The End of Art Theory

'The means must be asked what the end is' – Brecht

I. A Short History of Common Sense in Art

The crisis in criticism

When I returned to London in 1977, after a year spent living in New York, I was asked to speak at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in the context of a three-day conference on the 'State of British Art';[1] I was told that the conference was to be a response to the *crisis* in British Art. As my own particular brief was simply to talk about 'Images of People', I felt able to accept the invitation even though I knew nothing about the purported 'crisis'. I never did learn what the 'crisis in British Art' was; nor, I suspect, did anyone else. In retrospect, some ten years on, I now see the ICA event, the brainchild of three British art critics, as a textbook example of what psycho-analysis terms *projection*: the crisis sensed by these critics was not in 'art' but in *criticism itself*. In the previous year, the first edition of Raymond Williams's *Keywords* had been published; Williams opens his account of the word 'criticism' by remarking that the sense of the word in relation to art and literature, 'depends upon assumptions that

may now be breaking down'. Writing at the beginning of the 1980s, and retrospectively surveying the 'theory' explosion of the 1970s, Elizabeth Bruss observes, 'an increase of theoretical activity . . . arises whenever the function of criticism itself is in doubt'.[2]

Implicit in Bruss's observation is the model of a hierarchy of metalanguages, according to which criticism may become contained within the overview of theory, much as the artwork is encompassed by the overview of criticism. As I will have cause to observe again later, such a model has itself been dismantled in recent theory; nevertheless, there is a contingent, empirical, truth in it. 'Theory' and 'criticism', to which we should perhaps add 'reviewing', are all practices of writing; in institutional terms, 'theory' tends to issue from a different site from that of criticism and reviewing: academic institutions and journals in the former instance, art magazines and the press in the latter. The spectrum of discourses, then, runs from scholarly research to consumer information. I refer to a 'spectrum' of discourses, because, although I distinguish between theory and criticism, it will be obvious that theory is (generally) a critical practice, and criticism (necessarily) involves theoretical presuppositions. I shall have more to say later about that portion of the spectrum where theory and criticism most clearly run together. For the moment, however, I wish to speak in terms of the more separated bands of this continuum; in these terms, for my purpose here, what distinguishes 'theory' from criticism and reviewing is that theory is openly and self-consciously theoretical, whereas criticism conceals, or is blind to, its own theoretical basis. The most commonly encountered art criticism characteristically presents itself as operating with, and within, 'common sense' (rather than what it tends to disparage as 'intellectualisations'), whereas theory, as I have written elsewhere, 'sets out to question the underlying assumptions of common sense in order to replace them, where necessary, with better-founded, or more comprehensive explanations'. For theory, 'common sense' cannot be contrasted with 'intellectualisations' because common sense is itself made up of congealed residues of the intellectualisations of past ages. Art practices are themselves, of course, just as subject to tacit presuppositions as are theory and criticism; a

history of art could be written as a graph plotted against the axes of theoretical self-awareness and theoretical oblivion; that more than one line would need to be plotted is clearly indicated to us now, in the 1980s, where there has never been a greater gap between those who practice theory and those who believe themselves innocent of theory. At the present time, the most favoured way of securing the end of theory is by denying that it ever began. Criticism and reviewing, as most commonly practiced, are the major form of this denial.

At its simplest, the common sense picture of the act of criticism shows a critic in confrontation, or communion, with an artwork; the critic is seen as expressing his or her thoughts or feelings about the work, and a judgement of the value of the work, to an audience assumed to be the same audience as for the artwork under review. In the common sense view the artwork has itself originated in the thoughts and feelings of the artist (which may or may not include value judgements about the world in which she or he lives), and is itself an attempt to 'communicate' to this same audience. There is a timelessly natural appearance to this scene: the artist creating, by force of his or her very nature; the critic naturally assuming the judgement seat, by force of a special 'sensibility'; the audience, naturally, *attentive* to both. Apart from such contingent details as the way the participants are dressed, this scene is essentially as it always has been, and always will be. I am reminded of that television cartoon 'sit-com' series, *The Flintstones*, which depicts domestic life in the Stone Age: the central character, Fred Flintstone, a worker in the local stone quarry, is seen going through the everyday ups and downs of life with his wife and teenage daughter (the latter shown perpetually chatting on the stone-phone). In another series by the same company (*Hanna Barbera*) this same white middle-American nuclear family is projected into the future as the *Jetsons*: Fred leaves for work in a flying saucer, argues with wife and daughter over who should press the button to start the robot which clears the table and washes up, and so on. Common sense, and the criticism which inhabits it, not dissimilarly tends to construct a history and teleology of art by projecting the dominant contemporary notions of art into the past and the future. It is such an attitude which gives us those

coffee-table books, and 'survey' lecture courses, with such titles as, '*Art: from the Stone-Age to Picasso*'. In such 'history of art', however, it is precisely *history* which is missing – as even a cursorary account of the evolution of the very *term* 'art', itself, will demonstrate.

The word 'art'

In classical antiquity, the word 'art' (Greek, *tekhnē*; Latin, *ars*) was the name given to any activity governed by rules; art was that which could be *taught*, and as such did not include activities governed by instinct or intuition. So, for example, music and poetry were not at first numbered amongst the arts as they were considered the products of divine inspiration, beyond mortal accountability. With, however, the elaboration of a mathematics of pitch and harmony (Pythagorus), and of a poetics (Aristotle), music and poetry took their place amongst the 'arts' – alongside, for example, logic and shoemaking. The only generally-held principle of differentiation between the various skilled activities constituting 'arts' in the ancient world was whether the art in question was considered primarily a manual or an intellectual form of work. This implicitly class-based division of the arts survived into the Middle Ages in the distinction between 'mechanical arts' and 'liberal arts', the latter now specified in terms of the 'trivium' (grammar, logic, rhetoric), and 'quadrivium' (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music). These 'liberal arts' formed part of the medieval university curriculum; the teaching of 'painting' and 'sculpture' was undertaken in the artisans' guilds ('sculpture' had, then, no distinct existence outside of the general field of responsibilities of the *mason*, while a painter's responsibilities ranged from the decoration of furniture to advice to women on the application of cosmetics). When, in the early Renaissance, painting became elevated to the rank of 'liberal art', it was as a result of the argument that painting had ceased to be simply a manual skill and had become, *de facto*, a *learnèd* occupation: in order to construct scenes true to perspective, nature and history, the painter must command geometry,

anatomy and literature. It was, however, to take almost another century before sculpture was to be similarly elevated in status.

The emergence, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, of what we would today call 'experimental science' created a further division of the field of 'arts' – with a result roughly corresponding to the modern distribution of 'arts', 'crafts' and 'sciences'. The problem of the *purpose* of such things as music and decorative art, which had vexed Plato in the *Republic*, resurfaced in the form of the question of what, if anything, the liberal arts which were not (experimental) sciences had in common. An answer which gained broad assent was provided by the Abbé Charles Batteaux in his book, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1747). Batteaux listed seven 'fine arts' (echoing the late-antique number of seven 'liberal arts'): architecture, dance, music, oratory, painting, poetry and sculpture. The 'single principle' to which these arts could be 'reduced' was that of the selective imitation of nature to provide that which is *beautiful*. Batteaux's appelation 'fine arts' has survived into the present, as has his definition (albeit with some qualifications). Of the seven *beaux arts* on his original list, two – oratory and poetry – very soon became grouped separately as *belles lettres*; in the nineteenth century dance and music seceded to leave only the three 'visual' arts – architecture, painting and sculpture – to enjoy the title *beaux arts* (the *Académies des Beaux Arts* taught only these three subjects). Towards the end of the nineteenth century these three became simply *Art* – a restricted, capitalised, use of the term hitherto unknown in English (today, of course, membership of this class has become even more exclusive, as it is now common to speak of 'Art and Architecture' – many schools are so named). It is this *Art* which the Greater Oxford Dictionary defines as, 'the skilful production of the beautiful *visible* forms', a definition which has a selective relation to the theories which precede and inform it, and to which I shall now (re)turn.

Realism, formalism, expressionism

Prior to the promotion of painting to the status of a 'liberal art' there was no 'theory of art' in the modern sense of an 'explanatory scheme of ideas' – for example, an interrogation of the purpose of art, and the values it embodies or serves, developed as a self-consciously independent discipline. Philosophical discussions of such topics as 'beauty' and 'representation', begun in antiquity, were not undertaken with a view to elucidating art – the visual arts served merely as a convenient source of examples. In the Medieval period, discussion of pictures and statues was predominently theological, doctrinal; otherwise, there was a rich workshop literature concerned only with ways and means, never with questions of ends. None of this, of course, should be any occasion for surprise, for, as already observed, there was as yet no independent conceptual category to serve as the *object* of theory – no 'visual art' seen as fundamentally distinct from a host of other skilled trades. Classical antiquity *had* produced many treatises on poetry and rhetoric; in the absence of a classical theory of painting it was to these that humanist scholars turned when, in the mid-sixteenth century, painting first became defined as a *theoretical*, as well as a practical, discipline. Inverting a formula from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, *ut pictura poesis*, 'as is painting, so is poetry', the humanists rooted painting in the representation of the text; from Aristotle's *Poetics* they took the dictum that the highest calling of any art is the depiction of human action in its most exemplary forms: 'young men should be taught to look, not at the works of Pauson, but at those of Polygnotus, or any other painter or sculptor who expresses moral ideas', for, 'Polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, Pauson was less noble'.[3]

The programme of so-called 'history painting', which humanist scholarship inaugurated, was able to be assimilated to the extensive philosophical discussion – since Plato and Aristotle – of *mimesis*, 'imitation', or 'representation'. By the eighteenth century, such history painting – art on the side of *mimesis* – had become firmly established as an 'official' form, an art in the service of the state. This was most conspicuously the case in France, where the status of history painting had been secured with Louis XIV's recognition of the *Académie* in 1663, and with the appointment of Le Brun to the position of 'First Painter' to the King. The *Académie* had formed in 1648, under the leadership of Le Brun, as a secessionist group of history painters

seeking independence from the then virtually all-powerful painter's guild, the *Maîtrise*. The *Maîtrise* represented the artisanal tradition; as Norman Bryson writes:

> From its inception, the Académie divided French painting into two provinces, that of *homo significans*, and that of *homo faber*. The final ascendency of the Académie over the Maîtrise marks the institutionalised sanction of those who painted by text over those who painted without it.[4]

Far from waning in influence during the temporary suppression of the *Académie* in the revolutionary period, history painting continued even to illustrate the same classical texts, but in the service, now, of new masters – Republican antiquity being seen as replete with exemplary actions widely deserving of imitation in art and life (that of Junius Brutus, for example, who had his two sons put to death for conspiring to restore the monarchy in Rome). On his accession to the imperial throne in 1804, Napoleon immediately launched schemes for the state control of the arts; in a most extraordinary transformation from Jacobin revolutionary to Napoleonic courtier, the history painter David became appointed *Premier Peintre* to the throne.

If we disregard the dominant contemporary tendency to interpret the history of art as a succession of styles (begun with Winckelmann, but now derived primarily from the work, early in this century, of Wölfflin, and Worringer), we can see an underlying theoretical attitude, recommending a combination of selective imitation and exhortation, running like an unbroken thread from Aristotle's preference that men be depicted as 'nobler than they are', through all subsequent idealisations of monarchical, ecclesiastical, state and revolutionary figures and projects. In this, at least, a line of eminent ghosts – from Aristotle, through Diderot – stands behind Zhdanov: 'Socialist realism, . . . requires the artist to present reality *in its revolutionary course of development*, in a true and historically concrete manner'[5] (my emphasis). There is a residual Zhdanovism in a certain 'left' approach to art in the West to this day ('positive images of'); it might claim to be the sole descendent of true Aristotelianism in the arts were it not

for the fact that the very stance to which it is today customarily opposed – Formalism – is itself of Aristotelian descent.

Plato had a low opinion of painting: paintings imitate objects; objects imitate ideal forms; therefore, paintings are twice removed from true knowledge. Aristotle dispensed with the transcendentalism of Platonic forms – form inheres *only* in substance. The painter therefore may be said to abstract the inherent perfection of form from imperfect objects. It is this strand of Aristotelian thought which effectively 'split off' in the eighteenth century to result, eventually, in the tendency we know today as 'formalism'. This development out of Aristotle was routed through Plotinus's concentration, in late antiquity, on the problem of 'beauty'. Plotinus's 'neo-Platonism' effectively reversed the Platonic condemnation of art as the 'imitation of imitation'; the arts are, 'holders of beauty, and (they) add where nature is lacking'. It is essentially this early idea of selective imitation in the interests of the production of *beauty* which, some seventeen centuries later, gains wide diffusion with the success of the book by Batteaux I have already mentioned, and the incorporation of some of Batteaux's formulations into the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers* (1751). Even while shifting the project of painting from the exclusive ground of what today we would call 'textuality', Batteaux preserved the humanist equation between painting and poetry. In the *Laocöon* (1766) Lessing attempted to separate the projects of these two *beaux arts* in emphasising that painting depicted a simultaneity of events in *space*, while poetry showed a succession of events in *time* (a distinction nevertheless recognised and accommodated in the doctrines of *ut pictura poesis* in the concept of *peripateia*). It was Lessing who termed architecture, painting and sculpture *die bildenden Künste* – 'the figurative arts' – declaring that while poetry can speak both of the visible and the invisible, painting can express only what is visible; it is in so doing that it obeys the precepts of beauty, painting being best suited to the depiction of 'beautiful shapes in beautiful attitudes'. From Lessing, the line towards modern formalism runs through the philosophical idealism of, most notably, Kant; it enters the present century via the writings of Bell and Fry, and culminates in Clement Greenberg's 'high modernism'. I shall

return to this particular theoretical tradition later; for the moment, I wish to move quickly on to identify a further 'splitting' of this line. To the two basic attitudes towards art, rooted in antiquity, so far mentioned – the view of art as 'imitation', and the view of art as 'form' – the late eighteenth century begins to add a third: the view of art as *expression*.

Seventeenth-century history painters were much concerned with the problem of expression. Le Brun wrote a treatise on it – *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions proposées dans une conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (1698) – a synthesis of his teachings at the Academy. Le Brun is concerned with the problem of showing, in an image, those internal states of protagonists in a drama that the poet is able easily to describe in words. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, 'expression', in connection with visual art, had come to mean quite another thing. A text from the first century AD attributed to the Greek 'Longinus', lost then rediscovered and published in the sixteenth century, exerted an increasing influence across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The text, 'On the Sublime', seeks to identify the source of a quality which only great works of literature possess; of five features 'Longinus' names as contributing to the quality of 'the sublime' one is 'vehement emotion': 'nothing makes so much for grandeur as genuine emotion in the right place'. The resurrection of Longinus and the notion of 'the sublime' was central to a widespread reaction to Enlightenment naturalism and rationalism which had begun, even in the middle of the eighteenth century, preparing the way for Romanticism in the passage into the nineteenth century when, for the first time, as Monroe Beardsley puts it: 'Artistic production comes to be conceived as essentially an act of self-expression; and the critic, as the century moves on, feels a growing concern with the artist's sincerity, with the details of his biography, with his inner spiritual life'.[6] The concept of art as expression is given its twentieth century form most notably in the writings of Benedetto Croce, whose most influential teaching – derived from Kant, and now an unquestionable received wisdom of common sense – is that 'science' is the expression of concepts, while 'art' is the expression of *feelings*.

Rationality and response

As the above remarks begin to suggest, the basic configuration of ideas and institutions which circumscribe our view of '*Art*' today was first assembled in the eighteenth century. Although what we now retroactively identify as 'problems of aesthetics' are discussed in philosophy before the Enlightenment, it is only in 1735 that Baumgarten coins the term 'aesthetics' to identify an *independent* branch of philosophical inquiry. The 'history of art' in the modern sense does not emerge until Winckelmann breaks with the anecdotal 'lives of the artists' format in a book on ancient art published in 1764, whose title introduces the expression 'history of art'. 'Art criticism' also, in the form we know it today, is similarly a product of the eighteenth century. Previously, critical judgements of works of art were mainly concerned with assessing whether or not the rules which were held to govern the making of the work in question had been sufficiently well observed, and whether sufficient skill had been displayed in their observation. The Academy (there were over 100 academies in Europe by the end of the eighteenth century) was the institutional expression of the desire to assemble rules and criteria of judgement into a coherent *teaching* – a system, moreover, which could be imposed beyond the Academy through direct and indirect control of patronage. The French Academy, again, exemplifies the most fully achieved realisation of this desire. The power of the *Académie* under the *Ancien Régime* derived from its incorporation within a broader programme of political consolidation which began with Louis XIV's resolve to rule alone, but its history also runs concurrently with the struggle of the French bourgeoisie for its own birth as the dominant class, and it is not too fanciful to see the impetus of modern criticism in the general assertion of the rights of 'good argument' and individual entrepreneurship against the dictates of sovereign law. The Academy, by emphasising rule and reason as the foundation of art, itself inadvertently encouraged the conviction that any lay person was qualified to arrive at a valid judgement of an artwork through applying everyday morality and rationality. Moshe Barasch finds the prototype of this modern lay critic in Pietro Aretino, a sixteenth-century satirist

who was, 'probably the first layman-critic who judged a work of art just because it appealed to him and evoked his response, without caring for either the correctness of the representation or the profundity of thought suggested by it'.[7] However, although, 'the beginnings of an art criticism based on an educated layman's taste', may indeed pre-date the Enlightenment, it was not until the eighteenth century that the ideological and institutional innovations take place – including, most importantly, egalitarianism and journalism – which will allow the eventual emergence of 'critics' as a professional class.

I have remarked that modern criticism arises with the Enlightenment ambition to pit a commonwealth of reason against the arbitrary despotism of mere aristocratic opinion. In France, where the political defeat of absolutism was most emphatic, it was *drama* which became the primary artistic means of focusing the emerging bourgeois ideologies. Diderot was late in turning his interest from the stage towards painting and when he did so it was the painted dramas of Greuze he championed ('history painting' become bourgeois morality play) against the courtly decorations of Boucher (history painting become, at least in the eyes of Diderot, mere stucco). Drama, painting, politics, – all were to be called as equal subjects before the bench of reason; there was as yet no question of dealing with them as befitted their 'individual condition'; ethics, not aesthetics, was the master discourse in the interrogation of the arts; Diderot writes: 'Two qualities essential for the artist: morality and perspective'. 'Is it true?', 'Is it spiritually inspiring?', 'Is it socially useful?', are the questions to be asked of art, and they may be put, and decided, by any virtuous, literate (and propertied) citizen.

The idea that 'good common sense' is the fundamentally most important quality in an art critic was effectively overturned by the wave of irrationalism which swept in the Romantic movement. By the end of the eighteenth century, under the influence of, most notably, Rousseau, the metaphor of organic growth had replaced more mechanical, rational, images of the processes governing art: ignorant of, or indifferent to, rules and reasons, the artist creates by blind necessity, like Nature itself. Such a view was given added intellectual authority by Kant; against the then prevailing Enlightenment view (derived from Locke) that

true knowledge is only gained empirically, via the senses, Kant asserted that knowledge is essentially innate – arising from within the individual, rather than derived from without; for Kant, *Genius* is the name given to the 'innate productive capacity', a gift of nature, which produces art 'from within'. In a well-known statement of 1800, Wordsworth writes: 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. It is at this time that the analogy between painting and literature, which had dominated thinking about the 'visual arts' since the mid-sixteenth century, gave way to the analogy between painting and music, as in Pater's celebrated dictum, 'all art aspires to the condition of music' (from this new metaphor is able to be derived not only Romanticism, and subsequent expressionist theories, but also Formalism – according to whether 'music' is taken to stand for emotional outpouring or pure non-referentiality). The critic now also, for the first time, becomes an expressionist; Baudelaire, for example, has no time for that criticism, which, 'on the pretext of explaining everything, has neither love nor hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament'. The removal of the judgement seat of criticism, and the spring of art production, from the terrain of reasoned consensus to that of individual intuition, although it may appear as a radical upheaval, was in fact a symptom of the consolidation of bourgeois confidence in its own political and ideological hegemony. The picture of the critic as a 'cultivated' person of 'sensibility' is the picture of someone who is bourgeois *to the core*; it is this core of sensibility which, made to resonate in contact with the art object, will vibrate in perfect sympathy with other similar sensibilities, similarly exposed to the same object. Much as, in George Orwell's description, the British upper middle classes, 'communicate like bats, by means of high-pitched squeaks inaudible to the rest of us', the critic who relies on his or her 'response' will be sure to be understood by those of their own kind, and without need of reasoned justification. As Raymond Williams comments, 'the notion that response was judgement depended, of course, on the social confidence of a class and later a profession'.[8]

The contemporary practice of writing 'personal response' reports on exhibitions by contemporary artists – 'reviewing' –

was again, not established until the middle of the eighteenth century. The 'review' emerges as a direct consequence of changing socioeconomic circumstances in, primarily, the second half of the eighteenth century: the rapid growth of periodical literature, and changes in the form of art patronage. The fundamental importance of the practice of 'collecting' in the determination of art institutions cannot be overestimated – the art market, the museum (the modern form of which, again, emerges in the eighteenth century), criticism, art history, have all arguably developed in response to it. The practice goes back to antiquity; the eighteenth century is nevertheless a period of transition from a situation in which antiquarians passively 'serviced' the taste of their (mainly aristocratic) patrons towards that contemporary situation in which 'dealers' extensively *create* the taste of their (mainly *nouveaux riches*, and corporate) clients. The practice of reviewing is part of the new pattern of market forces created in capitalism's progressive transformation of use-value into exchange-value, and part of the process of audience-reorientation of art from an hereditary élite of the powerful towards a 'general public'. This is not necessarily to overestimate the economic influence of the review; writing in 1824, Stendhal observes:

> A personable young artist can easily manage, between exhibitions, to establish relations with the editor of a journal. When next he exhibits his work, never mind how poor its quality . . . he will find his pictures emphatically noticed, and praised as little masterpieces. But nobody will buy them.[9]

There is, however, a shift of emphasis taking place in this moment of emergent Romanticism which, some 20 years later, and now fully consolidated, will make mere economic considerations seem, if not actually irrelevent, at least no longer primary. Baudelaire, writing in 1846:

> What is the good? – A vast and terrible question-mark which seizes the critic by the throat from his very first step in the first chapter that he sits down to write.
>
> At once the artist reproaches the critic with being unable to teach anything to the bourgeois, who wants neither to paint nor to write verses – nor even to art itself, since it is from the womb of art that criticism was born.
>
> And yet how many artists today owe to the critics alone their sad little fame! It is there perhaps where the real reproach lies.[10]

With Romanticism, the anguish and turmoil which are the assumed creative lot of the artist now accompany the toils of the critic; but more to my point here, mere monetary reward is no longer the primary issue – it is not fortune that the Romantic artist seeks, it is *fame*.

Imagination and hypnosis

The way the term 'masterpiece' is used by Stendhal, in the passage quoted above, is itself indicative of a fundamental historical transformation in the concepts of art and the artist. In the Middle Ages, the 'masterpiece' was simply the item of work executed by an apprentice to prove he had adequately learned his craft (albeit accession to 'mastership' brought with it financial, and other, class privileges); in the modern sense of the word, however, something more than manual skill is connoted; this expanded sense first begins to emerge as a consequence of the transition of the artist's role 'from *homo faber* to *homo significans*' initiated in the mid-sixteenth century. Certainly, it is still common today for visual art to be valued for the trace of the *hand*. There are various reasons for this; one, following on the response of Morris and Ruskin to industrialisation, is nostalgia for a pre-industrial 'golden age' – the trace of the hand, absent from most objects around us today, becomes the trace of a lost, utopian, 'organic society' (as Raymond Williams has remarked, the one thing we can be sure of about the 'organic society' is that it is *behind* us). Another reason is in our market economy system of values which fetishises that which is 'unique' – that which permits the sense of *absolute* individual ownership. Yet another is to be located in a 'logocentric' philosophical tradition which privileges the authorial signature as guarantee of *pres-*

ence.[11] The modern valorisation of the hand-crafted object is thus variously 'overdetermined', and it would be profoundly a-historical to claim this current penchant as continuous with the medieval attitude. In the latter, considerations of craftmanship are inseparable from, and circumscribed by, considerations of *use*, the *significance* of which is established *externally* to the object (as for example, in religious ritual, or courtly pageant); in the modern attitude, significance is held to be inscribed *within* the work, and its very right to be called a work of 'art', rather than of 'craft', is determined by reference to its (supposedly inherent) semiotic and/or affective status. Thus Gombrich locates a historically 'most decisive phase' of development of the idea of art in, 'the assimilation of the visual arts to their "sister arts", architecture, poetry, music, and the dance'. In this development, 'art lovers . . . came to seek in art the same kind of imaginative experience they had found in literature and maybe in music'. He concludes, 'Thus it was not so much the work of the human hand which became an object of admiration, but any token of the creativity of the human mind'.[12]

In the Middle Ages, to speak of the 'creativity' of the artist would have been to risk burning as an heretic – there was only one *Creator*; nor is the idea of the artist's 'creativity', at the time it emerges, quite the same as the notion most widely held today. The story of the evolution of perfection in art told by Vasari in his *Lives of Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550 and 1568) is a story of the progressive perfection of *representation* in which art is seen as an activity of problem-solving indistinguishable in kind from that of science. Vasari writes: 'Greatness of art in one is born of diligence, in another of study, in this one of imitation, in that other of knowledge of the sciences'; Venturi comments, 'too many origins, and precisely that which was wanting was the only authentic one – creative imagination'.[13] What is modern in Venturi's (1936) opinion is the yoking of 'creativity' to a very particular understanding of 'imagination'. Venturi's particular aesthetics derives most directly from Croce, probably the single most influential modern aesthetician, but the origins of this idea of 'creative imagination' are earlier – they date from the nineteenth century. Today, the idea that 'creative imagination' is the 'only authentic origin' of art may seem so unquestionably self-

evident that we forget that it is, historically, a quite recent assertion, and we also forget the circumstances in which it emerged. In the nineteenth century this notion of art served a *revolutionary* Romanticism, politically opposed to the narrow profit-seeking utilitarianism which industrial capitalism was seeking to impose in all aspects of society (just as 'post-industrial' capitalism seeks to impose it today). Raymond Williams recommends that, in considering Romanticism, we remember that, 'Wordsworth wrote political pamphlets, that Blake was a friend of Tom Paine and was tried for sedition, that Coleridge wrote political journalism and social philosophy, that Shelley . . .',[14] and so on.

If today, the politics of Romanticism *has* been 'forgotten' (repressed) it is at least partly due to the fact that Romantic aesthetics facilitates, if not induces, such amnesia. In practice the Romantics did not separate aesthetics from ethics, but in theory such a separation was strongly implied. Schelling had early criticised mimetic theories of art in proposing that art, far from being concerned with reality, aspires to truths 'higher' than reality – a theme developed by others to result in a theory of artistic production as necessarily autonomous, free of all demands external to itself – in the words of Goethe (albeit he was speaking of *music*), 'a little world of its own, . . . which must be judged by its own laws'. Kant's distinction between 'phenomena' and 'noumena', provided the conceptual space for a notion of *intuition* as the means to forms of knowledge more 'profound' than those derived from observation. Thus, for Wordsworth, the object of poetry is, 'truth, not individual and local, but general and operative, not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion'. The vehicle for the communication of such 'general' truths was the *symbol*.

Goethe had made a distinction between *allegory* and *symbol* which has behind it a very long history.[15] The 'symbol' is an essentially extra-discursive form, albeit it may appear clothed in the substance of language, whose effect is to abolish the separation of subject and object, establishing an instantaneous and complete communication on the basis of *rapport* rather than cognition. Such an idea leads to an emphasis on the *intrinsic* form of the art object itself, and the relation of the viewer to

the form, rather than on the relations between object, viewer, and the world in which both are situated (a denial of difference, in a shift from a triadic to a dyadic relation, in which those who read psycho-analytic theory may see something of a concomitant emotional regression). As Terry Eagleton writes,

> The symbol fused together motion and stillness, turbulent content and organic form, mind and world. Its material body was the medium of an absolute spiritual truth, one perceived by direct intuition rather than by any laborious process of critical analysis. In this sense the symbol brought such truths to bear on the mind in a way which brooked no question: either you saw it or you didn't. It was the keystone of an irrationalism, a forestalling of reasoned critical inquiry, which has been rampant in literary theory ever since.[16]

And we may of course add, in art theory too: it is this same Romantic formalism which, in Clement Greenberg's high modernism, was destined to become the official aesthetics of the Western world in the middle of the twentieth century; and it is precisely the same mystical doctrine of the 'symbol' which after Modernism's demise in the late 1960s, is born again today in the resurrected body of 'new' expressionist painting. It is the idea of the 'symbol' which is most responsible for today's dogmas of artistic 'expression' and critical 'response'. The basic configuration of past intellectualisations which today masquerade as spontaneous 'response' (Pascal asked, 'who knows but that second nature is not merely first habit?') I have identified as 'realism', 'formalism', and 'expression theory'; these are the three theoretical tributaries which feed the mainstream of contemporary 'common sense' in art and art criticism. Today they are rarely encountered in isolation from one another, nor are they peculiar to the 'visual' arts; for example as Catherine Belsey has observed,[17] the prevailing common sense view of literature today has its origins in the position Ruskin developed on painting. Ruskin's view of visual art represented a synthesis of the relatively new Romantic expression theories with the traditional theories of art as *mimesis* to which Romanticism had been opposed. In the mimetic tradition, art is supposed to

represent reality; in Romantic thought, art is supposed to express personal feelings; the confluence of these two views gives us a view of art as 'reality refracted through a sensibility' – 'expressive realism'. Some variety of 'expressive realist' position still informs much left-humanist art theory and practice in the West, and it is nowhere stronger than when it is legitimating documentary photography – Donald McCullin is the 'expressive realist' artist, *par excellence*, of our day. However, the dominant common sense view of art in the West is perhaps best characterised as 'expressive formalism'. Lessing, as I have remarked, saw the essence of visual art as consisting of, 'beautiful shapes in beautiful attitudes'; add Romanticism to this and we have the dominant common-sense understanding – seemingly shared by most art journalists – that artists 'express themselves' by means of beautiful shapes and colours. Through the magic of the 'symbol', the theory has now become generalised to the point that 'beautiful shapes and colours' can be claimed to 'express' anything whatsoever – 'higher realities', the 'human essence', more or less whatever the critic or artist chooses. What was truly *critical* in the old debates has today been lost from sight. What began as an emphasis on imagination – a creative faculty which seeks to *transgress* the given orders of representation – by degrees became a form of self-hypnosis in the service of the *status quo*. 'Criticism', no longer concerned with what is *critical* in society, is now the form of the incantation through which hypnosis is induced.

Common sense and (the) concrete

It is significant that the allocation of a distinct 'period' to Romanticism continues to present problems to orthodox art history and criticism. 'We don't know who discovered water', someone remarked, 'but we're sure it wasn't a fish'; if, in the view of a certain history and criticism, the boundaries of Romanticism seem to expand and contract, advance and recede, it is because this view is *from within* Romanticism. As it cannot survive outside of this ideological environment, orthodox history, theory and criticism, therefore, must believe that there is no outside,

no boundaries, no limits to the freedoms it so fiercely defends: the freedom of the artist to create without preconception, the freedom of the critic to respond without prejudice. But critical judgement, as Barthes has remarked:

> is always determined by the whole of which it is a part, and the very absence of a system – especially when it becomes a profession of faith – stems from a very definite system . . . it is when man proclaims his primal liberty that his subordination is least disputable.[18]

The putative 'freedom' of the artist is no more or less constrained than that of the critic. Contrary to the bland dogmas of our 'new', dissent-free, Romanticism, the artist does not simply 'create' – innocently, spontaneously, *naturally* – like a flowering shrub which blossoms because it can do no other. The artist first of all inherits a role handed down by a particular history, through particular institutions, and whether he or she chooses to work within or without the given history and institutions, for or against them, the relationship *to* them, is inescapable.

Institutional legitimation imposes a grid of the permissible upon the field of the possible. Obviously, a complex of considerations determine what is permissible in an institution – legal, economic, political, and so on. All such given determinants and constraints will, however, be submitted to the articulation of the 'master discourse' of the institution in question. The master discourse organises the field of the generally permissible in terms of what, in its terms, is *thinkable*. The discourse of the institution is, therefore, more fundamental to the identity of that institution than, say, physical plant or organisational hierarchies; indeed in many cases – the Catholic Church is a good example – the latter are the direct expression of the former. More surely than buildings and chains of command, the master discourse is always already *in place* to receive its novices; by its means the functionaries of an institution, regardless of rank, are inducted into the common system of beliefs and values which, by taking lodging in their own mouth, will identify them as *belonging*. The discourse allows the fiercest debates (as proof that it is open and spontaneous) but cannot recognise dissent – in the dispute over

the number of angels who may gather on the head of a pin the *existence* of angels cannot be brought into doubt; in the art world also, to question the existence of certain ideological 'angels' is to commit self-exile, to disappear over the discursive horizon.

The master discourse which is the common sense of '*Art*' is in the thrall of an antique, 'nominalist' view of language – believing that because there is a singular word, 'art', then there must be some singular *thing*, some 'essence', which the word names. History (to say nothing of modern linguistics) is the enemy of this illusion; real history therefore – mutable, heterogeneous, indeterminate – is kept prisoner in its own dungeons while a more coherent imposter (a more plausible narrative) takes public command, and dispenses judgements. Our art museums are most often machines for the suppression of history,

> substituting for concrete historical locations the fictive backdrops of an autonomous history of art or an unquestioned, and perhaps inexpressible, standard of 'aesthetic excellence'. Where historically remote work is being displayed, instead of the massive historical work of recovery necessary to re-insert the 'dead' signs in the complex moments within which they once resonated with meaning, we are all too frequently offered the 'scholarship' of the family tree and pedigree, the spectacle of the cemetery with its monuments and relics.[19]

The contents of this graveyard is the canon of established 'masterpieces'; to be admitted to it is to be consigned to perpetual exhumation, to be denied entry is to be condemned to perpetual oblivion. The canon is what gets written about, collected, and taught; it is self-perpetuating, self-justifying, and arbitrary; it is the gold standard against which the values of new aesthetic currencies are measured. The canon is the discourse made flesh; the discourse is the spirit of the canon. To refuse the discourse, the words of communion with the canon, in speaking of art or in making it, is to court the benign violence of institutional excommunication:

> Regional dialects of the discourse, so to speak, are acknowledged and sometimes tolerated, but you must not sound as

> though you are speaking another language altogether. To do so is to realise in the sharpest possible way that critical discourse is power. To be on the inside of the discourse itself is to be blind to this power, for what is more natural and non-dominative than to speak one's own language?[20]

Seen from the centre of the discourse, the horizons of the discourse are quite simply the boundaries of art itself (as Wittgenstein said, 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world'). From the horizon however, the view is of another world, one which includes elements of the previous one, but is no longer contained by them. From the centre, of course, this new position is literally *eccentric*; there are moments, however, when historical circumstances favour heretics, and when the 'crazies' suddenly make sense.

In the late 1960s, various forms of social revolt were endemic in France and Italy, and there were widespread protests in Europe and the US against the Vietnam war. A wave of political and cultural radicalism arose in 'higher education', where, as Elizabeth Bruss has written: 'the tacit interests and assumptions that had always governed classroom procedures and curricula were suddenly exposed to view'. At this cultural moment, she observes:

> the defense of art as a superior reality had lost its former social meaning as an attack upon utilitarian values and had become instead a plea for quietism and social withdrawal – by implication tolerant of any world, no matter how ugly or unjust, so long as it allowed some small protected space where art could function.[21]

When the shock wave of the French May events of 1968 hit the British educational institutions it rocked even the normally quietistic art schools (where 'non-conformism' is traditionally confined to the invention of new styles of dress). In the late 1960s, art students militated for the democratisation of decision-making processes in general, and for changes in curricula and syllabuses in particular, with the over-all aim of opening the art academic course to the wider contemporary world around it.

('He was educated as an artist', the Formalist Viktor Shklovsky remarked of a friend, 'which is to say he wasn't really *educated* at all'.) In *Le Gai Savoir*, Godard's 1968 film about education (which particularly addresses the questions, 'what, and how, do we learn from images?'), one of the characters remarks, 'Self-evident truths belong to bourgeois philosophy'. In the late 1960s, the self-evidently eternal verities of *Art*, inherited from the Enlightenment and Romanticism, a 'Philosophy of the Life Room', were rigorously interrogated. For a moment the grip of art academic restrictive practices relaxed. The advance into the 1970s, however, was an advance into economic recession, rising unemployment, educational cutbacks and increasingly authoritarian 'neo-conservative' politics. By 1980, the 'life room', which the late 1960s and the early 1970s had turned into a debating chamber, was once again the silent habitat of stiffly naked ladies and mouldering piles of fruit; what I had felt moved to describe in the 1970s as, 'the anachronistic daubing of woven fabrics with coloured mud, the chipping apart of rocks and the sticking together of pipes – all in the name of timeless aesthetic values',[22] was once again the unquestioned and unquestionable norm. The debates themselves, however, were not silenced, they continued in the margins of the art institutions and, in exile from the increasingly conservative 'art magazines', they took up residence in other journals (particularly, the newly-emerging reviews of 'cultural theory'). Political dissent was not the only French import of the late 1960s and the 1970s, there was also a massive influx of theory. Introduced into Britain by *New Left Review*, and then developed in a variety of other journals, most notably (in terms of my interests here) *Screen*, French Marxism, semiotics and psycho-analysis became the radical alternatives to the discourse of *Art* in general, and the empirical-intuitive Anglo-Saxon critical tradition in particular. With the new theory came a rejection of the established 'high art' hierarchies, with film and photography tending to take precedence over literature and painting, and with all forms of 'art' being viewed as part of a broader picture of representational practices in contemporary society. It became impossible to think 'art theory' in isolation from 'theory of ideology' – particularly under the massive theoretical and political impact of feminism. As Laura Mulvey has

remarked of this period, 'The "great tradition" of British culture . . . was rejected as complacently chauvinistic in both the national and sexual senses of the word'.[23] No mere 'crisis in British art' then, in the 1970s, but a crisis in the very *culture* in whose name criticism pronounced its judgements. Viewed in the overlapping illuminations of Marxism, semiotics, psycho-analysis and feminism, orthodox criticism was safe neither in its empiricism nor its intuitionism, neither in its liberal humanism nor in its phallocentrism; it was, however, perfectly secure in its newspapers and magazines, its galleries and museums, its art schools and art history departments – mere intellectual and moral bankruptcy was not to deprive it of its institutional holdings. In 1968, *New Left Review* had published a translation of Lacan's celebrated 'mirror-phase' article; in 1971, *New Left Books* published a translation of Althusser's equally influential 'Ideological State Apparatuses' essay. Shortly after, writing about British historiography, one of the *New Left Review* editorial board observed:

> British historians have largely remained impervious to the solutions put forward by Marxism, psychoanalysis, and classical sociology. Or else they have only glimpsed them through the blurred light of caricature and vulgarisation . . . The result is as weird as if a Newtonian physicist were to come across Einstein, admit that relativity was probably a factor of some importance, and then to attempt to carry on as before, under the impression that the occasional acknowledgement would absolve him from the necessity of further thought about it.[24]

I feel this same sense of the 'weird', which Gareth Stedman Jones's analogy so perfectly characterises, when I contemplate the 'art scene' of the 1980s. It has undergone a sea change and yet it has not changed at all. It loudly and proudly proclaims its new-found 'postmodernism', and yet the period which separates it from modernism, the late 1960s and 1970s, the period which dismantled modernist art and criticism totally, is a period in which, as it is generally stated, 'nothing happened'. Conservative criticism has again displayed its favoured way of dealing with

ideas which threaten it: when the ideas are new, they are contemptuously dismissed as 'fashionable' and/or 'obscure', when they are no longer new they are loftily dismissed as *passé*; in the space between, the texts are looted of their *terminology*, which is then used to vacuously ornament the pages of conservative writings, in demonstration that the new material has, anyhow, now been 'assimilated': pages are now peppered with such terms as 'signifier', 'desire', 'drive', 'deconstruction', and so on – a roll-call of the arrested, terminological prisoners given meaningless labour in intellectual deserts. The greatest act of appropriation, however, has been the reduction of a complex intuition of the 'end of an era', with all the possibilities that should offer for 'thinking the unthinkable', to an art market gimmick – I refer to the trivialisation of the idea of the 'postmodern'.

II Criticism and Voluntarism in the Age of Postmodernity

Enlightenment, surveillance, simulacra

In an art world ever eager to decant its old ideological wine into new terminological bottles, there has been much critical discussion of, and greater uncritical use of, the idea of a 'postmodern' aesthetics. The wider current debates around the term 'postmodern', however, range beyond questions of aesthetics, they derive from apprehensions of a fundamental shift, if not a mutation, in (North-Western) history, culture and politics in general. As Frederic Jameson puts it:

> this problem is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one. The various positions which can logically be taken on it, whatever terms they are couched in, can always be shown to articulate visions of history, in which the evaluation of the social moment in which we live today is the object of an essentially political affirmation or repudation.[25]

We should bear in mind then, first, that the 'postmodern' is not so much a 'concept' as it is a *problematic*, a complex of

heterogeneous but interrelated questions which will not be silenced by any spuriously *unitary* answer; secondly, as is clearly inscribed in the very term 'postmodern', any position defining itself as such is, *by* definition, a position on the modern – a postmodern vision cannot be a solely prospective one, it is necessarily also retrospective; thirdly, but most fundamentally, the 'political' and the 'aesthetic' are the inseparable, simultaneously present, faces of the currency of the postmodern problematic. Turning first to the political, for my particular purposes here (which can only be to sketch a small number of the features I find most salient) I ask to be excused a slide from the 'political' in a strict sense, to a broader nexus of political/philosophical/cultural considerations. In these terms, the period of modernity may be seen as beginning with the Enlightenment belief in the infinitely perfectible progress of social and political institutions through the power of *reason* (philosophy); its emblematic historical moment is nevertheless fully *active* – the French Revolution; in which the arbitrary absolutism of aristocratic and ecclesiastical authority was to be replaced 'at a stroke' by the just rule of democratic rationality. The 'faith in reason' was the result of a consolidation and generalisation, in the eighteenth century, of the scenario of the progressive solution of problems in experimental science which had emerged in the seventeenth century. As Habermas (after Weber) notes, the eighteenth century identified three autonomous spheres of reason – science, morality and art – as engendering discrete bodies of discourse, which could then be separately institutionalised:

> Each domain of culture could be made to correspond to cultural professions in which problems could be dealt with as the concern of special experts. This professionalised treatment of the cultural tradition brings to the fore the intrinsic structures of each of the three dimensions of culture. There appear the structures of cognitive-instrumental, of moral-practical and of aesthetic-expressive rationality, each of these under the control of specialists.[26]

The reservoirs of knowledge thus accumulated through specialisation were to bring into bloom a paradise-on-earth of rational

social organisations; eight-tenths of the way into the twentieth century, however, such optimism has been revealed as misplaced – the Enlightenment vision of a rational ordering of the social totality did not foresee its consequences in twentieth-century *totalitarianism* – Hitler, Stalin. In an important sense, then, a postmodern sociopolitical perspective is one in which the programme of the Enlightenment – the 'liberation of Man' [*sic*] through scientific invention and 'scientific social management' – is seen to have at best failed, or at worst to have been the *cause* of the ills from which the twentieth century suffers.

The Enlightenment project of replacing arbitrary authority with the rule of beneficent reason has, in contemporary Western democracies, and in harness with capitalism, secured individual freedoms only in the context of imposed norms of behaviour and aspirations which together form a universe ordered to fulfill, not human desires, but the needs of an increasingly autonomous principle of *production* – the maximisation of 'gross national product'. In the West – due in significant part to the erosion of state autonomy consequent upon the growth of multinational corporations – the democratic process has effectively been reduced to the opportunity of the individual to vote, every few years, on the issue of whether the state should stand on one, or the other, of its party-political feet – a change of posture leading to little internal readjustment, and no change of direction. In recent years, the equally economic–production centred programmes of Marxist parties – the traditional recourse of those, in the West, in opposition to the capitalist state – have themselves been seen as failing to meet the most urgent aspirations of substantial sections of the population; not only as a short-term exigency, while 'preparing for power', but as a perpetually inbuilt necessity of their own Enlightenment-rooted totalising logics. The events of May 1968, in France, saw the emergence of forms of Left oppositional politics which had little to do with Western Marxist parties either in their organisation or their affiliation – being both radically democratic, and independant of the labour movement. In the years since 1968 we have seen the consolidation and proliferation of such 'micro-political' movements: women, blacks, gays; ecology, anti-nuclear, anti-psychiatry; and so on. Thus the reductionist projects of totalis-

ation and normalisation in Western 'democracies', whether they issue from the state or its traditional opponents, are being opposed by the democratic (re)assertion of a *plurality* of interests. It might be objected that there is nothing new here – the reconciliation of the often conflicting interests of social factions and fractions within the over-all project of the state has been *the* perennial problem of democracy. Against this it may be asserted that what *is* new, and what now counts as a 'postmodern' political perspective, is the refusal of *any* oppositional philosophy or strategy of the *totality*. Women, for example, have for some time been no longer prepared to subordinate their immediate demands to the cause of some supposed 'ineluctable advance of the proletariat', whose eventual and inevitable triumph is purported to be the only certain guarantee that those demands will be met. (Such a refusal may derive both from historical observation of the failures of socialist revolutions to dissolve patriarchal social formations, and from Marxist analyses of contemporary Western societies, in which the industrial working class is seen as now displaced from its once privileged strategic relation to power by other groups not defined in terms of social class – for example, the emergent information technocracy and bureaucracy.) As we are reminded seemingly every day, a negative aspect of the general phenomenon of political, 'interest-group', splintering is terrorism. As Baudrillard observes, in the media-generated babble of information, disinformation, suspicion and counter-suspicion, acts of terrorism often appear as detached from any *particular* cause:

> Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or of extreme right-wing provocation, or staged by centrists to bring every terrorist extreme into disrepute and to shore up its own failing power, or again is it a police-inspired scenario in order to appeal to public security? All of this is equally true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the fact does not check this vertigo of interpretation.[27]

What is certain is that the state will respond with an increasingly vigilant surveillance of its own population, thus adding a further increment in a process of totalisation which threatens, according

to a logic of 'the inevitability of gradualism', to shade into totalitarianism almost without our having noticed it. Nor is this particular aspect of the process of totalisation a contingent response to the phenomenon of terrorism – it is, as Foucault has related, a structural aspect of modern Western societies.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes how the Enlightenment turned in horror from the punishment systems of the *Ancien Régime* – based on public torture and execution, and in which incarceration played a relatively unimportant role – to evolve a system of punishment in which the centre-piece is the *prison*, thus shifting emphasis from punishment of the body to reform of the mind. Foucault shows, first, that punishment under the *Ancien Régime* was not irrational barbarism, as the Enlightenment viewed it, but was itself, in terms of its own internal logic, perfectly rational. Secondly, he shows that, far from resulting in the 'reform' of miscreants, returning them to society, the prison brings into being a whole new recidivist 'criminal class'; but moreover, it gives birth to a 'technology of power' based on *surveillance* which is then disseminated to all sectors of society, imposing 'normality' from school, to office and factory, to hospitals, and so on. Foucault writes:

> The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievement.[28]

Foucault refers to modern society as a 'Panopticon society' – after Bentham's 'Panopticon' prison, in which a single guard is able to watch *all* prisoners, while the prisoners know only that they are being watched but never *when*. Readers of Foucault were quick to interpret this metaphor in terms of contemporary information technologies. Thus Mark Poster responds:

> The techniques of discipline no longer need rely on methods of regulating bodies in space as Foucault thinks. In the electronic age, spatial limitations are bypassed as restraints on

> the controlling hierarchies. All that is needed are traces of behaviour; credit card activity, traffic tickets, telephone bills, loan applications, Welfare files, fingerprints, income transactions, library records, and so on. On the basis of these traces, a computer can gather information that yields a surprisingly full picture of an individual's life. As a consequence, Panopticon monitoring extends not simply to massed groups but to the isolated individual.[29]

In the above passage Poster, in effect, gives a picture of a new subject for the new society of information technology – a subject (like the subject known to psycho-analysis) radically 'decentred', a subject formed 'in the wake of the signifier' – in this case, the traces of its work, leisure, and consumer activities scattered in a random pattern across the fields of contemporary life in the West. The subject thus constituted is invisible and (potentially) radically inaccessible, it inhabits the micro-circuitry of the ever-growing community of data banks. To this scattered and invisible field of the subject-as-data (that which is sucked from, or shed by, the subject in its paths through contemporary history) society adds the scattered but visible field of *spectacle* (those products of the media and advertising industry which are sucked into the subject; that into which the subject projects itself in a countless series of identifications). The existential subject lives out its experience between these two 'layers' of the phenomenological subject extended in information technology and the media. From this perspective emerges a more fully 'postmodernist' view in which the present period of Western history is seen not simply as a stage, albeit perhaps terminal, in the *evolution* of Enlightenment-inspired social formations, but rather as a total transfiguration of these formations as the result of a (technologically facilitated) mutation in the form of capitalism itself. As Jameson has observed, we are witnessing,

> a prodigious expansion of late capitalism, which now, in the form of what has variously been called the 'culture industry' or the 'consciousness industry', penetrates one of the two surviving pre-capitalist enclaves of Nature within the system –

> namely the Unconscious. (The other one is the pre-capitalist culture of the Third World.)[30]

In this period of what Jameson calls 'late capitalism' (after Ernest Mandel's description of the three-stages of capitalism: market capitalism; monopoly capitalism; and *Spätkapitalismus* – multinational, 'late', capitalism) it is the nature of *exchange* which has most fundamentally mutated.

Marx identified three stages of evolution leading to the primacy of exchange-value: a time up to, and including, the Middle Ages, when only production which was surplus to real needs was exchanged; the time of emergent capitalism, when *all* material production enters into commerce; and, with nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, a time of 'universal venality', when 'everything, moral or physical, . . . is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value'. A primary source of the postmodern sensibility is the apprehension that the 'commodity society' we still inhabited in the 1950s has now metamorphosed into what Guy Debord has called the 'society of the spectacle', in which, as Debord puts it: 'The image has become the final form of commodity reification, . . . the spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image'.[31] The universal principle of the Western political economy of the sign is now the effortless symbolic transmutation of all things into all other things through the intermediary of money. Such mobility of symbolic value is achieved through a form of society unprecedented in history, a form which may be viewed as replicating, at the level of the social and material, the radical disjunction of signifier and referent we find at the level of language – for this is not simply a society of the image, it is a society in which the image has effectively *replaced* that which it purportedly represents. In a (Platonic) word, upon which Jean Baudrillard has elaborated, we are a society of the *simulacrum*.

The simulacrum is a 'copy' of which there is no original. The commodity, in its potentially infinite series, is only the most palpable form of the simulacrum; the can on the supermarket shelf, certainly, but also the supermarket itself – each 'new' branch identical to the others – and the job at the check-out desk too (the fact that one person, branch, or can, may tempor-

arily precede the others does not make it the original, merely the first). Such systems of simulacra live in the embrace of other such systems. Through the 'media', objective reality has become a membrane of simulacra stretched over the real; in it we glimpse our reflected, media-inflected, desires and fears. Our eyes and ears, extended in the camera and the microphone, probe dangers to which our bodies are not, at that moment, exposed – an impregnable clairvoyeurism which blinds us to our own precarious social realities by making them appear external to themselves: Baudrillard writes, with an aside which invokes Foucault.

> Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral).[32]

In the society of the simulacrum there is an incessant sliding of the spectacle over the real in which the referent – re-run, rewound, scrutinised in freeze-frame, run fast-forward – is eaten *live* by the signifier. In this imagistic irreality, print/imprint, positive/negative, image/reality, pose as oppositions only to dissimulate that they may exchange places at will. Baudrillard writes,

> *Watergate is not a scandal*, . . . capital, which is immoral and unscrupulous, can only function behind a moral superstructure and whoever regenerates this public morality (by indignation, denunciation, etc.) spontaneously furthers the order of capital, as did the *Washington Post* journalists.[33]

The illusion of difference where none exists, the identity of a thing with what it had projected/rejected as its opposite (in what Derrida has termed the 'logic of the supplement' – I shall discuss this later), is nowhere more apparent than in the regimes of simulacra which make up the 'art world'; nowhere more clear than in those incestuously intimate dances in which critical discourse, money, and image continuously exchange masks.

The market for fashion

As already observed, with the triumph of exchange-value over use-value any object can become the equivalent of any other; with the triumph of 'universal venality' any act, any statement, any belief, can be emptied of signification to become a token in a universalised system of monetary values where money itself is the sole signified. A photograph of a painting by Giorgio de Chirico appears one morning on the front page of a daily newspaper.[34] Below the image, a spokesman for the museum which is about to exchange over a million pounds for the painting, is quoted as saying that de Chirico's 'juxtaposition of a torso and a bunch of bananas' is, 'one of the most bizarre and compelling inventions in the history of art', which, 'has given this picture something of the hold on the imagination of a wide public that is possessed by the Mona Lisa or Rodin's Thinker'. Surely the fact that this is a 'surrealist' painting has determined the first part of this statement (by way of Lautréamont's 'encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine'), as it has also determined the recourse to an 'aesthetics of shock' in the second part. The fact that the statement is not only mechanically formulaic but patently exaggerated signifies only that the *content* of what is said does not matter, only the form counts; something connoting learning and authority – something to invoke the legitimation of the 'great story' of *Art* – is to be intoned over this exchange of a very large sum of money for an image. The photograph of the painting printed in the newspaper will be seen by many more people than will see the painting, an image which will also be reproduced in books and on postcards (all this contributing to what Malraux liked to call the 'museum without walls'). Everything here is *said* as if a privileged 'real' – de Chirico's painting – stood behind these myriad representations, verbal and visual, to give them their ultimate meaning and truth; but this manner of speaking only barely conceals the fact that, in the systems of exchange in which the painting is a token, the painting is no more the 'real', and no more the final resting place of meaning, than is the interview, the photograph, the front-page news, the postcard in the museum shop, the million-pound cheque. They are all part of, 'this pandemonium of Capital . . . the intense

chaos of signs blinking within and without us, overwhelming our senses and critical faculties, . . . signs as empty as they are strident'.[35] The skin shed by the hand of de Chirico is now just another film in a succession/circulation without end and, now, *without beginning* – 'a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard). The only principle of coherence ordering this otherwise vacuous milling of meanings is psycho-economic: the interdependent logics of fetishism and exchange, whose dual fascinations will, on the one hand, bring in the same crowds to see this image of a million pounds as gather around the Gioconda and the 'Treasures of Tutankhamun', and on the other, are singularly consistent with this *particular* image, which anxiously offers the consolation of a multiplicity of 'bananas' to this 'female' form's amputated melancholy.

The intermediary of money guarantees the abolition of difference and the creation of equivalence, much as, in horror films, Dracula's kiss converts the contradictory social heterogeneity of the living into the single-minded unity of the undead. Dracula's victims lose their identity, along with their blood, in exchange for parity with their victimiser, an analogous transfusion of contents and status is performed at the art auction: the painting is drained of its symbolic value, which passes to its purchaser in the form of prestige, in exchange for investment value. Part of the symbolic value of the painting, of course, inheres in the (magical) belief that its essential substance is congealed 'creativity' – this too (by the same magic of communion) becomes the *property* of the purchaser. Hence the catalogue to an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1983: *The First Show: Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections 1940–1980*. In place of the customary names of artists, the cover carries only the names of the collectors; the greater part of the catalogue is devoted to interviews with them; the essays in the catalogue are about the collectors and their place in the history of the art of collecting. In short, the discursive forms of dominant, 'common sense', art criticism are transferred, unmodified, from 'art and artists' to 'collections and collectors'. For example: 'Rowan's is a cultivated, sensuous taste that first found expression in his renowned collection of colour-field paintings'; or, again, 'The collection of Count and Countess Giuseppe Panza di Biumo is a brilliant creative endeavour unlike any we have seen in this century. Guided by his own innate and dramatic grasp of the beauties of architectural space', and so on. I read all this in Los Angeles, but am now writing in London and am aware of an opinion here which would attach no more significance to this show than that of a mere quirk of the Californian Grotesque, the product of a singularly unmixed economy which dictates that Museum and University must flatter private wealth or perish; in Europe, the state cocoons those it charges with the preservation of eternal verities and values from such undignified soliciting. This, of course, is untrue – here in Thatcher's Britain it becomes patently less true by the minute – but this is not the point. Suppose it were true that the Museum were really a seat of 'independent' and 'disinterested' aesthetic judgement – the sort of judgement invoked to legitimate the exchange of a million for the de Chirico. It is worth quoting Baudrillard here at length:

> One might believe that, by removing the works from this private parallel market to 'nationalise' them, the museum returns them to a sort of collective ownership and so to their 'authentic' aesthetic function. In fact, the museum acts as a *guarantee* for the aristocratic exchange. It is a double guarantee:
>
> – just as a gold bank, the public backing of the Bank of France, is necessary in order that the circulation of capital and private speculation be organised, so the fixed reserve of the museum is necessary for the functioning of the sign exchange of paintings. Museums play the role of banks in the political economy of paintings:
>
> – not content to act as an organic guarantee of speculation in art, the museum acts as an agency guaranteeing the universality of painting.[36]

Baudrillard adds, 'Objects other than painting, of course, could be analysed in the same terms: for example knowledge'.

And so it is that the institutionally dominant form of art history in the modern period has been a history of, and for, the salesroom; its efforts have been primarily directed towards perfecting the determination of attribution and provenance, a self-imposed

restriction of vision which can have no other explanation than the need of a financially hyperinflated art market – essentially arbitrary, and therefore inherently unstable – for the spuriously stabilising 'objectivity' that only art historical 'science' could bring to it.

It is thus that art history, criticism, the market, and the museum, mutually circulate their meanings: a fashionably nostalgic de Chirico revival amongst young painters in Italy, selected for capitalisation and promotion by art dealers, results in the upward valuation of works by de Chirico, a major exhibition of his work, and the million-pound price tag, which in turn underwrites the spiraling prices of his young 'followers'. All meanings here contribute to, and are swallowed up in, the roar of *fashion*; the heady alternation/alteration which converts 'different' into 'same'; a dizzy whirl whose very velocity, like a gyrating toy, guarantees its stability; a vortex of effects which sucks a vacuum into its own core, such that it no longer makes sense to posit the market – the economy – as 'origin'. The 'centre', prime cause (like power itself, in Foucault's description), is now everywhere and nowhere. In contemporary capitalism, in the society of the simulacrum, the market is 'behind' nothing, it is *in* everything. It is thus that in a society where the commodification of art has progressed apace with the aestheticisation of the commodity, there has evolved a universal rhetoric of the aesthetic in which commerce and inspiration, profit and poetry, may rapturously entwine. Compare, for instance, the following two passages (they are by no means exceptional, they are typical), the first is from *Vogue* magazine:

> As the sun descends the butterfly bright colours which flourish at high noon give way to the moth shades. The tones are pale, delicate. These are the classic Mayfair colours. White, naturally, takes pride of place, but evening white lightly touched with silver or sometimes gold. Mayfair colours are almond, pink and green, dove greys and blue with the occasional appearance of what can only be described as peach. Jewellery is kept to a minimum, just simple pearls and diamonds. Not necessarily real, it is the non-colour that is important. The look is essentially luxurious, very much for the pampered lady dressed for a romantic evening with every element pale and perfect.

The following is from an art review column of *The Guardian* newspaper:

> In his new show a whole new range of cheeky pinks, violets, silvery greens are put through their paces alongside the more familiar Alan Green colours, a red that hovers on the edge of becoming maroon and that silent deep-sea blue, 'the night made visible'.
>
> In previous exhibitions the colour has completely covered the canvas but here the artist is seen experimenting with various framing mechanisms that not only anchor the main colour on the wall but also set up a whole new series of internal relationships.
>
> A grey is surrounded by a violet, and although there is much more of the grey it is the violet that seems to have infiltrated the spirit of the picture. Red-Pink is almost square. The inside is reasonably sedate, a deep poppy crimson. But the frame is an outrageous pink which seems determined to upset the red's decorum. It fails but only just.

As the art world sways increasingly to the rhythm of fashion (the most conspicuously *visible* flutter of the pulse of capitalism) so the discourses of fashion and art journalism have flowed into an easy confluence such that they are now often indistinguishable in 'tone'. Frederick Jameson has spoken of a process of the commodification of the narrative in which,

> the best-seller has tended to produce a quasi-material feeling tone which floats above the narrative but is only intermittently realised by it: the sense of destiny in family novels, for instance, or the 'epic' rhythms of the earth or the great movements of 'history' in the various sagas.

Such 'feeling tones', says Jameson,

> can be seen as so many commodities towards whose consump-

tion the narratives are little more than means, their essential materiality then being confirmed and embodied in the movie music that accompanies their screen versions.[37]

In *Système de la Mode*, Barthes identified, in fashion writing, a 'written garment', (*vêtement écrit*) radically distanced from the description of actual clothing in that it has no other purpose than to be consumed at the level of *myth*; similarly, the genre of art criticism exemplified above manufactures a mythified 'written painting' – reproducing its absent 'original' (we are back with the simulacrum) as a 'feeling tone'; this, also, has its material, musical, counterpart in those television art programmes in which creators are seen frowning through dense layers of Bach as they fiercely scumble paint onto canvas, the morning's art review perhaps mumbling through their minds and made material in their hands, the word made paint.

The crisis of legitimation

I have already quoted Habermas on the fragmenting of discourses in the eighteenth century which led to our present separation of 'art' and 'politics' as discrete domains of experience. Habermas is not a cultural postmodernist, he believes that the Enlightenment project may be realised, albeit in a corrected form, and he, moreover, sees the new communication technologies as unprecedented means to attaining a harmoniously integrated society, one in which the previous separation of realms of expertise, and the separation of 'experts' from 'public', will be dissolved. Lyotard, a political and cultural post-modernist, is highly critical of this scenario, in which he sees all the provenly dangerous French Enlightenment and German Idealist fantasies of a managed totality – dangerous in that the utopian dream of an 'organic society' has proved to take historical form only as a totalitarian nightmare of 'consensus' under force. On questions of *aesthetics*, Habermas and Lyotard are both modernists – albeit again they differ in their view of the role of modernist art. Habermas's view of the role of modernist art is best summarised in a tale related by Peter Weiss, which Habermas retells with

approval.[38] The story concerns a group of 'politically motivated, knowledge-hungry workers in 1937 Berlin', young people who, 'through an evening high-school education acquired the intellectual means to fathom the general and social history of European art'. From, 'the resilient edifice of this objective mind, embodied in the works of art', they gathered, 'chips of stone' [*sic*], which they then 'reassembled in the context of their own milieu'. In 1937 such deference to established culture had already been 'overtaken on the left' by such movements as *Proletkult* and *Arbeiterfotografie*; today, Habermas would sound simply irrelevantly schoolmasterish to young left workers more inclined to play rock than gather it.

As I have already remarked, the programme of 'high modernism' in Art – as, for example, set out in Clement Greenberg's criticism – is a culmination of the Enlightenment project of organising knowledge into independent areas of self-reflexive expertise (Greenberg makes his own debt to the Enlightenment specific: 'I conceive of Kant as the first real modernist'). As I have put it previously,[39] Greenberg defined modernism as, 'the historical tendency of an art practice towards complete self-referential autonomy, to be achieved by scrupulous attention to all that is *specific* to that practice: its own traditions and materials, its own *difference* from other art practices', to which we should add that he further viewed modernist art as the vessel, and the bastion, of 'superior culture'. Lyotard, like Greenberg, is a Kantian in his interpretation of the role of modernist art; it is our means to an intuition of the *sublime*, which for Lyotard means 'the unrepresentable' – 'that which does not allow itself to be made present'. I have already given responses to such an aesthetics of the ineffable, both from a sociopolitical and a psycho-analytical point of view.[40] I shall not repeat my remarks here except to add that Lyotard's modernism is further compromised from a historical point of view in its nostalgia for an impossible vanguardism, long overtaken by events. Lyotard's position is, as Jameson observes, 'the celebration of modernism as its first ideologues projected it – a constant and ever more dynamic revolution in the languages, forms, and tastes of art', yet which are today simply, 'assimilated to the commercial revolutions in fashion and commodity styling we have since come to

grasp as an immanent rhythm of capitalism itself'.[41] We may in fact make more progress in formulating a post-modern problematic for art through attention, not to what Lyotard says about 'art', as such, but rather to what he says about (scientific) *knowledge* (a reasonable shift of attention as, as already remarked, art since the Enlightenment has been conceived of as embodying a *type* of knowledge).

In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard identifies two major 'narratives of the legitimation of knowledge' which once justified scientific research. In one, the narrative of *emancipation*, the extension of a universal scientific suffrage to all members of society (through, primarily, early schooling in science) is to lead to a society freed from need or injustice, as a result of the duality of rationality of demands and the (scientifically secured) satisfaction of such demands at all points within the social formation. In the narrative of emancipation, the subject of science is *the people*. Thus, if I am an individual researcher, I may justify my experiments by recourse to a narrative in which my work is *on behalf of* the people (no matter that the research is commissioned by the state, the state is the representative of the will of the people).

In the second major narrative of legitimation, the subject of science is not the people, but *philosophy*. Here, knowledge is sought *for its own sake*; philosophy is, in effect, sceptical that the desire of the people is necessarily benign. Science 'for its own sake' (conducted nevertheless in accordance with a sovereign ethic) will achieve, by purely 'internal' speculative means, that unity of knowledge of nature which can only benefit humanity in general. Thus, in terms of this narrative, my work as an individual researcher is to contribute a further 'piece' to knowledge conceived of as a sort of jigsaw puzzle which may be surveyed from the superior vantage point of the *university* as a potential totality in process towards completion.

A *crisis of legitimation* in science occurred with the dissolution of the positivist dream of a unified totality of knowledge built on *observation*, with the recognition that, in the words of Heisenberg, 'Natural science does not simply explain and describe nature, . . . it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning'.[42] There is thus no longer any singular 'reality' to

provide the common ground upon which all scientifically rational demands of the people, or all instances of 'pure research' *en route* to a 'unified knowledge', can stand. Both major narratives of legitimation therefore enter a terminal crisis. Lyotard's response to this crisis of legitimation is through linguistics, particularly through an assimilation of the scientific theory to Austin's notion of the 'performative' utterance. The performative is an enunciation – for example, 'keep off the grass', or 'I thee wed' – which has *in itself* no descriptive function (albeit it may be, in Austin's expression 'void for lack of reference' – for example a 'keep off the grass' sign where there is no grass). The performative is rather an incitement, inducement, or commitment, to an *action* (or, as in such utterances as, 'I thee wed', its meaning is in the very *act* of its utterance). Thus, as Jameson puts it, the justification of scientific work now becomes, 'not to produce an adequate model or replication of some outside reality, but rather simply to produce *more* work, . . . to make you have "new ideas"'. In the absence of the 'master narratives of legitimation', scientific research is now characterised as, 'so many smaller narratives or stories to be worked out . . . small narrative units at work everywhere *locally* in the present social system'.[43] (We may note the formal similarity of this post-modern picture of scientific activity to the post-modern pattern of political activity).

If we return now to the question of the legitimation of art, we can see narratives of legitimation at work which are broadly analogous to those which once were operative in science: 'art for the people', and, 'art for art's sake'. Jameson suggests an analogous 'crisis of legitimation' of art in the nineteenth-century 'crisis of representation' which led from realism to modernism. I find this unsatisfactory, unlike science, art (here, painting) did not lose its confidence in the existence of a singular reality, merely its confidence in its ability to represent that reality with the speed and comprehensiveness of the new photographic technologies – hence the painter Paul Delaroche's celebrated exclamation at the first exhibition of the Daguerrotype, 'From today, painting is dead'. The subsequent work of, for example, Cézanne and the Cubists, was justified by such critics as Bell and Fry precisely in that, they asserted, such paintings offered access to

a more singularly essential, 'noumenal', *superior*, reality. In the first half of this century, the two master narratives of legitimation survived to serve, respectively, in the West, high modernism, and in the East, Socialist Realism. Western Modernism in the visual arts went into crisis with the dawning realisation, in the 1960s, that its formal experiments were exhausted and that its political utopianism had become vacuous. The 'campus revolts', and other political events of the 1960s, assisted in precipitating the terminal crisis of 'art for art's sake'; for a short time into the 1970s the alternative master narrative of 'art for the people' enjoyed a vogue amongst those who had helped get rid of modernism, but it was undermined in history and in theory (I shall return to this later), and it collapsed.

With the 'delegitimation' of the master narratives of *Art*, art also is now in the position of operating with 'local' narratives – narratives which can no longer be assumed as always-already in place, but which must be continually *in process* of writing and revision. It is no accident therefore that we have, since the end of the 1960s, seen an increasing number of 'artist-theoreticians', a development which is neither historically unprecedented nor institutionally inconsistent. To summarise what I have already said at some length: art in general, in the modern sense, begins in the mid sixteenth century with the recognition of painting as a *theoretical*, as well as a utilitarian, practice – a recognition consolidated in the ensuing programme of *ut pictura poesis*; the eighteenth century sees the foundation of a modernist 'specificity', a 'purely visual' art relieved of a narrative function (Lessing), but in the name of a superior theoretical knowledge (Kant), and under the guarantee of the 'grand legitimating narrative' of the Enlightenment (henceforward, painting is destined no longer to contain narratives, but only at the cost of becoming contained *by* a narrative of a 'higher' order). The eighteenth century also sees the provision of the necessary 'external' material conditions and discursive institutions for the support of the putative 'autonomy' of the aesthetic: the institution of 'aesthetics' and 'art history' as independent disciplines; the growth of the Academy, notably differing from the former artisans' guilds in that it inducts its candidates into philosophical, as well as technical, discourses; the expansion of the institution of

the public exhibition (exemplified by the *Salon*), the growth of periodical literature, and the emergence of 'critics' as an independent professional class. It is this legacy of the Enlightenment which we have inherited in the form of our present art institutional complex, a variety of sites – studios, galleries, magazines, academic journals, art schools, university art departments, museums, and so on – which are linked by the discourses common to them, and which in turn they replenish and recirculate according to the terms of their particular practices (painting, criticism, dealing, conservation, teaching, and so on). Within this over-all discursive formation the 'discourse in dominance' is itself a legacy, a survival of past intellectualisations now sedimented into the 'common sense' of *Art*. I have identified the primary strata of this amalgam as 'realist', 'expressionist' and 'formalist' theories, bonded together through the ideological primacy of the 'symbol'. In addition to the 'discourse in dominance' there are 'discourses in dissidence'; these, already in the minority, are further reduced in their institutional effectivity in that they are commonly defined only in their opposition to the status quo (beyond this they most often appear as heterogeneous, often mutually hostile, 'left factions').

Discourse and discursive formation

It is because my purpose in this essay has been to examine art criticism and theory that my attention has been directed to the register of *discourse*. This is not to deny the determinations of the economic, the political, or any other analytically isolable realm of the social formations within which art institutions and practices are articulated. It is, however, most emphatically to deny that discourse is merely the means of 'expression' of pre-existent entities – individuals, social classes, political or artistic practices, 'history', the *zeitgeist*, 'structure', or whatever else – conceived as independently constituted *outside* of discourse. It is to stress that discourse is itself a determinate and determining form of social practice; discourse does not *express* the meanings of a pre-existent social order, it *constructs* those meanings and that order. I have noted that the recognition of the art institution

as a *discursive* institution is consistent with an influential post-modernist perspective, most notably that of Lyotard, which foregrounds the agency and efficacy of the *legitimating narratives* in the construction of *practices* within the social formation. I believe that such a recognition is of crucial strategic importance to any 'dissident' art programme. Some recent experiences, particularly in the US, have led me to believe that, in spite of the theoretical work of the 1970s, an implicit 'reflection' or 'expression' theory of discourse still prevails on the 'left' of art theory and criticism; I therefore feel I should resume a position on discourse derived from a collage of some of the work of the past decade before proceeding with the articulation of this position within a post-modernist art problematic.

I have, so far, spoken of the 'discourses' of the art institutions, and of these institutions as 'discursive formations', without giving any particular definition of the *word* 'discourse'. I should now explain more precisely what I intend in using this word rather than some other, such as 'speech', 'writing', or 'ideas'. In the first decade of the twentieth century, modern linguistics was able to emerge from nineteenth-century philology by means of the distinction Saussure made between *parole*, individual acts of speaking, and *langue*, the system of elements and combinatory rules of a language which all speakers of a language hold in common. *Langue*, the abstract underlying system of language, thus became the object of systematic study, while *parole* was left outside of such study, as a supposedly freely-willed act of personal expression. Saussure himself had observed, in passing, that not all of speech consisted of spontaneous invention; he gave the name 'fixed syntagms' to those locutions we commonly call *clichés* – 'how do you do', 'have a nice day', and so on. Writing in the 1940s Louis Hjelmslev, in developing Saussure's linguistics, found it necessary to interpose a third category, 'usage', between *langue* (the abstract system) and *parole* (an individual's use of that system): 'usage' was to be described through analyses of the actual linguistic practices extant in a given society at a given time. Modern linguistics had begun with a model of language use in which a sender 'communicates' with a receiver; the task of linguistics was to describe the system internal to language itself which permits such communication.

In more recent years, Michel Pêcheux has been notable for his attempt to elaborate a linguistics capable of taking into account the fact that, first, 'sender' and 'receiver' are not the fully self-possessed subjects presupposed by Saussure, but are in fact 'split' between conscious and unconscious, as described in psycho-analysis; and secondly, that language is most intimately bound up with 'context' in general and social institutions in particular. Here, 'one must leave behind the notion of *langue*, to which each speaker bears a similar relation, and consider discursive formations, specific areas of communicability that set in place both sender and receiver and which determine the appropriateness of messages'.[44] This is to say that, whereas structural linguistics, guided by Saussure's notion of *langue*, seeks to identify universal principles of linguistic production at a high level of generalisation and abstraction, discourse analysis operates at a very different level of considerations, being concerned with particular formations of language-in-*use* which emerge in a society, at a particular historical conjuncture, on the *basis* of *langue*. Discourse analysis is therefore a tool of institutional, ideological, investigation, in a way that theoretical linguistics cannot be. In the words of Pêcheux and his collaborator Catherine Fuchs, discourse analysis is, 'the theory of the historical determination of semantic processes'.

No doubt in part because of the technical difficulties of its formal linguistic framework, the work of Pêcheux is less well known than that of Michel Foucault. Foucault's work is in no way simply assimilable to that of Pêcheux, but nevertheless there is much that is similar in the over-all intent of the two projects. Just as, in Pêcheux's work, the expression 'discursive formation' takes over from *langue*, so, in Foucault, it takes over from 'thought' or 'ideas'. Foucault is basically concerned with the question, 'where do ideas come from?'. Histories of ideas, under the sway of Renaissance humanism and its Enlightenment development, have been written as histories of progress and continuity. Foucault describes the cost of such spurious continuities; for Foucault, the history of ideas is one of profound discontinuities in which 'ideas' never form or function in isolation from institutions and relations of *power*. Discourses in power establish their own continuity and legitimacy of lineage only by the

(violent if need be) suppression of those discourses which oppose them. By 'discourse' here is meant a series of utterances, Foucault calls them 'statements', produced under definite social and historical conditions: the science of physics; 'concerned' social documentary photography; interior design magazines; psychiatry; art criticism – the list is potentially endless. The questions Foucault would bring are: 'why have these discourses been produced and not others?'; 'what are the necessary conditions of their existence?'; 'how are they pre-constructed as the survival of previous discourses?'; and so on. Towards the close of the *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault envisages the possibility of an 'archeology' of painting which would try to recapture the 'murmer' of the painter's intentions, the implicit philosophy which informed the painter's view of the world; an 'archeology' which would trace the extent to which the opinions, scientific knowledge, ethical systems, and so on, of the period in which the painter lived, appear in the painter's work, transcribed now, not in the form of words, but as images. This 'archeology' would attempt to reconstitute the latent discourse of the painter:

> It would not set out to show that the painting is a certain way of 'meaning' or 'saying' that is peculiar in that it dispenses with words. It would try to show that, at least in one of its dimensions, it is discursive practice which is embodied in techniques and effects.[45]

Elsewhere in *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault writes: 'The archeological description of discourses seeks to discover the whole domain of institutions, economic processes and social relations on which a discursive formulation can be articulated'.[45] As formal discourse analysis soon discovered, any single institution is itself the site of a plurality of discourses which, moreover, are often mutually contradictory; it is thus that, as Colin MacCabe writes:

> The substitution of the notion of discursive formation for discourse emphasises that there can be no simple one to one homology between institution and discourse – there can be no method of counting the number of discourses or ideologies within a given social formation. The analysis will always depend on the political and ideological struggles imbricated with the different discursive formations.[47]

In the interests of brevity, and in order to proceed with my specific project here, I made a provisional distinction between 'discourses in dominance' and 'discourses in dissidence'; in so doing I posited a unified dominant 'common-sense' of *Art*, opposed by disunited 'dissident' factions. It may be objected that art history, theory, and criticism *in general* proceed by mutual contestation, if not denunciation and recrimination. The overwhelming majority of such litigations before history however are fought *on behalf of the same ideological beneficiary* – as Bourdieu has remarked, 'nothing better conceals the objective collusion which is the matrix of specifically artistic value than the conflicts through which it operates'.[48] For example, critical argument over whether this or that work is a masterpiece or not, can only benefit the status quo if it fails to problematise the categories 'work' and 'masterpiece'.

Let us suppose, however, that we are able (as most of us believe we are) to distinguish between discourses which are not simply different shoots from the same theoretical root, but are mutually opposed 'root and branch'. On what basis do we judge in favour of one or the other? Apart from the 'grand narratives', it is most usual to find that the appeal of both parties to the dispute is to such things as 'experience' or 'reality' – factors external to the discourse, which each sees as supporting its own position. In such a case we have encountered a common root in the 'argument from epistemology', and it is at this point that we must stress the obvious fact that 'theory' is itself a form of discourse.

In the introduction to *Mode of Production and Social Formation*, Hindess and Hirst write:

> Throughout this text we refer to theory as theoretical *discourse*. Why do we use this term? Theoretical discourse we shall define as the construction of problems for analysis and solutions to them by means of concepts. Concepts are

deployed in ordered successions to produce these effects. This order is the order created *by the practice of theoretical work itself*: it is guaranteed by no necessary 'logic' or 'dialectic' nor by any necessary mechanism of correspondence with the real itself. Theoretical work procedes by constant problematisations and reconstructions. Theories can only exist as *discourses* – as concepts in definite orders of succession producing definite effects (posing, criticising, solving problems) – as a result of that order. Classically, in epistemologies, theories have an appropriate form of order in which their relation to the real is revealed. They appropriate, correspond to or are falsified by the real. The limits of nature set their limits. Theory ultimately represents and is limited by the order of the real itself. In empiricist epistemologies, for example, theories take the form of categories translatable into definite observation statements. Our conception of discourse cannot be so limited. This is not to deny 'reality' exists, is ordered, or to assert that it is infinite and unknowable – all of these are sceptical or critical positions within epistemological discourse. We reject the category of reality-in-general as epistemological; it is the couple of knowledge-in-general . . . The reason why discourse is interminable is because the forms of closure of discourse promised in epistemological criteria of validity do not work. They are silent before the continued discourse of theories which they can never correspond to or appropriate.[49]

We may note that Hindess and Hirst's view of the status of theory is perfectly compatible with that of Lyotard, and is a response to the same observation of the crisis of legitimation in science. A consequence of the rejection of epistemology is that we replace the question, 'is this discourse true?', with the question 'what is the truth effect of this discourse?' This is more than a semantic quiddity; as Hindess and Hirst continue:

> If independently existing real objects are thought to exist in the form of actual or potential objects of discourses, then any theoretical discourse may be measured against what is thought to be known of those objects. For example, . . . 'bourgeois' historians and social scientists have been criticised for their failure to recognise objects specified in Marxist discourse.

Here, however,

> far from constituting a theoretical critique of the concepts and arguments of the discourse in question, this mode of analysis merely measures the substantive distance between the objects specified in one discourse and those specified in another.[50]

Thus, for example, 'sexism' is not some *thing* which had independent existence prior to its 'discovery' by women; 'sexism' is a *discursive construct* of feminist discourse, a construct whose specifiable *effects* are aimed at changing the structure of real social relations within the various practices – social, political, economic, and so on – with which the discourse is imbricated. The knowledges created and mobilised by the term are thus *strategic*, not ontological, and cannot be specified in advance of particular material contexts and conjunctures. For example, as Elizabeth Cowie writes:

> An image of a woman and child can be attacked for reproducing notions of femininity wholly defined by motherhood . . . the 'natural' career of children. On the other hand it can be argued that the same image instead presents a positive image of women – affirming their roles as mothers in a society which treats as second citizens those who are involved in the care of children.[51]

Outsiderism and subversion

I have already observed, in talking about the common sense of *Art*, that we are still extensively in the thrall of a Romantic discursive formation. In a long essay on Romanticism, Sayre and Löwy have stressed that, '*far from being a purely nineteenth-century phenomenon, Romanticism is an essential component of modern culture*';[52] they are at pains to emphasise the complexity of the Romantic movement, but they nevertheless identify a

'unifying element' in, '*opposition to capitalism in the name of pre-capitalist values*'.[53] If we take them at their word here in their identification of Romanticism with the *modern*, as I believe we must, then we may see the current confusions in art around the idea of the *post*modern as the perturbations attending a historical passage *out of Romanticism* (nothing more contradictory than Romantic postmodernism); we may then, further, define a postmodernist left aesthetics as 'opposition to capitalism in the name of . . .' *not*, presumably, pre-capitalist values (as these are known to us only in the form of a Romantic fiction), but then what? This, precisely, is what is currently *in question*; we may, however, make some progress towards a solution by means of a preliminary 'ground-clearing' in which we set aside those left art positions which seem most imbued with the survivals of Romanticism. For my purposes here, I wish simply to consider the second term in the expression 'discursive institution'. Specifically, I want to look at the traces of two Romantic preconceptions – the autonomously expressive individual (culmination of humanism), and 'the people' (projection of the dream of a pre-capitalist 'organic society') – as they have coagulated in the form of subject positions for work 'inside the art institution but independent of it', 'inside the institution but working to subvert it', and 'outside the institution'.

The arguments which make up the various 'anti-humanist' left critiques of the Romantic liberal humanist idea of the 'autonomous' artist are widely available and need no further rehearsal here (I am thinking primarily of the arguments from Marxian socioeconomics, and from Freudian/Lacanian psycho-analysis). I shall therefore pass over this particular Romantic formation, picking it up only at a convenient point of transition to the second position on/in the institution mentioned above: I have heard many artists say, 'My only relation is with my work'; by which I assume they mean this is the only thing *they* value. This may be, but it is beside the point in the context of any consideration of the *historical* entity '*Art*'. Regardless of the personal feeling of the artist, it just happens to be a fact that the art which gets *seen* (in galleries or museums, in magazines or books), the art which becomes counted *as* 'Art', has been subjected to processes of selection and legitimation which are beyond the

control of the artist (albeit some artists are infinitely more attuned to these processes, and skillful at negotiating them, than others). Thus Pierre Bourdieu writes:

> who is the true producer of the value of the work – the painter or the dealer, the writer or the publisher, the playwright or the theatre manager? The ideology of creation, which makes the author the first and last source of the value of his work, conceals the fact that the cultural businessman (art dealer, publisher, etc.) is at one and the same time the person who exploits the labour of the 'creator' by trading in the 'sacred' and the person who, by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing, or staging it, *consecrates* a product which he has 'discovered' and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource. *The art trader is not just the agent who gives the work a commercial value by bringing it into the market.*[54] (my emphasis)

Bourdieu consequently makes a necessary distinction between 'cultural value' and 'economic value'.

Many artists have expressed hostility to the 'commodification' of their work by making work intended to attack the very system it ostensibly feeds (like the cartoon cat who substitutes a stick of dynamite for the sausage on the bulldog's plate). Bourdieu speaks of such work, mentioning for example Manzoni's tins of 'artist's shit', and comments:

> Paradoxically, nothing more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion. Because they expose the art of artistic creation to a mockery already annexed to the artistic tradition by Duchamp, they are immediately converted into artistic 'acts', recorded as such and thus consecrated and celebrated by the makers of taste. *Art cannot reveal the truth about art without snatching it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event.*[55] (my emphasis)

The 'paradox' here identified by Bourdieu is given an extra, ironic, twist when those doing the 'consecration and celebration'

are themselves 'radical' art critics; such critics are apt to praise work which 'resists commodification', but in so doing they are anachronistically locked into the logic of a cash, rather than a credit, economy – according to the inexorable logic of *contemporary* capitalism, the cultural value critics accord to such work *will* be transmuted into economic value (no matter that the work 'does not sell' – at the very least, lecture fees and airplane tickets will be generated, and if enough critical writing is produced to make the work 'historically important', a National Endowment for the Arts grant may be forthcoming, or even a museum acquisition); in short, only work which remains *invisible* may remain untouched by money. (The pious show of repudiation of money *as such*, rather than of the inequitable distribution of the wealth it represents, is surely the least convincing guise in which moralism masquerades as morality.) Again, on those rare occasions when the 'subversive' work actually provokes a public scandal, and/or a legal action, the institution under 'attack' only benefits – for the art world thrives on scandal, and the market needs occasionally to convince its bourgeois clients that art is *dangerous*, therefore *exciting*. Such processes contribute to what Bourdieu calls the *accumulation of symbolic capital*: '"Symbolic capital" is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, mis-recognised and thereby recognised, hence legitimate, a "credit" which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees "economic" profits'.[56]

Apart from the recently popular left critical position which tolerates the art object and the gallery only on condition that the former be seen to attempt to do away with the latter, there are other available 'left positions'. The extreme left position on the object and the gallery is summarily to pronounce both as dissolved. Various articulations of this position have been inherited from the aesthetic debates in the Soviet Union in the immediate post-revolutionary period: a situation is sought in which visual art will, in the street and in the workplace, give expression to 'the people' – either directly (the Soviet *Proletkult* position), or through the intermediary of trained artists (the *Lef* 'art at the social command' position). Contemporary exemplifications of these scenarios might be: in the former instance, the spray-can graffiti on New York subway trains; in the latter, the

incorporation of artists into Trade Union work as designers of publicity material, and/or the exhibition of artworks in factory canteens, union halls, and so on. The first, obvious, thing we should note about such a general programme for art in contemporary Western society is that this society is neither post-revolutionary nor pre-revolutionary. In the case of subway-car art, a very small group of young Spanish-Americans were selected for promotion in the gallery-system (thus instantly excluding the rest as 'inferior artists', 'failures') while an advertising programme was simultaneously mounted *inside* the subway-cars in which prominent black athletes, civic leaders, and other 'personalities', condemned the 'defacing' of public property. The publishing industry in general (and Norman Mailer in particular) made profits from selling photographs of the 'subway-art'; a number of, mainly white, artists – who had nothing whatsoever to do with the original, popular, 'movement' – launched careers with a fashionable, *faux-naïf*, 'graffiti-art'. Finally, we might note that the content of the original, 'authentic', popular art was the *signature*, as it were, 'in lights' – a poignantly understandable response to the grinding anonymity of institutionalised poverty, but in no way indicative of the existence of a spontaneous popular ideology *exterior* to the ethos of such culture-industry products as the TV show *Fame*. As for union work, most of the artists I know who have been involved in union work *as* artists have complained that their work has been subjected to (conservative) political and aesthetic censorship, and/or that shop-floor workers were simply indifferent to the 'art' shown to them – even where it directly represented 'real struggles' in which they themselves might become involved (for example, industrial injuries compensation cases).

I would emphatically stress that I do not intend my negative remarks to dismiss *in principle* any such initiatives as discussed above – the viability of such initiatives can only be determined *in context*. I merely wish to point out that there is little empirical support for the ultra-leftist critical position which advocates 'working outside the (art) institution' as, *a priori* the privileged, indeed the *only*, politically progressive strategy. Such a critical position must be set aside as 'voluntarism' (defined by Lenin as a political strategy based on an idealised picture of the material

conditions of struggle, rather than on an analysis of those conditions) for, quite simply, there *is* no 'outside' to institutions in contemporary Western society; they fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle – to leave one institutional site is simply to enter another, which will have its *own* specific conditions and determinations. The artist who works for a trade union *as* an 'artist' has not moved into any 'outside' (Romantic 'outsider*ism*' is at the core of this voluntarism), he or she has simply exchanged the problematic of one institution for that of another; in so doing he or she risks abandoning a struggle to which they could bring some experience and expertise, for one to which they are novices. Moreover, more fundamentally, they remain firmly *inside* the dominant *discourses*. The major weakness of the 'art outside the institution' position is the completely empiricist and untheorised concept of 'institution' with which it operates: at its most reductive, 'institution' is equated with 'real estate' and 'market' – take the work out of the gallery and onto the street, refuse to sell it as a commodity, and the prison of 'institutions' is magically escaped. A number of sociological descriptions of the art institution are available and I shall not attempt to summarise them here, except to remark again that, even described empirically, the 'art institution' is a complex heterogeneity – art magazines, the art market, university departments, museums and so on – which offers no *singularity* which may be confronted from an unproblematical 'outside'. More theoretically, as I have already stressed, it is essential that we recognise the art institution as a *discursive institution*. The left in particular must recognise that in addition to such questions as, 'How can artists directly assist ongoing workers' struggles?', there is another question to be asked: 'What is the nature of political struggle specific to the art institution itself?'. The left must further recognise that more is involved in answering *this* question than the ultimately merely *gestural* response of 'subversion'. As Gramsci urged, the task of the left is less to reflect on the existing culture than it is to respond to the 'possibility and necessity of creating a new culture'. Rather than play Samson between the pillars of the museum, – which is, anyhow, futile – we should recognise that the museum is no more 'irretrievably bourgeois' than is, for example, the movie theatre, or the class-room – all

such spaces are sites of perpetual contestation over 'what goes on' in them, what gets shown, what gets discussed, what issues get raised and taken out of the museum into the surrounding social institutions: in short, what *truths* are (re)generated as prisms of perception and frameworks of action.

The outside as supplement

The voluntarist attitudes of 'individualism' and 'outsiderism' rest on a common assumed *binarism* in which an 'inside' (of the subject, of the institution) is simply opposed to an 'outside'. It is precisely such ordering principles which post-structuralist theories in general have tended to subvert. Such a tendency is, however, most *closely* associated with the work of Jacques Derrida. In his critique of 'logocentrism', Derrida 'deconstructs' the supposed opposition between speech and writing in which the latter is considered a dependent and inessential addition to the former. In his discussion of this purported hierarchy, a legacy of classical antiquity, Derrida examines the work of Rousseau, who writes: 'Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement to speech'. The hierarchy assumed here is more than simply a logical one, it is ethically charged: speech, if in good faith, may be trusted; but writing can never be free of the doubt that the text may have been misinterpreted, or wrongly ascribed. Rousseau therefore speaks of *ce dangereux supplément*,[57] in the course of what Derrida calls a 'logic of the supplement' running throughout Rousseau's writing. Thus, for example, just as Rousseau condemns writing for 'usurping' and 'corrupting' speech, he similarly condemns masturbation – that which, 'cheats Nature' – for usurping and corrupting 'normal' sexuality. These abnormal and unnatural 'supplements' however, Derrida argues, prove on examination to contain all that most essentially defines that to which they are presumed to be opposed: the meanings attendant upon a speech act are generated by essentially the same underlying systems of *differences* as generate the meanings of written texts, and in neither case is there any possible final closure of meaning upon a point of certainty, such closure is rather endlessly *deferred*; again, the

very fact that masturbation may serve *in place of* interpersonal sexual activity should alert us to the likelihood that it is not after all 'external' to 'natural' sexuality; and in fact the overwhelming predominance of the *imaginary* object, and the radical impossibility of possessing it (the perpetual incapacity of 'satisfaction' to exhaust desire), is common to both. Derridean 'deconstruction' therefore attacks the coherence of discourses and institutions at the level of the very 'logics of exclusion' through which they define and establish themselves. As the juxtaposition of the previous examples – language and sexuality – may suggest, a deconstructionist reading of psycho-analysis will be one which sees, in Freud's work, deconstruction *avant la lettre*. As Jonathan Culler puts it:

> Freud begins with a series of hierarchical oppositions: normal/pathological, sanity/insanity, real/imaginary, experience/dream, conscious/unconscious, life/death. In each case the first term has been conceived as prior, a plenitude of which the second is a negation or complication. Situated on the margin of the first term, the second term designates an undesirable, dispensable deviation. Freud's investigations deconstruct these oppositions by identifying what is at stake in our desire to repress the second term and showing that in fact each first term can be seen as a special case of the fundamentals designated by the second term, which in this process is transformed. Understanding of the marginal or deviant term becomes a condition of understanding the supposedly prior term. The most general operations of the psyche are discovered, for example, through investigations of pathological cases. *The logic of dreams and fantasies proves central to an account of the forces at work in all our experience* . . . These deconstructive reversals, which give pride of place to what had been thought marginal, are responsible for much of the revolutionary impact of Freudian theory.[58] (my emphasis)

I have taken the example of Freud here, as work anticipating deconstruction (Marx could also serve in this capacity)[59] because very many critics and artists who are in one way or another 'on the Left' are hostile to psycho-analysis and are therefore

theoretically disadvantaged by a further 'inside/outside' dualism, that of a Cartesian world order. Gilbert Ryle describes this world (the world of common sense) in *The Concept of Mind*, in it:

> A person . . . lives through two collateral histories, one consisting of what happens in and to his body, the other consisting of what happens in and to his mind. The first is public, the second private. The events in the first history are events in the physical world, those in the second are events in the mental world.[60]

For the majority of the art left, *History* is the first history; the second history, such as it is, is (somehow) the precipitate of the first. (This view is 'materialism' any other is 'idealism' – the first judgemental stop on a terminological slippery slope which runs precipitiously via 'subjectivism' onto the rocks of 'bourgeois individualism'.) As Ryle observes, in the terms of what he calls the 'official theory', 'the transactions between the episodes of the private history and the public history remain mysterious, since by definition they can only belong to neither series'.[61] Consequently, there has been a tendency on the Left, since Marx, (a Left too often fatally inclined to mistake mere *positivism* for 'materialism'), to assimilate the concept of 'false consciousness' (*ideology*) to the category of, simply, *error* (an assimilation encouraged by the fact that the very little that Marx and Engels said about 'false consciousness' was never, anyhow, very clear). The result has been a tradition of Left art practice as *propaganda* – a strategy of confronting the 'public' with the *facts* (most often with a mixture of moral accusation and exhortation). But what if a correlation between 'knowledge of the facts' and 'correct' action – indeed *any* action – cannot be assumed; what if a *non*-correlation can practically be guaranteed? The Left has no answer here except a voluntaristic self-assertion which belongs to the same structure of *disavowal* ('I know very well, but nevertheless . . .') upon which the strategy of propaganda has foundered.

The word 'disavowal', here, comes from Freud, who first uses it in his discussion of (sexual) *fetishism*. Marx, in his discussion of *commodity fetishism*, finds he must similarly have recourse

to a language of animistic magic and mysticism: a table, for example,

> so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, . . . is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful that 'table-turning' ever was.[62]

Marx explains that in order to grasp the nature of the commodity, in which, 'a definite social relation between men, . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things', he must take his analogy – fetishism – from, 'the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world'. It is in its potential to dispel such mists that psycho-analytic theory is essential to Left cultural analysis, for in so doing it lays bare the shifting labyrinths of 'psychic reality' which occupy that place of 'transaction between mental and physical', which the 'official theory' assumes to be occupied merely by a (more or less clean) *window*. Althusser saw most clearly not only the vital necessity for an adequate theory of ideology, but also that this theory must draw upon psycho-analysis; he remarks that in Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology*, from which their most frequently cited remarks on ideology are derived, the formulation of ideology is positivistic: 'Ideology is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream . . . All its reality is external to it'; and he observes, 'Ideology is thus thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud'.[63] Psycho-analytic theory is necessary because ideology is not a matter of 'false consciousness', it is not a matter of consciousness at all, it is profoundly *unconscious*.

In an Althusserian scenario, the art institution is one amongst the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' whose function is to secure the reproduction of ideology. This function is clearly inscribed across the history of art; equally clearly, art cannot be *reduced* to this function, cannot be specified *exclusively* in terms of ideology. Speaking of the social marginality of literary humanist discourse, Terry Eagleton observes that it:

> was certainly a peripheral phenomenon within late capitalism, but this, precisely, was its ordained place. Its role was to *be* marginal: to figure as that 'excess', that supplement to social reality which in Derridean style both revealed and concealed a lack, at once appending itself to an apparently replete social order and unmasking an absence at its heart where the stirrings of repressed desire could be faintly detected. *This, surely, is the true locus of 'high culture' in late monopoly capitalism: neither decorative irrelevance nor indispensable ideology, neither structural nor superfluous, but a properly marginal presence, marking the border where that society both encounters and exiles its own disabling absences.*[64] (my emphasis)

Art is not simply a *part* of ideology in general, the ideological is always, whether explicitly or implicitly, *at issue* in art – a fact most clearly displayed in the relation of art production to political authority and social reproduction (history offers a spectrum of such relations, from the unreflecting total subservience of the medieval artisan to ecclesiastical and aristocratic authority, to the highly self-conscious opposition to industrial capitalism of the Romantics).

The collision, or collusion, of the Law and Desire is to be found in all parts of the social formation, as within the subject itself. Art is perhaps today unique among representational institutions, however, in that it may now have no function *other* than to represent such encounters.

'The end of art' theory

I began my remarks on the postmodern with Jameson's observation that any such reflection entails a 'political affirmation or repudiation' of the social formations we now inhabit. It might seem that this observation itself entails a return to moral and political certainties (from where else may 'affirmation or repudiation' be derived?) which have themselves been repudiated in postmodernism. In a recent conversation about postmodernism, published in a left cultural journal, one of the participants says: 'I have found this personally very "liberating", . . . to get the

weight of moral and political certainty or necessity off my mind, but also ultimately very depressing to be left in the restless flux of rhetoric without a rudder'.[65] What needs to be said here is that moral certainty and political necessity is not, of itself, dissolved in the 'restless flux' of postmodernism's 'anything goes'. We should first remember that the 'postmodern' is a 'first-world' problematic – thus, for example, the moral certainty and political necessity that black South Africans should democratically participate in the government of their own society, will not be swept away by any amount of breathlessly fashionable gush about postmodernism; but neither, closer to home, has the tacit institutionalised racism of British society ceased to be any less certainly a moral evil. The end of 'grand narratives' does not mean the end of either morality or *memory*. For example, to speak personally, the fact that I do not see in contemporary events the portents of the imminent collapse of capitalism and the guarantee of the inevitable triumph of the proletariat does not mean that I have forgotten the experiences of my working-class childhood, it does not erase my sense of what social injustice is, and it does not change my social and political allegiances. *Of course* memory cannot be conclusively disentangled from fantasy; *of course* my strongly-*felt* moral sensibility has roots in irrationality and internalised policemen whose influence over my actions is far from completely benign; *of course* allegiances may be betrayed as easily as affirmed, and ideology and political affiliations cannot simply be 'read off' from social class. *Of course* moralities and histories are 'relative', but this does not mean they do not *exist* – at the very least as components of that 'psychic reality' which is the ground of my actions. The question for art (and) theory, as for politics (as always) is, 'how is all this – which devolves upon a "subjective" point of view – to be articulated in a way which is intersubjectively valid and productive; how is it to be (re)constructed in (re)presentation?'. It is as an answer to *this* question that the 'grand narratives' seem no longer credible.

What have expired are the absolute guarantees issued by overriding metaphysical systems. 'Certainties and necessities' are now seen as inescapably *positional*, derived from, and applied within, complex networks of mainly local and contingent conditions; it is thus that Lyotard sees the great legitimating narratives, 'good

for all time', as having given way to a proliferation of smaller narratives, 'good for the moment', or at best, 'for the forseeable future'. Nothing can be guaranteed by history (desired goals must be worked for, not waited for), nor can any action be measured against norms and criteria given in advance, they are rather *born* in the conflicts of authority and desire, (we now ask not, 'is this correct?', but rather, 'what is this trying to do?'). In all this there is no longer any 'outside' in which to work, or from which to speak. Too many of our 'progressive' critics are nevertheless failing to draw the obvious conclusion – as Jameson has put it:

> The cultural critic and moralist . . . along with all the rest of us, is now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories, that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable.[66]

This consequence of the transition to postmodern culture has been confirmed in the contemporaneous and analogous transition to post-structuralist theory. The passage to post-structuralist criticism is a movement, as Barthes put it, 'From Work to Text': from a view of criticism as an operation performed by a self-possessed subject upon a discrete and distanced object, to a view of criticism as an act of *reading*, imbricating, implicating, a divided and unstable subject in the multiple instabilities of a text which continually opens onto other texts. Barthes writes:

> it is part of the theory of the text to plunge any enuciation, including its own, into crisis. The theory of the text is directly critical of any metalanguage: revising the discourse of scientificity, it demands a mutation in science itself, since the human sciences have hitherto never called into question their own language, which they have considered as a mere instrument.[67]

Subsequent calling into question of critical languages has been conducted with a necessarily restless, if not reckless, disregard for disciplinary boundaries. Previously separated streams of

discourse have burst their banks, defamiliarising the features of academic-institutional landscapes which had seemed immutable. But a (post-modernist) *mutation* in the 'science' of criticism (theory) calls for more, it calls for a radical interrogation of the whole discursive structure of the *institution of criticism itself*.

I have spoken of the deligitimation of the 'master narratives' of art – the heroic teleologies of 'art for the people' and 'art for art's sake', with all their attendant 'parallel' and 'sub' plots (most prominently, 'the greatest story ever told', humanism's 'Ascent of Man' [*sic*]). This deligitimation has, of course, been achieved only 'in theory'. Jameson accurately observes that if the master narratives have now 'disappeared' it is because they have 'gone underground' to contribute to what he calls the 'political unconscious'. Their everyday manifestations are in every aspect of the institution, every instance of what Benjamin termed the 'apparatus'. In viewing the institution in its discursive aspect we should not confine the concept of discursivity merely to language itself. For example – to speak of the academy – the architecture of the lecture theatre, the arrangement of chairs in a class-room, are also 'statements' in a discursive formation. Foucault cites, as an example of the discursive 'statement', the empty space which forms the margin on the page of an official report – made wide in order to receive the comments of a superior. In the contemporary art institution, all works are made with, in effect, a 'margin' which awaits the inscription of the master narrative, or the critical judgement, (most often they amount to the same thing). More, the art 'most likely to succeed' today is that which is in essence *nothing but* a blank slate upon which the critical discourse may be inscribed (to a great extent, the distaste of critics for conceptualism, and its derived forms, has been a distaste for the spoiled page). Of course, the very opposition 'critic'/'artist' is itself *the* major statement in the art-critical discursive institution. In this relation, the subjective site 'artist' is that of 'the visual', a site of silence and intuition, of transcendent Spirit, but also the place of the supplicant before History; the subjective site 'critic' is that of 'the verbal', a site of speech and intellect, of transcendent Reason, and the judgement seat of History. In recent years an increasing number of 'artists' have been prepared to transgress this hallowed line of *apartheid* in

the racial system of representational practices; they have met very few critics coming in the opposite direction. There is of course absolutely no reason why a critic *should* make art (we do not *have* to go along with Benjamin here), but neither is there any reason for critics to continue to complain that 'we do not have the art we need'. Today, any critic making this complaint should 'put up or shut up'; no special technical skills are *necessary* in order to make art today (the time is long past when a lengthy apprenticeship in painting and drawing from the figure, and a study of anatomy, was an unavoidable precondition of art production); there, therefore, remains only the argument that the artist is 'a special sort of person', a major component of the dominant mythology, but hardly a notion to be subscribed to by critics devoted to the critique of such ideologies. The critic may of course plead that he or she is 'too busy' to devote time to the *practice* of art; in this case we may ask what is most important, to make 'the art we need', or to complain that we do not have it?

Foucault described a certain picture of the left intellectual who, 'spoke and was acknowledged to have the right of speaking . . . as a representative of the Universal . . . the consciousness/conscience of everyone';[68] he argued (following Gramsci) that, for some time now, intellectuals have in fact tended to play another role – no longer purveyors of the general, the 'good for all time', they now engage the particular conditions of their everyday professional and social lives. No longer 'universal' intellectuals, they have become 'specific' intellectuals. This, today, is the modest condition of the intellectual in the art institution – whether they be styled 'artist', 'critic', 'theoretician', 'historian', 'curator', or whatever. To accept this condition is to work not for 'posterity', 'the people', 'truth', not even for that hardy perennial chimera 'the general public'; it is to work, rather, on those particular projects which seem *critical* at a particular historical conjuncture (feminist art, criticism and theory offers the best recent example, here); such projects are *held in common* by a 'constituency' which may, or may not, be large; there are a potential multiplicity of projects corresponding to a plurality of constituencies; constituencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they may overlap; nor is there any one way of defining

a constituency (it might be entirely a hypothetical *projection*, not empirically known – for example, the readership of a particular journal).

A postmodern art problematic is one which puts on the agenda the imbrication of the aesthetic and the political, but *now*, as Foucault has put it:

> the problem isn't so much to define a political 'position' (which brings us back to making a move on a pre-constituted chessboard) but to imagine and bring into existence new schemes of politicisation. To the great new techniques of power (which correspond to multinational economies or to Bureaucratic states) must be opposed new forms of politicisation.[69]

Some years ago, commenting on this passage, I wrote:

> 'new forms of politicisation' within the institutions of art (and) photography must begin with the recognition that meaning is perpetually displaced from the *image* to the discursive formations which cross and contain it; that there can be no question of either 'progressive' contents or forms *in themselves*, nor any ideally 'effective' synthesis of the two; that there can be no *genre* of 'political' art (and) photography *given in advance* of the specific historical/institutional/discursive conjuncture; that there can be neither 'art for all' nor 'art for all time'. These and other unrequited spectres of the left art imaginary are to be exorcised; the problem *here* is not to answer the old questions, it is to identify the new ones.[70]

The identification of new questions, the generation of new work, is precisely the function Lyotard allocates to theory. When this function is undertaken as 'criticism' (when theory is brought into relation with a given text) then the first requirement is that it should establish a 'meshing' of the respective 'language games' (of criticism, of the artwork) such that what results is *collectively productive*. Far too often, however, 'criticism' takes the form merely of the incantation/imposition of a 'master narrative' over the work in question, whose own terms are not engaged. There then results that unlitagable injustice that Lyotard has termed

the *différand* ('A case of *différand* between two parties takes place when a 'regulation' of the conflict which opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the injustice suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom').[71]

The *différand* orders the *end* of art theory – here, the *goal* of one theory is the *death* of the other. It is dissolved only with the recognition of no other order but that of *difference*. Difference is today denied not only in the petrified 'common sense' which dominates the art institution (for all its pious pretence of pluralism), it is also negated in the sovereign metalanguages of the 'theory' which has come more recently to oppose such art ideologies. Both, in their very different ways, have engendered forms of unlitigable terrorism – institutional in the former case, intellectual in the latter. To make this observation is in no way to eliminate the crucially significant difference between common sense criticism and 'theory'. The former is an inert residue – habits of mind formed in the repetition of figures from forgotten intellectual systems; as a result of the latter, however, we now look out upon a totally transformed intellectual landscape. As already noted, our contemporary category, 'art', came into existence in the mid sixteenth century with the separation of *homo significans* from *homo faber* (a foregrounding of the semiotic, rather than the artisanal, aspect of art), and the recognition of art as a *theoretical practice*. This theoretical status of art was confirmed and consolidated in the discursive-institutional constructions of the eighteenth century (the academy, art history, criticism, and so on) to form the foundations of the modern art institution. The apparent 'emergence' of theory in the art world of the late 1960s (which so scandalised the self-appointed guardians of art's intellectual innocence) was therefore simply a *resurgence* of that which had been repressed in the ideologies of (a degraded) late-Romanticism. The waning of these ideologies (those composing what I have called the 'common sense' of *Art*) was symptomatically expressed in the mid-1970s as a 'crisis in criticism'. Response to this crisis has been various: predominantly, there has been *no* response other than the automatic repetition of that vapid critical 'art-speak' which seems now to be an essential lubricant to the flow of money in the art market; amongst the critical opponents of such

hack journalism (admittedly far worse a problem in Britain than anywhere else) are to be found, mainly, proponents of a regressive-Utopian Romantic anti-capitalism in which art is seen as a potential pinnacle of purity in a sea of venality; it is from this position that we hear, for example, the strident moral denunciation of the present – the call to reconstruct an earlier, more spiritual, age.

The category of the 'postmodern' is our first glimpse of the historical emergence of a field of *post*-Romantic aesthetics. The cultural theory of the 1970s – drawing predominantly on feminism, Marxism, psycho-analysis and semiotics – demonstrated the impossibility of the modernist ideal of art as a sphere of 'higher' values, independent of history, social forms, and the unconscious; this same theory has undermined the modernist dogma that 'visual art' is a mode of symbolisation independent of other symbolic systems – most notably, language; modernist pretensions to artistic independence have been further subverted by the demonstration of the necessarily 'intertextual' nature of the production of meaning; we can no longer unproblematically assume that '*Art*' is somehow 'outside' of the complex of other representational practices and institutions with which it is contemporary – particularly, today, those which constitute what we so problematically call the 'mass-media'.

A consequence of these developments is that the study of 'visual art' – for so long confined within artificially narrow intellectual and institutional limits – now ranges across the broader spectrum of what I have called elsewhere the 'integrated specular regime' of our 'mass-media' society. 'Art theory', understood as those interdependent forms of art history, aesthetics, and criticism which began in the Enlightenment and culminated in the recent period of 'high modernism', is now at an end. In our present so-called 'postmodern' era the *end* of art theory *now* is identical with the objectives of *theories of representations* in general: a critical understanding of the modes and means of symbolic articulation of our *critical* forms of sociality and subjectivity.

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