

The Object in France Today

Martine Antle

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Gilles Lipovetsky has aptly characterized the last two decades of the twentieth century as a period of ideologies crumbling into ethical ambiguity and contradictory values. As belief in ideals has faded, they have ceased to function as models for ordering socio-political networks and world views. And now, in the ideological ruins piling up in the midst of dissonant discourses and discordant behaviors, the representational modalities of dilapidated utopias are the relics retrieved in archeological attempts to define the current *fin de siècle*: “Le monde contemporain offre le tableau du capitalisme impérialiste libéral après qu’il a triomphé de ses deux derniers challengers, le fascisme et le communisme: ainsi parlerait le marxisme, s’il n’était pas défunt” ‘Today’s world offers the portrait of imperialist liberal capitalism having triumphed over its last two challengers: fascism and communism; or so Marxism would say, if it weren’t defunct’ (Lyotard 200). A transitional era par excellence, the moribund twentieth century is listlessly trying to define what it was, at a moment when, as Jameson says, the meaning of history escapes us.

In the age of recycling we are witnesses at the trial of originality; literary and artistic production is being questioned: “one of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary culture is that at a time when the image reigns supreme the very notion of a creative imagination seems under mounting threat” (Kearney 3). For Virilio and Kittler the artist’s individuality is questionable now that computerized information and infography can be adapted for the generation of texts and images. Synthesized images are in fact not images of something, they are devoid of a reference and have no object. For Baudrillard the synthesized image, like the video image, is caught up in an epidemic. “La contagion des images qui s’engendrent elles-mêmes sans

référence à un réel ou à un imaginaire est-elle même virtuellement sans limites, et cet engendrement sans limites produit *l'information comme catastrophe*" "The epidemic of self-engendering images that do not refer to any real or imaginary world is virtually uncontrollable, and this limitless proliferation produces *information as catastrophe*' (*Illusion* 85). Referenceless images are reality dummies, a sham set up in lieu of reality; as such, they bring into question our relationship to the "real." The profusion of such referenceless images attests to a fascination with simulation in today's societies, and to what Clement Rosset calls "ce désir d'aucune chose réelle" 'this desire for nothing real' which "relève en somme d'un attrait du vide qui se manifeste aussi, et de manière plus exemplaire encore, dans une hallucination qui fait périodiquement 'la une' de l'actualité philosophique ou littéraire: l'idée d'une fin du monde probable et imminente" 'arises from the attraction of the void, which is manifest in the hallucination that periodically is the center of a philosophical or literary attention: the presumption that the end of the world is near' (78).

This vision of a world where we are no more than passive spectators has its gurus and its opponents. Eco attacks it in what he calls "cultural guerrilla warfare." Kearney has developed a series of "strategies of resistance" to the dangers of simulation. All levels of society reflect a re-narrativization of socio-political phenomena. Deprived of all notions of transcendence, objects are deformed and de-realized. Their appearance and content are questioned. The city has been taken over by the megalopolis. The "supermodern," as Marc Augé calls the contemporary era, produces "non-lieux" 'non-places,' the generic loci of banality, such as airports and hypermarkets. Pacific Bell's cable project introduces today in France the notion of a film industry without film. Virilio's "zero degree of life style" and Baudrillard's "xerox degree of culture" show up in the novels of the 1980s and 1990s, as a new generation of writers, while still assuming the primacy of the written word, is transforming literature and its characters according to the contradictions of contemporary culture. I have selected four texts as examples.

1. In Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La Salle de bain* (*The Bathroom* 1985), an immobilized character is reduced to the "zero degree of life style." In this and other of Toussaint's texts we witness the disappearance of the object as it is situated and mediated by a series of screens and windows. Vision is constantly pro-

jected through windows that open onto the double arena of the vanishing subject and object.

2. In Anne Garetta's *Sphinx* (1986), as television stations go off the air each night, the space of night clubs is substituted for the television screen, offering a "variation chaque nuit sur un même scénario misérable et violent" 'nightly variation of the same scenario of wretchedness and violence' (70). A***'s desperate search is set to disco music: a "coma agité de rythmes" 'coma agitated by rhythms': "Dans un brouillard vague je percevais les danseurs en masse compacte, écrasés les uns contre les autres . . . ils étaient incapables sans doute de se mouvoir mais la masse entière vibrait en rythme. . . ." 'In a haze I saw a compact mass of dancers squeezed together . . . Obviously they couldn't move, but the entire mass was vibrating rhythmically. . . .' (65). Like the television screen, "Paris by Night" displays the immobility of the deindividualized subject who can move only "en masse."

3. Anne-Marie Garat's novel *Aden* (1992) is one of the first texts (outside the "science fiction" category) to consider the problems of a society caught up in infography. The main character, Aden, is the best computer programmer at ADI, a statutorily independent enterprise involved in state service. Aden "aimait le diapason discret des mémoires informatiques. Il pensait quelquefois què ce chuintement était celui de son propre cerveau" 'liked the quiet vibration of the computer memories. At times the hissing seemed to be coming from his own brain' (11). Sitting bleary-eyed at the screen, he loses himself in the abstraction of signs, in the "sable scintillant des écrans comme des déserts sans accidents" 'screen's sparkling sand, like a perfectly flat desert' (17). Computer language with its propensity for erasure and oblivion is a language without history. It plunges him into a kind of anesthesia, a "voluntary amnesia." At least in the historical sense, there is no movement in Aden's universe. It is a universe "where everything can happen and where it's never necessary to go anywhere." He is caught up in what Virilio calls "polar inertia" or "housebound inertia." Aden travels between three distinct points: Paris, New York, and the suburbs where he grew up. Three days and nights of urban round-trips (presented as "false fevers"), during which we witness the dis-

placement of modern history and Aden's own story as the son of immigrants. He is memory's orphan; but the hard disk he is working on doesn't forget, because the computer has a "job log," a "memory of memory." As an archeologist of computerized information, Aden delves deeper and deeper into the strata of computer memory. The search for identity being reduced to a mathematical equation suggests that Aden himself is perhaps nothing more than a synthesized image derived from an equation.

4. In Hervé Guibert's *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* (*The Man in the Red Hat* 1992), a proliferation of art works is the pre-text for a desperate attempt to disentangle truth from falsehood. The "misty, muddy" (20) presence of the paintings in the gallery windows insinuates itself beyond vision. These paintings, both false and authentic, either copied by specialists in the art mafia or painted and copied by the artists themselves, are bought and sold, authenticated and denounced. In this counterfeit universe, where artists have their works signed by counterfeiters and see to it that their works are copied, the authenticity and originality of art and information are brought into question. We find ourselves in a world of fakes, where art is "au stade d'une circulation ultra rapide et d'un échange impossible" 'caught up in a high-speed circulation of impossible exchange' (*La Transparence* 22-23). In *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* television news and the video screen control the acquisition of art works: "Au journal télévisé on fait état d'un scandale parce que des toiles de la collection Schloss ont été repérées à la Biennale des antiquaires" 'the latest news scandal involves the discovery of paintings from the Schloss collection at the biennial auction of the antiquarian society' (50). The "unreal" video image so distorts the works on display that they finally disappear altogether: "Mais l'image s'était censurée d'elle-même à cause de la violente douche de lumière sur le champ opératoire, qui transformait la zone saignante et la boucherie en zone abstraite" 'through a kind of self-censure, the image itself was distorted by the violent lighting, which transformed the blood on the butcher's block into a zone of abstraction' (42).

The question of the esthetic image in contrast to the video image in writing in the 1980s and 1990s leads to the fundamental prob-

lem of postmodern discourse: how to best define the opposition between the modern (including the avant-garde of the 1920s) and the postmodern (including conceptual art, pop art and minimalism)? "Once outside the realm of architecture, itself relatively uncertain, one encounters nothing but obscurities and unanswered questions" (Bürger 7). Following Benjamin, Scott Lash sees Dada and Surrealism as well as Constructivism as postmodern, inasmuch as these movements all involve the deconstruction of an aura. Benjamin saw the loss of aura or reference as the earmark of both Baudelairean modernism and Surrealism. The correlative of this loss of aura is a representational system that is fragmentary, momentary, and subject to the infinite reproducibility of the work of art as it parallels that of exchange value in the capitalist system. Christine Buci-Glucksmann takes the same stance. In *La Folie du voir* (*The Madness of Seeing* 1991) she makes no distinction between modern and postmodern. Here loss of reference and fragmentary representation underlie a mimesis of death which produces a visual block (*La Folie* 204). Buci-Glucksmann sees the modern as derived from counterfeit and leading to a pathetic delirium of vision with nothing to see. From this point of view the modern is not different from the postmodern. The female body presented in its parts, the use of mirrors, and the taste for the funereal can all be found in modernstyle, *art nouveau*, and Surrealism.

For Baudrillard and Lipovetsky the postmodern contradicts the avant-garde. Baudrillard sees the postmodern as abolishing the very possibility of the revolution called for by the avant-garde. The postmodern is the era of "utopia made real," where everything is expressed, where everything is materialized as sign, in an informational epidemic, in a "transesthetic" of banality: "Même l'anti-art, la plus radicale des utopies artistiques, s'est trouvée réalisée, depuis que Duchamp installa son porte-bouteille et que Andy Warhol a désiré devenir une machine" 'Even anti-art, the most radical of artistic utopias, has been realized since Duchamp's bottle holders and Andy Warhol's desire to become a machine' (*La Transparence* 24). Jean-Luc Chalumeau sees the ready-made as characterized by reversibility: "la capacité pour les objets élus par Duchamp de retomber dans l'anonymat fonctionnel des urinoirs et des portemanteaux" 'the capacity of Duchamp's chosen objects to fall back into the functional anonymity of urinals and coat racks' (152). But Chalumeau, unlike Baudrillard, makes a distinction between the ready-made of the avant-garde and postmodern ready-made. He sees Jas-

per Johns's ready-mades as false objects and counterfeit ready-mades, since they cannot be in any way related to functionality (*Lectures* 152). In fact, the difference between the beginnings of the avant-garde and the postmodern makes sense only within the socio-political context in which an esthetic is developed.

These ideological questions aside, the problem of the postmodern has attracted a profusion of critical texts from very diverse disciplines. It is no exaggeration to say that postmodern criticism is itself postmodern. Widely divergent points of view and arguments for and against certain distinctions between the modern and the postmodern come from nearly every field of interest, from literature and the plastic arts to cybernetics, sociology, politics, and mass culture.

The essays in this collection are primarily concerned with close analysis of certain objects in contemporary French society. Some participants have chosen to address the question of postmodernism directly. Others have not. Some have clearly distinguished between the modern and the postmodern, while others see the postmodern as a continuation of the modern. What all the essays have in common is a focus on the specificity of the object in its socio-cultural context.

Dominique Fisher's analysis of digital images demonstrates that these proto-images are the esthetic and political meta-objects of a "screen-oriented" society. Her interpretation of Benetton advertising and of the "non-place" ("non-lieu") in contemporary writing leads to an affirmation of a Baudrillardian zero degree of politics, a "transpolitic" characterized by limitless reproduction and simulation.

Maryse Fauvel's study of architectural objects opposes the Eiffel Tower, an emblem of the modern, to such more recent construction as the Louvre Pyramid, the Orsay Museum, and the Arab World Institute. Through an analysis of the play between opacity and transparency in the exteriors of these edifices, she demonstrates that the recent constructions are *objets d'art* which exhibit the contradictions of today's pluralistic societies.

Monique Yaari investigates the pictorial paradox of Combas and his contemporaries. Yaari situates the Combas phenomenon at the root of the problem of the modern and the postmodern in that Combas' paintings abolish the opposition between painting for an elite and popular painting. Rather, they are expressions of mass-media culture, a mixing of genres from the Middle Ages to the avant-garde,

and a mixture of techniques; they pose the question of the "Frenchness" of French painting.

Peter Schofer asked a number of undergraduate students of French to take pictures during their visit to Paris of objects that seemed out of place or surprising. Deliberately situated outside the postmodern debate, his ironic reading of a Midwestern student's photograph of a billboard facing Père Lachaise cemetery emphasizes the cultural and sexual connotations of the commercial artifact.

Erotic commercialization of the human body in the media is taken up by Jean-François Fourny in his investigation of the relationship between contemporary fashion and pornography. Fetishism and fragmentation of the body-as-object are analyzed as they relate to androgyny and unisex fashions. This study looks into the exploitation of men in what Fourny calls the "huge gay pornography industry."

Lawrence Schehr's essay invites us to reflect on the "gay body," analyzed as an object of discourse since the 1980s in the writings of Renaud Camus, Guy Hocquenghem, Dominique Fernandez, Yves Navarre, and Hervé Guibert, among others. Schehr shows that the "gay body" in the AIDS era surpasses the limits of representation and defies visual description. Desire in these contemporary texts exceeds the imaginary and eludes such series of mental projections of the "gay body" as can be seen to characterize the pre-AIDS era. Hervé Guibert's images are literally "contaminated" in his hyper-real universe, where all projections of desire are directed through the "invisible lens" of the virus. As Baudrillard has said, the body is no longer a metaphor of anything at all: "Ainsi gardons-nous l'empreinte d'une sexualité sans visage, infiniment diluée dans le bouillon de culture politique, médiatique, communicationnel, et finalement dans le déchaînement viral du Sida" 'We keep the imprint of a faceless sexuality infinitely diluted in the broth of political, media-driven, communicational culture and, finally, in the viral unleashing of AIDS' (*La Transparence* 15-17).

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