with their own finitude and death. This transhistorical conception of the Absolute thus squares the circle that leads from nihilism to whatever fragile humanism, for both are modes of confrontation with death, and indeed their confluence was already foreshadowed in Perken's significant remark (in the early *Voie royale*), that 'il y a aussi quelque chose de ... satisfaisant dans l'écrasement de la vie ...'. At the same time a secular 'modernism' or modern art can now also be added to this list of the great absolutes; and if I have dwelt at such length on this still impressive work, it was to arrive at this point at which a paradigmatic modernist aestheticism necessarily completes itself with a trans-aesthetic dimension. Malraux's 'Absolute' then confirms Adorno's remark - 'where art is experienced purely aesthetically, it fails to be fully experienced even aesthetically'<sup>25</sup> - and rebukes those contemporary returns to the aesthetic which seek to purify the latter by eradicating everything extra-aesthetic in the works they celebrate.

But it is also a point that could be made by way of a different kind of terminology: for it seems to me that Malraux's aesthetic conception of the Absolute is also to be assimilated to the notion of the Sublime, as that gradually became the fundamental motor impulse of modernism from the romantic period onwards. The function of the Sublime, it will be recalled, was to displace those merely decorative forms classified under the opposing rubric of Beauty, whose properties are the central concern of traditional aesthetics and traditional artistic production. In that case, however, not only are the 'returns' to the modern and 'pure' or authentic aesthetics unmasked as so many forms of Beauty, rather than as contemporary versions of the modernist Sublime; but the aesthetics of postmodernism generally can be characterized in just such a way, as the displacement of various modernist claims to 'sublimity' by more modest and decorative practices in which sensory beauty is once again the heart of the matter. This is what I will try to show in a concluding section.

#### IV

We will now explore the visual consequences of this 'return of the aesthetic' in the image production of contemporary film, where the lure of Beauty and the ideology of aestheticism seems to play a renewed, if historically modified, role. I want to examine an English filmmaker (Derek Jarman), an African one (Souleymane Cisse) and a Mexican (Paul Leduc), before looking at some recent European high-cultural successes and once again examining the vexed question of contemporary historical films (which I have elsewhere called 'nostalgia films'). The premise has nothing to do with individual influences, but rather with the mediation of a common situation to which all these directors react in one way or another, and which is diffused and transmitted by an international film festival culture, which constitutes the level of globalization in film production today (as that seeks to oppose and to pose alternatives to an equally global US commercial film exporting system).

Derek Jarman's most widely distributed film, *Caravaggio (1986)*, is in many ways supremely representative, in its content as well as in its form, of the *painterly* strategy, in which, as in Godard's *Passion (1982)*, the well-known but still electrifying paintings alternate with tableaux of the living bodies of actors imitating them, in the guise of posing for them. The separation of form and content implicit in the posing of a pre-existent tableau by actors reconfirms and strengthens the simulacrum-qualities of the filmic image itself, by restoring some 'real world' of which this is but the visionary staging in an aleatory image.

The succession of such images - a fog-blue room holding a motionless figure in purple, bodies with a corpse-like pallor adjoining the folds of a brilliant red garment, the spilling of a jug in pieces, or a dish of oranges, smoke filtering through a classic low-life tavern, or a religious procession, or a knife-duel among toughs - these stunning shots, which frame each other by their very alternation and bring each other into being, produce each other by their very contrast, are in their formal logic deeply static. They do not merely burden the plot - such as it is - they turn it inside out, and make the biographical sequence of actions and events into a mere pretext for the visuals. This is inscribed within the film as a kind of boredom -the boredom of the models, the boredom of the hangers-on in the painter's studio, drowsing and waiting endlessly for the painter to decide on an angle or a tint of colour-contrast; it is inscribed, even more deeply, in the painter's life, which is itself little more than a marking time and a waiting between acts of the painting of a canvas which are somehow essentially outside of human ' time or praxis. But nothing is more paradoxical when we have to do with this particular painter, whose notorious life is virtually a paradigm of adventure and of crisis, the beaux-arts' equivalent of Villon or Genet! Boredom is here finally the sign of the withdrawal from history, of which classical plot now becomes the allegory. Even sexuality and violence - elsewhere the very staples of an essentially visual mass-cultural pornography - are emptied out by the painterly gaze, the aesthetic fetishism of this immense world-weariness. Indeed, a supplement of boredom is the price the viewer is asked to pay, as a kind of devotion to 'art' as such, to the reappearance of a virtual religion of the image on the other side of countercultural marginality (and in another sense, no doubt, the spectator is inscribed in this film allegorically in the person of the mute and slow-witted companion-servant of the painter).

But I have not mentioned the most striking feature of this work, namely its magic-realist anachronisms, as when we hear a train in the background of a lovers' bed, watch a Renaissance protagonist work on his motorcycle, a prince of the church peck away at his old-fashioned typewriter, observe a scene acted out in a cavernous garage in front of an old roadster, or watch court figures in silken finery calculate something on a portable adding machine. These are all, it will be noted, the technologies of an expanded conception of the media as such, encompassing both transportation and communication: densely crystallized and then projected into the painterly past in the form of discrete gadgets, these tell-tale objects stand as the symptom for the deeper complex of impulses at work here, foregrounding the relationship between aesthetics and technology in the postmodern, and unmasking the dialectical link between this conception of beauty and the high-tech structure of late capitalism. Jarman<sup>26</sup> thereby demystifies the very different nature of mystique of a Tarkovsky, about whom I've suggested in another place<sup>27</sup> that his breathtaking reinvention of the natural elements on the wide screen - sodden marshes, rain, blazing flames - are themselves mere inversions of the advanced technology that permits their reproduction: they are thus in the truest sense simulacra, and one is tempted to turn to a film from a very different tradition to seek their estrangement and demystification. I am thinking of the American SF film *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), with its mesmerizing euthanasia sequence, in which the citizens of a dead and barren, polluted and overpopulated planet, from which clean air and water, and all plant life, have been effaced, are encouraged in one last high-tech ritual to go to their deaths consuming enormous National Geographic holographs of a natural beauty that had ceased to exist on Earth a century before.

But one can also imagine a very different image production from this one, and it is this that seems to me to mark the turn of the Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cisse away from social realism to the extraordinary visual and mythic narrative of *Yeelen* (*The Light*, 1987), a film which has stunned

audiences all over the world by its visual splendour and by the power of its fable, in which a bad ogre-like father, endowed with frightening magical powers and capable of documenting the assertions of anthropologists that the original shamans were technically paranoid schizophrenics, implacably hunts down his son, who equally seeks his own share of the magic, and confronts him in an ultimate duel in which they destroy each other along with the organic world itself, in a final atomic blast that leaves nothing but desert. The monitory denouement, with its ecological overtones, clearly asserts a certain contemporary intention; while the mythic vehicle allows the power of the image to invest directly in the narrative in virtually the reverse of what happens in Jarman, and to stage a plot whose very characters have become vessels for natural forces and elements. It is a very remarkable experience, indeed; but it is also, particularly following on Cisse's social films describing the crises and state repression of contemporary Third World society, a peculiarly aestheticizing one in all the senses in which we have used this word. I hope it is not puritanical of a Western viewer to say so, but I feel a certain perplexity about this work which I am at least reassured to find that my African friends share. Myths are pseudo-narratives which can have no conclusion and no genuine contemporary content; the atomic flash at the end of this one is rather the symptom of impoverishment and the acknowledgement of a certain ideological defeat or failure: but where the recourse to myth in the modernist period (Thomas Mann, T. S. Eliot's essay on *Ulysses*) provided the possibility of substituting one kind of narrative for another, whose closure presented structural difficulties, this more postmodern 'mythic' procedure can better be grasped as the pretext for substituting an image for the otherwise unresolvable narrative contradiction.

A rather different light is shed on this problem of the legitimation of the image by the films of the Mexican director Paul Leduc, and in particular his extraordinary *Latino Bar* (1990). This film eschews all mythic motivation, and yet foregrounds the image as such even more absolutely insofar as, despite a 'total flow' of popular music in its soundtrack, it does without all dialogue, thereby less approximating the operatic version of MTV practised by Jarman than returning in some original and idiosyncratic fashion to the dynamics of silent films as such. Yet the sequence of shots does not, as in the greatest silent films of the tradition, confront us with the labour and the emergence of some primal narrativity from out of the specific sign-system and wordless impoverished stills of the photographic image. Rather, it stunningly reinvents itself on two dialectically distinct registers: on the one hand, a simple and even stereotypical narrative of love and jealousy, violence and struggle, set in a complex spatial labyrinth of booths, huts and taverns on a pier in Maracaibo, a narrative which needs no words; and on the other, a system of colour distinct either from the dynamics of sheer black-and-white or the garish effects of modern technicolour (as exemplified by the other films under discussion here). *Latino Bar* is rather expressed and articulated in a system of darkened and virtual colour, whose only imaginable equivalent might be the tinting occasionally experimented with during the silent era. The image, now liberated from the complex temporalities of a plot you need to read and decipher, to reconstruct at every point, begins to call for a different kind of visual attention, its depths and tenebrosities projecting something like a visual hermeneutic which the eye scans for ever deeper layers of meaning.

We can, I think, detect here a subterranean return of the sacred of an altogether different kind than what was posited in *Yeelen*, for as the camera approaches elements of the pier's installations and then draws back from them again, what the image offers is nothing less than the altars of the *candomble* or the *santeria*, with their profusion of gaudy devotional bric-a-brac intertwined with vegetal masses and floral decoration. The filmic image of Leduc thus imitates the elements of

traditional filmic narrative in much the same way that the altar of *candomble* imitates the 'high' or official religion of the Christian altar, secretly decentring and destabilizing a Eurocentric hierarchy organized around the axis of a central sacred painting or sculpture - a centring and centred representation - and offering at the outer limit some archaic chance at a pre-theocentric inversion and liberation of libidinal energies.

Leduc is an all the more useful reference point for us in this context, owing to his better known film portrait of Frida Kahlo (*Frida*, 1984), a work insensibly infiltrated and colonized by an omnipresent postmodern decoration (which symbolically enacts the reappropriation of Frida by the cultural politics of contemporary social movements). This is then a work which exemplifies some new type of postmodern documentary whose formal originality is comparable to that of the 'new historicism' or the new ethnography with respect to older cultural histories or older anthropological reports. In all these formal mutations, an aesthetic attention and motivation is substituted for older 'rational' interpretation, even though it is an aesthetic of textuality rather than one of sheer style and appearance (as in the aesthetic historicism of the late nineteenth century). Other films that can document this new kind of form might include Isaac Julian's work, and *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1990).

I now want briefly to follow traces of the new aesthetic of Beauty through some lower-level contemporary film genres or types of production. The predominance in commercial cinema of so-called action films, save for the occasional lyric filler, is not implicated here, even though what can descriptively (and non-morally) be called sex-and-violence porn does offer something of a grim caricature of current aesthetic notions of an absolute present in time. For these films offer, in a powerful reduction to the sheer present of sex or violence, intensities which can be read as a compensation for the weakening of any sense of narrative time: the older plots, which still developed and flexed the spectator's local memory, have seemingly been replaced by an endless string of narrative pretexts in which only the experiences available in the sheer viewing present can be entertained.

Yet, precisely this enfeeblement of narrative time - now projected on to narrative history itself - is also one of the determinants of what I have called nostalgia film, a misnomer to the degree to which the term suggests that genuine nostalgia - the passionate longing of the exile in time, the alienation of contemporaries bereft of older historical plenitudes - is still available in postmodernity. The latter is, however, anything but alienated in that older modernist sense: its relationship to the past is that of a consumer adding another rare object to the collection, or another flavour to the international banquet: the postmodern nostalgia film is then very precisely such a consumable set of images, marked very often by music, fashion, hairstyles and vehicles or motorcars (for it is difficult for the form to accommodate periods more distant than the modern era itself). In such films the very style of a period is the content and they substitute a fashion-plate of the age in question for its events, thus producing a kind of generational periodization of a stereotypical kind which is, as we shall see, not without its impact on their capacity to function as narratives. I don't want to be understood as dismissing the often high quality of these reconstructions, which include *The Godfather* (for the late forties and fifties), followed by any number of versions of the twenties and thirties that take the Mafia for their vehicle - including a number of interesting experiments in television series (*Crime Story*, for example). Artefacts like these are indisputably experimental work in new forms of historical representation and raise the most interesting philosophical questions about the representation of history generally: for that

very reason judgments on the new forms are not ways of marking merely personal successes or failures but rather judgments one passes on the age itself and its capacity to generate form.

In this respect, I would suggest that the most interesting test case for nostalgia films might be staged within the work of a single auteur; I'm thinking of the Cuban filmmaker Humberto Solas to whom we owe two distinct representations of the Machado dictatorship, first in the second episode of his classic *Lucía* (1969), and then in his later film *The Opportunist (Un hombre de éxito)*, 1986), which to be sure spans a longer period and brings us up to the Revolution itself. The Machado episode in *Lucía* is constructed according to what I am tempted to characterize as a well-nigh *symboliste* aesthetic: an aesthetic of absence, whose point of view is the woman rather than the man, contiguity to great or violent events rather than their head-on representation, what Jakobson would surely have called a metonymic rather than a metaphoric approach to the historical object. This episode, which touches on a fundamental moment of Cuban history, is then a model of stylistic restraint and understatement and a filmic narrative of great delicacy. *The Opportunist* on the other hand makes a brassy head-on onslaught on the same historical object, trying to represent all the best-known features and events of the period directly. It thereby becomes degraded to a mere illustration of those same events, whose knowledge has to precede its own illustration. This is indeed on my view the most pertinent a priori formal observation to nostalgia film as such: since it is necessarily based on the recognition by the viewer of pre-existing historical stereotypes, including the various styles of the period, it is thereby reduced to the mere narrative confirmation of those same stereotypes. It can do little more than offer the most predictable testimony about their features (learned from history manuals and pre-existing collective attitudes and references); it cannot contradict the stereotypes of the period without falling into gratuitous and purely individual singularity. It does not, in other words, know that rich dialectic of the unique and the iterative, the typical and the individual, that made up the older historical art, as Lukacs and others have characterized it for us. Nostalgia film is historicist rather than historical, which explains why it must necessarily displace its centre of interest on to the visual as such and substitute breathtaking images for anything like the older filmic storytelling; and indeed, I think that it is axiomatic that attention to the image as such breaks narrative and is incompatible with a more purely narrative attention. It is an argument I would be tempted to extend on into the opposition between black-and-white and colour (which in fact characterizes Solas's two films), and to generalize as a no doubt extravagant hypothesis about the incompatibility of colour with narrative as such. But I will not go quite so far here, and will content myself with a rather different observation on the two works, namely that, while modernism may be an improbable characterization of *Lucía*, it is certain that its three episodes juxtapose their three modes of production by way of the mediation or three distinct aesthetics or styles. History in *Lucía* is thus also conveyed indirectly by way of a message of the form itself: which in *The Opportunist* is simply taken for granted as an unproblematical and relatively transparent representational language. At any rate, I conclude this discussion of commercial film by suggesting that their postmodernity consists at least in part in the way in which they package the past as a commodity and offer it to the viewer as an object of purely aesthetic consumption; and something like this can also be said, I believe, for most of the other objects of current visual production today, whether in film, advertising or MTV.

This is the point at which I would also like to read into the record the 'deplorable recrudescence of works of art about art and artists- in the most recent years of the postmodern era: works which also testify to a hint of nostalgia, but in this case a nostalgia for art itself and for aesthetics, for the art about art of the modernist period itself, which is fantasized as being non- or a-political. In fact,

modernism, the great modernists, were all profoundly utopian in the sense of being committed to the fateful premonition of momentous impending transformations of the Self or the World: what I would call essentially protopolitical experiences. Meanwhile it must also be added in the present context that their art-novels, their inveterate self-referentiality, always turned on language as such, and on the poetic as the mode by which those transformations were made. In that sense, Heidegger was the last modernist, and the difference, the distance, between his utopian meditations on language and current postmodern art about art is that language no longer occupies any privileged position in the postmodern, which is rather focused on decoration, on the visual arts and on music now understood itself in a decorative space-filling way (rock and its headsets on the one hand, precapitalist or baroque and earlier music on the other), rather than on the grandiose ambitions of modern bourgeois music as such, from Wagner to Schonberg.

I take as my text for such a hypothesis the typical and very successful embodiment of neo-aestheticism in Alain Corneau's *Tous les matins du monde* (1992): a film about the rivalry between two eighteenth-century composers - one an opportunist and a charlatan, the other a true creator and virtually a mystical seer in his aesthetic withdrawal from the world. The opportunist disciple takes advantage of his master's daughter to steal the latter's music and artistic secrets, and then sells out to the king's court, becoming a famous, wealthy and powerful figure, who nonetheless acknowledges and regrets the genuine, the 'real' music of his patron. It is a 'beautiful' film, but one 'which, unlike *Caravaggio*, disguises consumption as art, and gives us a pseudo-historical set of images for its own purpose, which are certainly not those of historiography. The historical setting indeed is used as a set of signals: the great musician is a Jansenist, which gives us the sign for French classicism, the court to which his pupil sells out is the corrupt *ancien regime* court against which the French Revolution was made. These combined signals allow us to read a protest against a decadent elite which is, however, not registered in political but rather in artistic terms. Meanwhile the rigours and asceticism of Jansenism - a kind of vague and general equivalent of English puritanism - allow the film to affirm the values of renunciation, while the beauty of images and the music, and the sexual freedoms with which the film is dusted, indicate nonetheless the pleasures of renunciation, renunciation as a kind of aesthetic gratification. The film is coded nationally, as a French contribution to the international film market, elegant, signifying what we call high culture, marking a retreat from Americanization and rampant consumer culture, from the grosser manifestations of contemporary business and market society, while still participating in a dignified way in this last as a distinct European option. The film is therefore a high-class consumer good, offered under the guise of art and aesthetics, as a distinctly European export. Its beauty is regressive and vacuous, and comes as all the more useful for my present purposes in that Corneau is very conscious of the symbolic and indeed political nature of his gesture here. He has said in a recent interview: 'we now have behind us thirty years of heated discussions about the relationship between politics and art ... today the vision of creative people is changing ... it is the very notion of engaged or committed art that is in the process of disintegrating ... In some deeper sense, however, the artist still remains the same. Isolated, caught in institutions that are too vast for him, a minority, the artist remains a pathological case; he produces a strange kind of content ... We have to revise our history ... [Even] the New Wave was not the leftist movement it has been taken for. Bazin was a practising Catholic ...' etc., etc.<sup>28</sup> These thoughts underscore the function of art as a substitute for politics and the work of art about art, or the movie about the artist as being essentially a reaction formation. That it can take very distinguished forms indeed can be witnessed by Kieslowski's production, in particular *Blue* (1993) and *The Double Life of Wronique* (1991). But these films themselves lead us on into another dimension of the new aestheticism, which is religion itself, or if you prefer the Gorecki-3rd-

Symphony syndrome. *Tous les matins du monde* already solemnly underscored the religious if not exactly the religious features of the new aestheticism. Kieslowski now deconceals the more intimate connections between these new visions of art and some new religious or mystical turn, whose traces one can find all over the new Europe, beginning as far back, if you like, as Godard's *Je vous salue Marie* (1985). (Godard always had an extraordinary sense of new trends and ideas in the air, and his new films are in addition textbook examples of aestheticism at least as far as classical music is concerned.) I am tempted to characterize these simulacra of religion as nostalgia products, very much along the lines of the aesthetic nostalgia we have been discussing here. Both are, on my view, substitutes for genuine content in the strong sense in which Hegel and after him Lukacs used that word. Where prudence suggests a turn away from the concrete view of the social - real content - which is always bound up with the protopolitical, at that point other forms of pseudocontent have to take its place. The work still has to pretend to be about something. Yesterday, a turn away from the world meant a turn towards the self: a turn away from Marxism meant a turn towards psychoanalysis: in that case, the Real was still somehow present, if only as an aching throb, an open wound. Today, even psychoanalysis and desire must be shunned as being too modern, and as requiring an assessment of late capitalism that the postmodern subject cannot tolerate. What offers itself as a substitute is then art and religion, pseudo-aestheticism in the form we have examined it here and its ghostly afterimages in the slow rotation of the religion of art into the art of religion.

## V

The final point I want to make has to do with beauty itself. In a period in which the 'Decadence' is itself undergoing some very interesting revaluations, it only seems appropriate in the present context to recall beauty's subversive role in a society marred by nascent commodification. The fin de siècle, from Morris to Wilde, deployed beauty as a political weapon against a complacent materialist Victorian bourgeois society and dramatized its negative power as what rebukes commerce and money, and what generates a longing for personal and social transformation in the heart of an ugly industrial society. Why then can we not allow for similar genuinely protopolitical functions today, and at least leave the door open for an equally subversive deployment of the kinds of beauty and art-religions I have been enumerating? It is a question that allows us to measure the immense distance between the situation of modernism and that of the postmoderns (or ourselves), and between tendential and incomplete commodification and that on a global scale, in which the last remaining enclaves - the Unconscious and Nature, or cultural and aesthetic production and agriculture - have now been assimilated into commodity production. In a previous era, art was a realm beyond commodification, in which a certain freedom was still available; in late modernism, in Adorno and Horkheimer's Culture Industry essay, there were still zones of art exempt from the commodifications of commercial culture (for them, essentially Hollywood). Surely what characterizes postmodernity in the cultural area is the supersession of everything outside of commercial culture, its absorption of all forms of art high and low, along with image production itself. The image is the commodity today, and that is why it is vain to expect a negation of the logic of commodity production from it, that is why, finally, all beauty today is meretricious and the appeal to it by contemporary pseudo-aestheticism is an ideological manoeuvre and not a creative resource.