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AGORAPOETICS



THINKING EUROPEAN WORLDS

After All:
Critical Theory and the Geography of Culture
at the End of the Postmodern Age¹

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I

The Lay of the Land

However we wish to speak of our age, of our social-historical moment, saying that we are in the Twenty-first Century brings us spontaneously to ask: what was, then, the Twentieth Century? What were the defining traits of its cultures, the idea or ideas it nourished about itself, the tenor of its discourse. And is it safe to say that the last half of the twentieth century can be definitively characterized as the Postmodern Age? Because whatever has been understood (and there are many interpretations), by critics both in the Americas and Europe, as the Postmodern Age, the sense of the label and the positions it represented have, in a few short years after September 11, 2001, become nearly irrelevant, as they bear at present little relation to reality.

In the closing years of the last millennium, several general outlooks on the state of present society appeared, each of which looked at the total picture from a clearly defined (though often laboriously argued)—and implicitly *post*—position. Let me refer to some of them in order to give the reader a sense of the wide range of possibilities in identifying the Dominant Paradigm at the end of the Twentieth century. Thus, we have:

- a) All of social reality is inescapably an interplay of Simulacra, false idols, and unreliable and unbelievable events (Baudrillard);
- b) The explosion of new kind of Empire (polycentric and invisible according to Negri, brutally self-evident in its drive to accumulation for others, such as Harvey, still controllable according to Brzezinski);

- c) Onslaught of planetary super-capitalism, market society, or the Age of Globalization which affects *all* aspects of life (too many to list here);
- d) Transformation of international political relations into a New World Order or Dynamics (Wright's nonzero sum game theory approach);
- e) The theory of the Monomind, or politically correct conformism (Kahn) and media control (Chomsky);
- f) The epistemologically new vision of Technovirtual Scapes (Appadurai);
- g) The complex critical metaphor of Creolization as the *Weltanschauung* of the fin-de-millennium (mostly non-Americans: Gruzinski, Glissant, Gnisci);
- h) The age both of post-colonialism and the crisis of nationalism (Bhabha);
- i) The now almost 'classic' view of Lyotard, the postmodern signaling a paradigm shift, as the age of the end of the great Enlightenment-inspired grand metanarratives, such as emancipation and idealism
- j) The cultures of nihilism and surrender to technology (continental philosophers, Postman, Taylor and others);
- k) Paradoxes of canon formation, multiculturalism and pluralism vis à vis identitarian and empowerment politics.
- l) End of History, End of Metaphysics and End of Utopias. One could well speak of "Endism" as a master metaphor for the end of the millennium.
- m) Dissolution of the theory and practice of the Avant-garde and definite triumph of the commodification of aesthetics and cultural artifacts
- n) Late-late Capitalism (Jameson) or Age of the Unfinished Enlightenment Project (Habermas) or the Age of Cynicism (Sloterdijk)

Other less specialized observers have said the dominant trait of social life in America has been a diffuse apathy marked by irascibility, and a marked rhetoric of "complaint" (Hughes), while other remarked

on how the driving wheels of upward mobile society is fueled by the desire of “contentment” (Galbraith), or is basically “Corporatist” (Ralston Saul). There are more specialized subsets to these. The attempt here is to literally map them out for a comparative and evaluative discourse. Going from the macroscopic toward the microscopic, we want to know whether and how any of these views are Post-modern, and if all or parts of them can still be useful after September 11, 2001, a date we choose as *ad quem* for this critical survey, with August 6, 1945, the *ad quo* date where it all starts.

We can begin by asking: the dialogues (and often debates) have been rich and profound, but why such broad differences and often contrasting views, and where did these sprout from? And why? And, have they had an impact on that same world they are describing, interpreting, and somehow hoping to change? What exactly have they been saying when they identified their methods and object of inquiry as postmodern. Could the concepts that help us understand our times turn out to be, in the main, the swan song of a badly misrepresented Postmodern turn or condition?

II

The Nineties

As I argued a generation ago,² in the seventies and the eighties, the philosophies that pretended to give us our bearings in the interpretation of society bore different names, such as post-structuralism, post-Marxism, new historicism, deconstruction, age of suspicion, feminism. The critique of post-industrial economies and the full-blown imposition of the service and information society required looking at process more than structure, at interdependence of non-homologous systems, and the search for models of analysis which could no longer rely on ‘classical’ or ‘rational’ liberal economics. In other spheres of culture, nihilism and the paradoxes of interpretation became a major theme, a spillover from the field of continental philosophy. And a general crisis in education, at all levels, which in the last thirty to forty years bumped

head-on against the external demands of financial accountability and privatization, on the one hand, and on the other the internal challenge of television, computers and, ultima Thule! the Internet.

Yet in the nineties, one could also perceive how critics and opinion makers were bogged down rehashing without conviction worn out tales essaying to re-adapt and/or update ideologemes of the earlier part of the Twentieth century. It is not as if no 'new' or 'alternative' views had not appeared (think of the work of Bhabha, or Appadurai), but in the main, looking at some of the production in aesthetics, cultural politics, the social sciences and global studies, it seemed as if the pendulum had momentarily slowed down its swing toward an entirely 'other' society, and that a certain 'nostalgia' was making itself felt. Such is the case with those theories that see the last quarter of the century as the *nth* transformation of a *predictive paradigm* (as for example we find in Bobbio, Habermas, Jameson, Said), from which derives the view that globalization and late-capitalism coincide and there is no way out, no 'rational' interpretation or solution to conflicts and contradictions other than by updating and readapting those same paradigms. This may no longer be a convincing view, but deserves reflection, especially insofar as it reintroduces issues of ethics and yet another round on the legitimacy of the political process, and the predictability of the dynamics of culture.

We become aware of this difference in the tenor, style, and recasting of dominant preoccupations of the Euro-American societies aided by one particular event, for the fact is that the *general* cultural and social paradigm has shifted, and radically, after September 11, 2001.

It was noted by many at the time, that there was a sense in which, suddenly, within two hours, most of the population in Europe and America realized that something *really* huge had taken place, and that at the end of that fateful day, the Twentieth-century was a long time ago. The complex and paradoxical (and mostly subterranean) shifts in the interplay between power, capital, politics, institutions, demographics and social policies, and, finally, and main object of this study, the interpretations of culture, especially during the years that go from the Fall of the Berlin Wall (with the ensuing and symbolically

connected dissolution of the USSR) to September 11, 2001, seem to have been completely misunderstood, or gone unseen by the very observers who presumably are telling us what is going on in the world. There is no longer any doubt that the majority of intellectuals, critics, philosophers, artists, writers too and the educated, the middle-class individual were caught entirely off-guard by the event. Far too many, even cynics, have asked: how can this have happened? Where does 'this' come from? And what does it mean? Certain things just don't, can't happen to . . . us! Where the "us" means advanced Euro-American countries.³

But not everyone was shocked into wakefulness from the dream of reason, for in the meantime, behind the curtains, and for over a decade, a small group of individuals were saying: let's rearrange the map.⁴

Looking back and focusing on the last fifteen years of the past millennium, one could perceive a buzzing background humorless irony in public debate, a theoretical weariness, an existential relativity, laconic cases of *faux optimisme*, a growing visible abyss between power, intellectual discourse, and everyday reality. We went very quickly from being a society driven by ideologies, principles, structured political discourses and belief in causes, in the unshakeable belief we were always "on the side of democracy" during the Cold War years, to a society whose ideas, institutions, and power flows are awash in atomistic seas of signals and signs, where image and representation dominate over text/content and the represented, as near general simultaneity appears achieved, and the word "virtual" is no longer a metaphor. Many have observed we float in the pervasive hum of high-strung, utterly non-logical, unpredictable relations, the entire collectivity swimming in an archipelago of surreal lives, in what Don DeLillo so symptomatically depicted as *white noise*. As we will see further down,⁵ the panorama is far from reassuring. In the words of André Glucksmann:

It is naïve to think that we can leave the horrible twentieth century with a healthy soul and a sound body, we have to account for two world wars, 45 years of war cold for us but hot for the rest of the world, 70 years of totalitarian revolution,

and to top it off a few genocides. The belief that the silencing of the weapons is proof that good sense prevailed, is truly a farce. A war that lasts too long unleashes a nihilist pathology which Thucydides called “plague” [peste]. Taboos and respect dissolve, scruples and *pudeour* vanish, people relish the risks and the grand transgressions by living in a constant endless re-threshing of values. Ernst Jünger spoke of this plague of the mind at the end of the First World War. (Glucksmann 149)

The philosopher moreover observes that the ultimate paradox is that the plague does not know it is the plague. It is definitely not a self-conscious *Zeitgeist*, even as it is constantly talking about itself: something is amiss. We seem to be living in an age in which “nihilism . . . is not solely the contempt for values most people consider supreme. Living in fear or feeling threatened is the axiom known through the world: there is no Evil. Because if nothing is bad, then everything is allowed,” meaning one can do anything and not feel having violated a norm, a principle, a protocol of sorts. Why is the end of the second millennium of Western Civilization haunted by such spectres?

III

Erasures

From another quarter, an extremely provocative thesis is submitted in the early nineties by think tank political philosopher Francis Fukuyama, whose thesis on “The End of History,” sent a few ripples through the decade. Depending on where one sits, Fukuyama’s picture may not be so pessimistic: through there will still be some limited areas of conflict in the coming years, he says, the result of deeply entrenched views not yet come to terms with globalization, large scale conflicts will not take place, the liberalist political economy of Euroamerica has reached its maturity, communism and totalitarian regimes have failed forever, the only world-wide engine for all is the market economy, a position shared by Wright and others.

Clearly, the ethical imperatives of institutions and the legitimacy of the nation-state come second. One reviewer (Atlas) pointed out that perhaps the thesis will stir up the opposite process, a growth of resentment to “write more histories,” but the prospects invite somber, if not altogether preoccupying, reflection:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of history. (Fukuyama cited in Atlas)

I consider this an adequate—though not necessarily correct or even desired—general picture of the cultural consciousness of America and in part of the “official” European Union at the end of the twentieth century. With the vertical drop in credibility of any opposition or dialectic, some thought it was now possible to have one world order (perhaps ruler) of the world, as George Bush announced in 1991, others believed the overall pattern was headed for ultimate fragmentation or chaos (Brzezinski). When the museum and all cultural or sacred artifacts—which are signs and symbols of a culture, a memory, and identity—exist and survive primarily owing to having accepted the reality of what Jameson has labeled late capitalism and individual ambition, worthy and made possible only if they generate a profit; and when art with the latest electronic media has intrinsically challenged the primacy of the physical space and ritual of the museum (think of the explosion of the Internet from the mid-nineties on), it has commodified the discourse about the past, we have something like the mummification of history. We will argue that the cultural paradigm is shifting, though it has initially proved difficult to accept positive aspects of it.

IV Nihilism

That the age is marked by deep nihilism is held not only by Glucksmann, but shared by many (though not always comparable or compatible philosophers), from Heidegger to Rosen, from Baudrillard to Subirats to Vattimo to Severino. It can be argued that nihilism was a trait of European history and culture already from the nineteenth century, whereas the post-modern, and the many other posts it spawned, has been variously dated to the sixties, or even the end of world war two (my position, shared by Arthur Koestler's).⁶ In any case, it has claimed for itself a contested or even conflictual overcoming of sorts with respect to Modernity. The issue is by now notoriously complex. In order to proceed toward a workable definition of the concept, we will have to begin by asking, as we said, an elementary question: Is the postmodern age over? And is it far-fetched even to suppose it may actually be just starting, just needs a new name?

First of all, we must consider the word. It is now nearly thirty years that it became evident that the very popularity and circulation of the word have rendered it a neuter, vague, one-size-fits-all tag. It has been persuasively argued that the Postmodern Age was perhaps more the last gasp of Modernity, than the epochal turn some of us had anticipated (see Carravetta 1991). *Too many cultural observers interpreted contemporary phenomena in cinema, literature, criticism, social theory, history and so on by relying on a metalanguage, ideology and a sense of the aesthetic which were through and through Modernist.* Critics from various disciplines still spoke of art as grounded in the autonomy of the signifier, they claimed in their theories that fields of discourse (or disciplines) ought to maintain a formal autonomy, or employed post-structuralist concepts and practices (such as deconstruction), whereas others insisted (perhaps utopistically) on seeing multimedia events and performances as places of political and social resistance.

But as all of these approaches and these theories were "invented"

and developed over a century ago, on what grounds would they have a right to be considered—*post*?

Underlying these social dynamics, one can also perceive an anxiety caused by the very concepts and figurations of radical thinkers, those who declared that Modernity is declining and fragmenting (Vattimo, Jameson, Rorty to name a few representative authors), that the subject (as understood from Descartes to Husserl) is center-less and alienated, that politics is dead or sclerotized beyond recognition,⁷ that teleology and logocentrism are ruinous, and may even lead us to imperialism and war and ethnocentrism and so on supported by a series of near apocalyptic projections.

No, there is no denying a nihilist streak in all postmodern discourse. Yet if all this were true, and we take a long hard look at how our lives are becoming ever more dependent on great technocratic, abstracting alienating forces, we would really have to begin from a position of despair, and own up that beneath the glittering pseudo-ideals there lurk delusions across the board, for the future is a dead end: here beginneth perennial war, eternal terror! (Virilio & Lotringer 24). Far too many interpreters of our times can't shake off the ghost of a general malaise, and nihilism cannot be shrugged off as something akin to temporary pessimism or a depression. Yet collectively the social cultural universe, much like the physical universe up there, continues its relentless shifting of masses large and small, at times subtly, at times through megaexplosions.⁸ My aim is to generate a map of these panoramas, scapes, trace new inroads, disclose or unearth practical and theoretical suggestions.

V

The Persistence of Doubt

The Postmodern can usefully be understood as a “last stage” of the twentieth century and, we will argue, as also dead by the beginning of the twentieth century. In that sense, the ideas about postmodernity that circulated in the nineties especially configure the last gasps and

convulsion of the Modern (as Habermas understood it). The premise for such an analysis—clearly subject to modification *strada facendo*—is that: insofar as postmodernity was understood as fundamentally informed by irony, parody, undecidability and free play, it *could not* effect any significant change in the description and interpretation of reality because these are master tropes of Modernity, no matter how one defines modernity. Postmodernity did not devise anything radically new because the new itself had become a repetitive dilated present, just a cipher in the network, a slogan, a commodity, an expendable actor, a toy concept for intellectuals and academicians who in their narcissism and presumptuousness did not realize the world was being stolen from under their very noses.

Another premise to the rest of my studies is that what retrospectively appears as the near-sightedness of some of the theoreticians of the postmodern is mostly owed to their unwittingly relying on binaries, or dualistic logic, on oppositional rhetoric. This is clearly perceivable when they speak about the Postmodern age as the dissemination and overproduction of either/or schemes, of digital practices, and in some cases even of the more intriguing and fruitful both/and models of distributions. It can be picked up in the way they set up their arguments, victims of the insidious connubium between method and rhetoric. This was a limitation. For as I have argued elsewhere, with this kind of methodic approach to cultural phenomena, one must also root it upon a unitary being or axiom that would justify or apply at all times, a shady neo- or pseudo-Platonic essence whose translation into an episteme is merely the result of a presumably commonsensical yet confrontational module. The deductive, assertive and persuasive rhetoric of this kind states: “things, sentences, are either true or they are not true.” Science and logic work by a priori givens, then by series of exclusions, finally by formal oppositions that reduce the field, make it a formal sign. Yet under various guises this betrays an *atemporal logocentrism* ontologically and formally independent of what in ordinary language we call reality. Perhaps these postmodern critics were just theoretically unable to read other signs of the age.

But what is paradoxical about this widely-shared philosophy is that, the moment it acknowledges the separation between word and reality, it *does* impact reality, and this occurs as it translates into materiality and enters an exchange economy, in creating mythologies about itself, in determining where people live and work and what they buy and think and imagine. In its embodiment as technology, now a pervasive quotidian presence in practically *all* societies, a “rational” science-cum-technology ideology becomes of necessity the paradigm to impugn to effect any changes whatsoever, even at the level of thinking about the world. However one defines it, and there exist several subtle interpretations of it, technology is the *Ge-Stell*, the en-framing, of the epoch, and may well be the sole factor that continues into the twenty-first century even as what the Postmoderns tried to do will drop off by the wayside.⁹ In my work on the postmodern, I advance a case for a constantly re-orienting *plurivocal* critical approach that will recover the pragmatic aspect of agency¹⁰ whether social or personal, in order not to lose meaningful contact with historical change, with material possibilities, with foreignness, with hitherto untried or suspicious discourses (such as hybridity), with creativity.¹¹

VI

Re-calling

Two weeks after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York and Washington, columnist Roger Rosenblatt in *Time* magazine offered a much-cited perception of what had taken place:

One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes—our columnists and pop culture makers—declared that detachment and personal

whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life. Who but a slobbering bumpkin would think, “I feel your pain”? The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequences of thinking that nothing is real—apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity—is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace.

No more. The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real. The flames, smoke, sirens—real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets—all real.¹²

Apart from the barely constrained anger, there is more than pessimism expressed here. It is more like a capillary nihilism in the face of which no ironic distance is any longer possible, as the instruments of ethics and reason have been turned back upon themselves. We seem to get swept up in an altogether different dimension. If there is no longer any opposition in the traditional sense possible, when one could display a number of plausible discursive engagements, when the much sought-after Other, or the enemy, is everywhere and nowhere at once, and often lodged within our own daily practices and speech habits, what chances are there for any interpretation to claim that it has the bearings on a given situation, and then pretend to see it objectively, or negatively?

As we mentioned above, with the loss of belief in any form of supreme good, certain classical processes of relating to society, certain values or images which for better or for worse represented a regulatory ideal, have been brought to exhaustion, to numbness, the true edge of Modernity. If irony is Postmodern, then the entire West is born already post, since from Socrates to Joyce any “advances” in rationality have been accompanied by the double-edged blade of irony. Then everyone we look at may show post-modern tendencies *avant la lettre*. And predictably we have had a post-modern Cervantes, Shakespeare. But I have argued that *irony ought not to be considered the dominant trope of postmodernity* because with irony we can only deconstruct, cut down to size, satirize about any ideal or counter-position, illustrate

the underlying tragic sense of life. Especially in the twentieth century. Making of the ironic mode the signature of modernism, means that the postmodern is probably the reverse, or alter aspect, the lack of irony. How unfortunate that it took a particularly “global” event to drive the point home. The problem is that with irony we also discard the tragic. Although a claim that the tragic age is over has been made right in the heart of Modernism (with Jaspers, Unamuno, Pirandello), it took some time for the phenomenon to surface in the latter years of the twentieth century. Looking back at what had changed between September 11th, and the end of the year 2003, Italian journalist Bernardo Valli, while referencing French minister of foreign affairs Hubert Vedrine, lists among the great casualties:

Above all the crumpling of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians at the end of 2000, which had begun with the Oslo agreement of 1993. And, obviously, with the election of George W. Bush, who put “boot straps” on the United States . . . and the September 11 attacks. . . . have given the new millennium a sinister welcome. The intervention in Afghanistan was the first visible result. The Anglo-American war in Iraq, without UN approval, was the first concrete application of the notion of preventive warfare. From which derived a profound divergence between Europe and the United States on questions of foreign policy, and in particular on the conception of the world. A world which is multilateral for the Europeans and unilateral instead for the Americans. The reawakening, in Cancun, of the North-South antagonism was the confirmation of the moods that hover over our planet.

These strong episodes of international life contain in a nutshell the reality of the post-tragic world in which we Europeans already feel we are living.¹³

It is not clear why it is “post-tragic” but a fair inference is that the events he lists place us in a world in which our lofty values are no longer

capable of holding the new forces and their flows and consequences at bay, that something truly “after” is going on. After listing a few other international facts which impinge on everybody’s life, no matter where and how they live, such as the extraordinary economic impact of China, and the North and South Korea schizophrenia, he muses over the importance that seems to be accorded to the next American presidential election. It is true that the removal of the draftees of the *Project for a New American Century* from Washington would certainly send a great wave of relief through the troubled waters of the West, Valli and also others in both the US and the UK have argued, but how much will things *really* change: “to imagine that a change of the guard in Washington might bring peace in the world is pure and naïve illusion.”

Yet not everyone is of the same opinion. According to two veterans of the Clinton National Security Council, Ivo H. Daalder and James L. Lindsay, the president of the United States “is not the president of cartoonists, a dim puppet of a cabal of old-guard hawks and neo-cons, but the master puppeteer himself. ‘George W. Bush led his own revolution,’ they declare.” (Schmemmann 12) This may or may not be true, we do however know—through substantial supporting evidence—that what is running the world is a group or cluster of groups of specialized interests.¹⁴ Reviewing seven books¹⁵ on the incredible changes that have occurred in just three years, Schmemmann muses: “Sept. 11 . . . has effectively divided our life into a “before” and an “after,” pushing the twentieth century with its hot and cold wars, its thicket of nuclear missiles and its arguments into the foggy past.” From the books reviewed one learns that there circulate theories according to which a super-order in world geopolitics has been attempted, and though the jury is still out as to whether it succeeded or not, there are many (Johnson, Todd, Soros, Harvey, Negri) who feel American hegemony is gone hysterical and will sooner rather than later bust.¹⁶

VII

Closing in

As we saw, in trying to understand what the postmodern age was, we have to become accustomed to how general statements about the state of things can change in such a short time. Jumping back, in the mid-nineties, when already some critics had begun to raise the possibility that the post-modern might conceivably be waning, Richard Harvey Brown writes, in a chapter titled “Reconstructing Social Theory After the Postmodern Critique”:

Contrary to the view that America represents the form of civilization ‘best adapted to the probability . . . of the life that lies in store for us’ (Baudrillard 1988:10), the waning of Europe’s economic and cultural hegemony has been followed by a ‘crisis of the Pax Americana’ (Eco 1978:76). If the Old World of Europe no longer seems to be the bearer of universal values and the model for enlightenment and material progress, the New World of America, in its turn, has encountered a relative economic decline, military ineffectiveness in relation to terrorist or political resistance, and a political and social crisis of legitimation. Moreover, the demise of the Soviet Union, far from ensuring the continued hegemony of America, has created a more polycentric, less controllable world in which American ideologies are increasingly anachronistic. (in Simons & Billig 15)

It appears as if Brown is trying to convince us that the “Empire” was already falling apart, that Bush senior exaggerated with his “new world order” speech of 1991, after the Gulf War, and that a much-desired polycentric or multipolar geopolitical reconfiguration was under way.

It is clear that something happened in the intervening years, for American ideology and foreign policy attempted, factually after 2001, to reinvent empire, and prevent or render implausible precisely the rise

of a multipolar geopolitics. But why were intellectuals, the guardians of the republic, and people who serve at the interstices of the transmission and interpretation of facts, not able to foresee anything like September 11th as possible? It was ironic—it no longer is—that while some sharp minds were trying to map out the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit demon of the century, in the mid-nineties, and speak of the postmodern age as the emergence of pluralities of discourse, complex relations among competing factions, and a rhizome-like decentering of everything, including power, another group of just as smart but certainly much more powerfully connected individuals were gathering their ideas and draft, in 1996, the above-mentioned manifesto, “Plan for the New American Century,” behind which there is an incredibly powerful heterogeneous group of world-aristocrats and oligarchs. Distract the population, they understood, or play upon their deepest fears. And if necessary, break the law. Just, never admit it. We will have to look at some of these strategies up close to understand what a chasm has been created during the last decade of the millennium, when the majority of the schools of thought were still mired in assessing how was it possible that Marxist theory had failed, going out of their way to demonstrate that everything intelligible is ultimately text and therefore mere self-contradicting signs, and subscribed to the vaguest universalism in equality, empowerment, validation for increasingly smaller and smaller groups and enclaves.

A close look at various strands of cultural studies, philosophies, feminisms, neo-left and hyphenated constituencies will now reveal how their very theories finally co-opted them also, making them innocuous, irrelevant, a marginal side-show. Defending one’s or one group’s prerogatives and entitlements meant also using a rhetoric of antagonism, of diatribe rather than dialogue, of “resistance” and “penetration” and “strategy.” A rethinking of how discourse actually works could have led to a less aggressive stance. Mixing the postmodern critique of society with resurgent nationalism and religious fundamentalism can lead to explosive combinations. The few who understood this danger fled into the high-power arts: cinema, architecture, industrial design, Internet-

based business, philanthropy. Power plays, buy-outs and mergers looped tentacles in newer areas of the social compact, perhaps someone thought that there existed a free-market plenum for ideas as well. Academics who spent twenty years in trying to devise a contemporary balanced and fair system of education had to see their programs wiped out by the keystrokes of the accountant or the financial consultant or a totally unqualified representative of a legislative body. Through the nineties, keywords on everyone's lips were: globalization, technology, information highway, Internet, post-colonial world, market economy, privatization, Wall Street, MTV, pop culture, consumerism. Some, endearingly optimistic, even spoke of a chimerical "peace dividend" as the Cold War drew to a close. But by and large American and European critics of culture found themselves too bridled by outworn modes of thinking, or too constrained by specialism, political correctness, and whatever was left of the left. This can be said with irony: What had been satirized as the future of totalitarian regimes, as in Orwell's *1984*, in less than half a century turned out to be a concrete social orientation at the heart of neoliberal democracies, powered by global electronic capital, propped up by pseudomediatic "speak" determining the destinies of billions of people: the word was either invisible (especially when translated into image), or if it was concretely audible, it said what it said and its opposite at the same time: verification theorists need not apply. Big Brother spawns reduplicated into countless little electronic brothers and sisters peeking or poking into every body and pore, every transaction, every cry for empowerment, representation and legitimation. How much of this was picked up by philosophers, by writers, by historians, by the critics of culture?

In the end, if we compare some of the key issues of the past ten years, as represented in cultural studies broadly understood by certain Keywords such as climate change, immigration, energy crises, surveillance, mass incarceration, de-legitimization of entire sectors or populations to the Keywords of the 80s and 90s discussed above, we ought to be able to effect two things. First, retrieve the sites where problems and discourses about today's issue were actually already

discussed during the Cold War years, especially after 1968, and were ignored, and why. And second, try to understand why certain perspectives could not have yielded any resolution or positive grasp of certain dynamics because the very theory and methods employed to analyze given phenomena would not allow them to see them.

TOPICA OF THE POSTMODERN¹⁷

1. Crisis and dissolution of metaphysical theories

A. Grand meta-narratives are no longer tenable, or believable. The grand myths that sustained Euro-American philosophies have shown themselves to be empty, distorted to the point of exacerbating their better or more noble intentions; they changed into the exact opposite of what they built their foundations on. The concept of Being, fundamental to Western metaphysics, has been continually demolished from within specific sectors—Marxism, capitalism, psychology—or by philosophy from all schools. Being is either a grand illusion or has never been permitted to occupy center-stage in thinking about being human. This version of the postmodern (Heidegger) believes man has been alienated since the time of Plato, that the end result of the metaphysics of presence after more than two millennia puts an end to philosophy itself, and that we must accept the technological world view as the effective (perhaps final?) immanent perspective during the twentieth century

B. *Identity, Absolutes, Centeredness are obsolete concepts*, they have been questioned to the point of seeming suspect to even bring them up in any intellectual discussion. The related notions: pure concepts, beliefs, ideals of perfection translated into actual social practice, and distinct “neutral” position in commenting the grand values, all of these axioms of correct rational thinking have been also beaten to a moribund state. Possessing or defending a definite purpose or “telos” has been considered anathema to thinking, because all philosophies have failed, and evidence abounds that all previous logocentric, self-centering metaphysics have wrought violence and decay in the

unfolding of civilizations. Examples can be found in feminist critique, in some forms of post-colonial discourse, where the mere positioning of the speaking voice, or the attempt at description, is seen as suspect since it is assumed to be impossible that it is not somehow gendered or political, as all discourse is.

C. Critique of Representation. Nothing can be written or shown without at the same time concealing its construction through conventions and logocentric self-interest of one type or another. It is one of the marks of postmodernist discourse. Representation is never honest because it cannot be true to its own claims. Language and image must effect a reduction of the field of expression, must rely on factors extrinsic to the contents they try to convey, and they are at least one step removed from their own intrinsic self-definition, as a means to re-present—through writerly and visual artifacts—a certain state of affairs in the world. This has been found to be case from both the subjective and objective viewpoints, as one cannot pretend to express anything personal without making concessions to the dualism of self-betraying mechanisms of expression. At the same time, on the outside, the very definitions of objects and facts can easily be deconstructed to expose strings of inconsistencies, economies of validation and the competition among language games or semiotic universes.

2. Dissolution of rational, “strong” thought.

A. Analytics, positivists, ordinary-language philosophies and in general what is traditionally called epistemology have suffered attacks from within and without. From within in terms of the inconsistencies raised right at the beginning with the question of what is a definition, and from that about the abstractness of highly formalized deductive logic, the endless string of problems raised by verification and truth and the much debated question of the foundationlessness of language games.¹⁸ All of these theory of knowledge issues conceal a metaphysical assumption about what it is we can call knowledge. Moreover, all three schools have demonstrated a certain rigidity in their formal premises, and have highly specialized though limited application and relevance to the broader

social world. Systems theory has arisen to correct some of the problems by making a conversion from analytic to synthetic approaches to knowledge, and is dominant in computer age planning and articulation. However, despite its roots in organicism and the pretense that it can elaborate principles and methods that apply to *all* systems irrespective of the particular elements and forces involved, it is validated only as temporary, instrumental, site- or problem-specific, fleshed out of all non-metatechnical components from its realm of operation (Laszlo).

These three dominant forms of philosophy have also been attacked from the outside, by philosophers of entirely different persuasion, for concealing unexamined assumptions about the logical, natural and preferred ways of human interaction, for not having dealt with the linguistic problems of its own articulation, for its naïve conception of consciousness, and for its apparently acritical legitimation through science and technology.

B. Circularity of its meta-language. It is a problem from the beginning of the twentieth century in particular, the issue of the meaning of meaning, and the related condition of the self-validation of formal critical languages, or metalanguages. Considered strictly at the level of language qua language, what is semantically right is ultimately determined by a group of people who are empowered to decide that these and only these are the new rules of notation, that moreover something can be correct even though it bears no relation to the real lives of humans. We fall into a profound abyss, when the most rigorous logical mapping of the world shatters as soon as it is up (Wittgenstein); thus what evolves is an awareness that any theory about the world is also and primarily a language game, a semiotic sea, a set of grammatical practices among so many others in society. (Fodor, Eco, Rorty)

C. Method(s) as linguistic, conventional constructs. From within the specific sciences to anthropology to literary theory to political history, what becomes the proper procedure is at heart dependent upon a set rhetorical strategy, a modality of addressing the question, a style for a specific community. Method is the obverse of rhetoric, though no one seems to want to acknowledge it publicly (Carravetta 1996 [now 2013]).

In this area of postmodern science, the topics of relevance concern the anarchy of methodology, the elusive continuity of scientific methods and assumptions, the power of constantly modeling newer possibilities. (Feyerabend, Kuhn, Stengers, Thom, Serres)

3. Crises of scientific models.

A. From within science. With the arrival of quantum physics, and with increasing knowledge of the universe, many classical theories were shattered, contrasting and competing approaches explained the same phenomena (for example, the long co-existence of the corpuscular and the wave theory of light), empirical undecidability was substituted by mathematical models, philosophical paradigms underwent tectonic shifts, the previously unquestioned objectivity turned suspect in the practical application of science. It is the age of Big Science (Appignanesi).¹⁹ Scientists are no longer credibly conceived as impervious to the interfaces of reality, politics, the realm of images, in their pure white frocks.

B. From the outside of science. There are lobbies at the Capitol for university research centers and pharmaceutical companies, professional wars over rights for obtaining patents and funding, there exists a micropolitics of work relations among scientists of different backgrounds, social class or political affiliation. Science is tainted forever, both from within, in the questioning of its methodological anarchy, and from the outside, as partaking in the broader struggles over empowerment, entitlements, and the management of ideas and jobs.

C. In terms of the Humanities and the impact of technology. As embodied in the larger reality of Euroamerica, technology is no longer an option, as it has surged at an increasing fast pace and made itself necessary in *all* aspects of life. The entire science of record-keeping, of library organization, of places for the gathering of knowledge have changed dramatically in the past thirty years or so: “databanks are the encyclopedias of tomorrow,” Lyotard had predicted thirty years ago. One of the most representative expressions of postmodern melancholy is to be found in the writings of humanists who resent the necessity of

mediating their lives with some technological device. Others wail for the imminent death of the book. On the other hand, there are artists and more creative types who welcome this dazzling superfast performer of what were formerly Herculean tasks for the mind, liberating other energies. This area, which includes film, video, computer-art and Internet-based meeting-interacting points, holds much promise for the twenty-first century. The postmodernists among these are often superficial, but always witty and upbeat.

4. Interpretation and Discourse

A. Texts will constantly undermine their assertions. This is the school called deconstructive criticism in the humanities, in particular in departments such as comparative literature, some French, German and English departments, perhaps as much as a third of the American philosophical community (the Continental Philosophers). In any one text (extended synecdochically to mean any cultural artifact) one can expose a struggle between presence and absence, identity and difference, continuous contradiction or negation of any one expressive code. Criticism faces the question of the undecidable. Blinded by its own insights, it is paralyzed. It exposes its indifference to the political and slithering elitism (de Man).

B. Texts require co-enabling component on part of critic/reader/viewer/listener.

i. A great many universities became known as beehives of the critics who held the belief that the proper interpretation of texts is strictly a function of the audience to whom it is addressed, and that in the end, *what* that audience decides, through a professional and interpersonal network, is what establishes the relevance and the meaning of that text. This postmodernist school evidences many parallels with what in aesthetics is called *Reception aesthetic*, and in hermeneutics is called the historicity of the (ever changing) fusion of horizon of signification within which a text interacted.²⁰ This has raised the possibility of having to consider a best seller a great work of art precisely because it became a popular book, trumping the older concern for “intrinsic” merit or value.

ii. Other theories within this group have looked at audience curves for film popularity, or label copyright protection for the music video realm, exposing the problem that distribution and availability are no longer extrinsic to the fortunes and therefore the critical or aesthetic judgment of a good work of art. Cinema as an art form has become the centerpiece of cultural studies because of its relatedness to the hard world of finances and political resistances, while living the political dream of a cooperative vision for all to see. In the art world, the market took over, aesthetic value and political symbolism took a back seat to great exchanges of capital. The financial mediator is no longer a minor or contingent player in the life of the arts.

iii. Finally, another postmodernist branch saw the production of remarkable works in the areas of minority and marginal literature, as more of these groups acquired a political consciousness and created a specialized public. They continued to believe in a political and ethical component to the very activity of doing criticism. This is relevant when these minoritarian literatures bump into the discussion on Canons, which are pressed to account for new readers, for changing demographics, perhaps for changing politics.

C. Texts as atoms in sea of signs, in unstable context(s). These theories are spin offs of the American way of understanding Derridian deconstruction. This has seen brilliant critics as well as confused followers, and soon any text whose meaning was undecidable was deemed postmodern, or vice versa. Textualism became an enterprise unto itself, at many conferences and through many journals there was no way of saying anything about a text which was not at the same time a debilitating reappearance of some other text in the tradition or the author's linguistic unconscious. This postmodernism extended to other disciplines, like architecture. It spoke of the postmodern as the age of parody, of inevitable irony, of a disempowered consciousness.

*D. Interpretation as knowledge/is knowledge.*²¹ Many American intellectuals addressed the complex relationship between what is considered knowledge, and what is the meaning to me and my society

of this knowledge. When it became apparent, by following Nietzschean intuitions, that knowledge itself is ultimately constituted by what a given society or group considers, at that time and in that socio-historical conjuncture, the true valid knowledge from which to legislate everything else, many critics turned to analyses of the impossible subjectivities, of previously unrecorded perspectives. Entire literatures by unseen or unspoken cultures are emerging where it is clear that each new history written can immediately be turned into a creation myth (Glissant).

E. Interpretations subject to power management. The Foucauldians are perhaps the most sophisticated social critics in America, above all because they have to be truly intrinsically interdisciplinary and . These theorists see a different kind of power politics, one not related to the well-known categories of left center and right, which are merely relative discursive formations over a period of a century, but one related to a central point in any interaction focused on entry-points, accepted speech codes, sets of taboos, control of the body, gender economies, and techniques of exclusions. This branch of postmodernist critique includes the Gramscians, the Orientalists, the new or post-Marxists.

5. Decline of the Modern

A. Subjectivity reconceptualized. The phenomenological, existential and, later, more broadly, Continental Philosophers, inspired by European thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, started writing about the dissolution if not the demise of the Cartesian subject, no longer compact and self-centering, and the endless alienation of the Freudian ego, forever in search of itself. Some suggested that subjectivity is something one creates after a confrontation with material reality, but by the 1980s this approach fell out of sight. With the death of the subject, and of the author, some have tried to reconstruct or sketch the possibility for the return of the subject without metaphysical grounding.

B. Confusion among the avant-gardists. Invariably a great many of the theorists of the postmodern associated it with some of the avant-garde. The postmodern then becomes a selection from among various avant-

garde practices and an amplification of them. The assertion that the avant-gardes as the terrain of exploration of creative possibilities at the limit are dead, that they no longer can claim to contest or critique the mainstream is rendered futile by the absorption of these techniques in the great machine of advertising and the pseudo-aesthetic of the middle class. Techniques of expression in the various media can be subsumed under the modes of irony, parody, and collage. In this area, the postmodern is often retrodated to the beginning of the twentieth-century and sometimes even earlier.²²

C. Return of suppressed or removed forms of discourse. The postmodern has also been the moment in the history of the West when forms of discourse which had been ignored, suppressed or repressed, finally surfaced. This includes the emergence of currents of criticism dedicated to the lives, metaphors, and political relevance of minority and marginal communities, among which we can mention Latino literatures, Chicano, Native-American, Asiatic, Italian-American, Greek-American, Caribbean writing, and other categories such as writings by gay, lesbian, prostitute, convicts, which were not as circulated and object of critique in the earlier part of the 20th century. These in part supplant, in part complement, literature which is focused on ethnic, religious, or linguistic double (but perhaps split) identities, such as the African-Americans, the Jewish-American, the Irish-American, the nostalgic Western writers, and earlier politically committed generations. Under the label of postmodernism we have seen the launch of foreign writers of varying styles, creative non-fiction (which would have sounded self-contradictory thirty years ago), creative criticism (such as essays), 800-page novels that double as allegories, magic realism, and ethnographic writing.

D. Crisis of the Political, of the essence of the State. Many authors from the cultural studies areas have focused on the political, sociohistorical aspects of the past twenty plus years, and in a great many of them what emerges is a severe critique of nationalism, of the very idea of the state, of the Nation. The critical assumption at work here is that both state and nation are the product of discursive formations motivated by

power, conquest, and legitimation whose less than noble objectives are now clear to everyone. Politics in the traditional sense has been often declared dead, it is highly suspect, and any form of representation is deemed political in a pejorative sense. Literature and the arts partake of a layered exchange economy, subject to power manipulation, and ideologemes such as nationalism create or affect strong and influential discourse at the microscopic level. This literature is often identified as post-colonial, and in specific cases, resistance literature, its thematic dominant consisting nevertheless in evidencing devious institutional subversion of rights of self-determination, empowerment and democratic procedures (Bhabha, Radikrishnan, Spivak, Said)

E. Reevaluation of genealogy, ethnicity. The return of the narration of heritage, the grand picture theory of the novel, of epic proportion, has also been called a postmodern practice. This has been favored by the growing publication of writings by non-Euroamericans in the Western languages. Many so-called hybrid artifacts have been automatically grouped under the postmodern aegis. This characteristic has also rekindled the debate over art and politics, and, at the meta-critical level, on the nature of the referent in literary narration. This literature—by Indian and African writers writing in English, as well as by mixed-race, non-native or split-culture authors within the United States (and progressively now also in England, France, Germany and Italy), or by francophone writers, or emigrants—is the most varied and problematic, and raises challenges to regional and nationalistic allegories of the traditional European countries. This production is often forced to spin out its new or alternative or just un-European allegories of provenance, historical struggles and reaffirmation in an aggressive or resentful tonality.

F. The problem of normative ethics. From declarations by American and European leaders concerning their non-Western colleagues not respecting Universal Human Rights, to the constant struggle among molecular groups in the inner cities for validation and respect for one's "universal" religious or ethnic or linguistic rights, a postmodern ethics has found itself deadlocked between cultural relativism and powerful

inner contradictions for its suprahistorical ideals. A resurgence of pragmatism promises to give the issue a new balance.

G. Decline or end of autopoietic theories, such as the autonomy of art, of the social subject, or the political. For most of the twentieth century, aesthetic theory, social science and politology have developed critical methods of analysis and isolated areas of study which literally “protected” the field from interferences from other contiguous disciplines. By the end of the millennium, art is more and more evidently a pluriform event, as heteronomy replaces autonomy, non-aesthetic concerns are deemed just as important as purely artistic ones. In politics, the “end of the political” signals an awareness that the field has been opened wide open, and that the purity of political meta-language is suspect. As some will argue, political economy is the de facto nexus between state and private corporations. Finally, in philosophy a critique of the subject which lasted nearly a century has arrived at the conclusion, especially in the wake of some schools of feminism, that, for the moment, we don’t really have an alternative to the notion of the subject, and that it ought be readmitted into critique, with the intention of trying on new clothes.

H. Globalization. No matter what definition of globalization one subscribes to, the world-market, world-system or the global empire model, there is no doubt that culture, in its diverse representations and styles, is one of the central forces and generator of myths, exchanges, and capital. Greater mobility, instantaneous correspondence, greater array of means to arrive at targeted audience, a professional ethos or elitism that is international in scope and nomadic by choice, make the arts primary engines of representation, change, and public taste. The postmodern is the age when Euro-America, after a century of military, political or economic dominance, finally extends its hegemony worldwide to and through cultural artifacts, imposing a new sort of aesthetic, as is evident by the massive production, reproduction and distribution of Western cinema and television products, the music industry, architecture, urban decoration and organization, the language for electronics and finance, the styles of the young across nations and continents.

6. History

A. Historiography one of many possible legitimizing accounts. There has been so much revisionism in the various historiographies—from national history introductory textbooks to a socio-history of the textbook itself, from the evolving meaning of education reform to the bid for empowerment of hitherto suppressed or repressed more local histories—that the very idea of assembling a canon has come under veritable attacks from left right and center. A Main Authors, or Major Themes, or The Essentials approach to offering an organic account of historical development in any number of fields, is now a problematic undertaking as the Internet has blown the field wide open, everyone constructing their own version or ‘story’.

B. History as myth or mythmaking. Consistently with the crises in the writing of any history, History itself has come under attack as perhaps another Euro-American logomachia, a grand meta-narrative (Lyotard), or a meta-myth (Brzezinski) about the wholesale adaptation of certain self-fulfilling prophecies about temporal continuity and coherence to the entirety of humanity. Whether one subscribes to the idea of history as the story of liberty, or history as the gradual emancipation of the masses, or history as the inevitable progress toward a better life, or even the more ancient history as the work of providence on the way to revelation or eternity, during the last quarter of the millennium several voices arose declaring all or parts of these ideas about history as foundationless, irrelevant, symbolic of imperialism, just another form of writing a grand novel, or even, and most unnervingly, as the “End of History,” the end of any reason to consider the past one way or the other. With the past gone, gone is also the future, and the critical mind is left to wallow in a dilated shapeless present, exercising “the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.” (Fukuyama 22–23).

C. Proliferation of other-histories. End of history means the dissolution of a Modern(ist) way of (re)writing one’s past strictly in conformity to Euro-American aesthetic assumptions and methodological grids, and the arrival in bookstores and universities of discursive practices which

have entirely different cultural traits, styles of narration, urgent issues. This includes scholarly publications by Caribbean, francophone, *extra-communitaire* and sub-continental authors, and creates a hyphenated historiography. This new discourse discovers a rhizomatic network, because the traces and the precedents have now, with the loosening and questioning of Literary and Historical Canons, possibility to emerge in the most disparate situations and contexts. In Kantian terms, the conditions of possibility are now available, both economically and in terms of the distribution and circulation of these authors, and the issues they address. At the peak of the postmodern age, publishing houses turn to authors who recount what was going on in the rest of the world while the Euro-Americans were overly committed to home-grown obsessions of nationalism, ideological warfare, communism, moving up the social ladder, grandiose totalitarian disasters. Great growth of migrations world-wide contributed to this phenomenon. The end of the Cold War has certainly been a watershed for this “rest-of-the-world” literature.

LEGACY OF THE POSTMODERN²³

Eleven Theses on the Orwellian Warp

1. Local knowledge or experience is as connected to faraway places and people on the globe as it is to immediate community. This is both humbling and energizing, as the means of expression, the referents of the exchange, and the agents involved are entirely outside the scope and reach of our well-entrenched academic categories. This may be a threat to the Humanities, not to the Sciences. The path chosen and the conditions along the way between origin and destination turn out to play a greater role in circulation and validation of meaning, and metamorphosis (or even translation) is no longer an incidental quality, as they thought and taught from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, but a dominant factor in every cultural transaction. One may metaphorically conceive, alongside the well-known use value and exchange value, of a transit or

travel value (which requires a constantly changing reframing of the first two).

2. Reconsideration of sensorial/sensual/aesthetic dimension. The arrival and strategic insertion in social interactions (especially among the young) of virtual reality will compel radical rethinking of our most cherished if not 'instinctive' ontological and epistemological groundings. While we still don't know the long-range effects on cognition, space-orientation, and problem-solving skills, the technology that went into virtual-reality (grandly celebrated in some science fiction colossals) allowed a more primitive technology to hit the market. For what has been learned from these sophisticated forms of inter-action between man and machine, tested through the military and, in terms of marketing, the youth cyber generation, is finding its way into surveillance and security systems and will pervade urban landscapes in the foreseeable future. So from both the political and economical, as well as the philosophical and existential points of view, the last decades of the millennium cast the (floating) foundations for virtualities which promise impending and deep changes in the environment, the way we think, and the way we do culture. Dystopias are going to be the norm, not the exception.

3. Loss of scientific and existential certainty and the vanished credibility of a center or central unity to any ideology or belief, while it threw many people into a frightened nihilism, can also be accepted as possibly liberating, as permitting the emergence of floating, migrating, shiftless fields of discourse and vindication, reaffirmation, validation across ever more interlocked systems of signs. Problems are now local, and perhaps regional (in a geographical sense as well), highly circumscribed, and yet dynamic, with no longer the pretense to be affirming a grand metaphysical truth and capable of migrating to previously unthought of fields or environments. Scientific knowledge is seen more and more as linked to its technological concretization, and these are seen as merely enabling systems of exchange, reduplication, and control.

4. In the twenty-first century, it is accepted that all utterances, transactions, and exchanges will leave a residue, a trace, a yet-retrievable clue

which can become a potentially enabling (or incriminating!) discourse or cause for agency. This has greatly aided in fields of research from forensic science to anthropological writing, from geological and geographic mapping to genetic history. And it has prompted other well-oiled practices, such as philology, library science, retrieval systems, medical diagnostic tests, and test-case scenario projections, to review and upgrade their very theoretical and institutional foundations, although some have begun asking whether everything ought to be saved, whether *everything* out of the past is worthy of preservation. These decisions will see the rise of new sites for conflict and validation.

5. In the re-evaluation or, perhaps better, trans-valuation of the metamorphic impulse in the culture at large one easily perceives how artifacts are repeatedly transfigured. In fact, whether exotic, or grotesque, or absurd, or weird and in any way “foreign,” cultural production is intrinsically unstable, explicitly commodified, predictably irritating to the guardians of the Ivory Tower. But it is the end of the “aesthetic” as a specific discipline or value, and the aesthetizing (or anaesthetizing) of all cultural interactions that demand that everything and everyone be (potentially) admitted into the process. In this perspective, hybridism, *mestizaje*, creolization will find greater spaces or channels for expression and growth. Because at bottom, change is the norm, stability the exception, chance and error are probabilities built into any plan or system. This extends to other sectors of society, such as availability of labor, the construction of identities, the competition of a greater variety of educational methods (for instance, the slow acceptance of ancient far Eastern medicine; or Internet college degrees; skills-specific schools/businesses).

6. The Fragmentation of all or most of the systems and theories of the earlier part of the twentieth century is actually seen positively by both corporate élites *and* independent intellectuals. For world-systems of corporate capitalism fragmentation means exploiting whatever shards of meaning can be recycled packaged and sold, for intellectuals a sense that heterogeneity, conflictualities and critical relativism have given the interpreting mind a greater range of positions, and yet unimaginable

viewpoints. The downside of this apparently positive frame is that the corporate élites are the ones that have the real power to effect concrete, empirical changes in society and the world, whereas the intellectuals (artists, journalists, professors, various professionals) will continue to bicker and harangue from the stands. The “Organic” intellectual is long gone, the public intellectual of today must play as a media performer, there is no outside to the “System,” there are just gradations along a pre-established spectrum, yet continuously “updated” and subject to “remodeling.”

7. Borderlands. There is no question that a great deal of what is to come in the twenty-first century involves thresholds, frontiers, ingress/egress checkpoints, (il)legal border crossing, recognition and legitimation of minority status, social/judicial protection. But border crossers challenge stable systems of economics, of ethnic or national traditions, and local laws. Migration is no longer a peripheral social phenomena, but a major fact of concern at various levels, from urban policy to international treaties, and impacts greatly on globalization dynamics.

8. Technology is no longer an “instrument” of science, but the “world view.” If this is irrevocable, it does not necessarily follow that we ought to relinquish our *libero arbitrio*. No one can deny the immense benefits derived from fast-paced industrial first and technological later advances in medicine, transportation, communication. It really becomes a matter of deciding to curb the destructive aspects of what technology offers. The arguments of the environmentalists, and all ecologically-minded discourses, will continue to be a major part of our cultural life, as they will bear upon political and economic decisions as well.

9. Time overtakes Space as grounding metaphor. But which conception of Time? Space is back to a Kantian sense of the external frame which allows objects to have length depth and width, but Time is gone, as it is no longer, or exclusively, the measure of the interval between two sounds or two notches on a stick. Classical physics and geography are relevant still and perhaps only for the actual packaging and transportation of goods, the management of people (whether in the streets, in jails, or on

the job), and the provided-for but never permanent channels for social distribution and consumption. There are two kinds of temporalities that one nonetheless can refer to. Planning and acting in any material way will demand attention to these word-concepts: timing, timeliness, time-space, interest-time, cosmological-time, and recovery-time (or down time) of any supersized technological infrastructure. On the other hand, the temporality of personal emotions, or at the other end of the spectrum, of traditional myth, as well as the atemporality of revelation, and the cyclic-time of nature, have been awash in a dilated presentness, tossed in a surreal contemporaneity of discourses and struggles, unable to secure any stable anchoring, or claim universality. Ever at risk of being pulverized or silenced, these temporalities are in constant negotiation for some meaning amidst the relativity and relativism that will prevail. Reconceptualizing and harnessing the experience of time may be the ultimate challenge to those wishing to save creativity, individuality, while retaining a modicum of humanity.

10. Interpretation is multilayered, polysemous at all times, whether we highlight the pole of the writer (sender) or that of the reader (receiver). It will be constituted by an often transversal crisscrossing of self-validating utterances, and its objectivity is forever gone. The objects, the facts, the events are intrinsically connected to both, the interpreter and his/her world as well as the reader or listener or consumer. Nietzsche was wrong when he gloomily predicted: there are no facts, just interpretation of facts, casting all metaphysical bearings into the air. Rather, *there are* facts—September 11 *did* occur—but their meaning and relevance cannot be dissociated from a specific, dedicated interpretation and, with that, a specific use and exchange value (even at the level of language itself). The loss in objectivity ought to be compensated by a rise in subjective self-awareness, in being conscious of how everyone's, including one's own, version of the facts is still one among several contending ones, threatened every second of irrelevance or powerlessness. Or losing to a better marketed product. But the big challenge here is that looking for a stable meaning behind an utterance, especially if made *not* in writing, is already a chimerical pursuit. The

media (especially the great cable and television networks) are in part responsible for creating this situation. In fact, during the last ten years there has been a growing dissatisfaction with, and loss of credibility of, the traditional information networks (newspapers, various syndicated reportages, even some web sites, all somehow tainted by external or interested associations)

11. Freedom of speech, the meaning of existence, the sense of memory, the legitimacy of institutions, the reasons of the law, the militarization of civil society, the growing gap between rich and poor, the (re)turn to tribalisms, massive demographic shifts, the erosion and instability of the nation-state, the contested relationship between needed natural resources and the preservation of environment, and questions arising from leading-edge sciences such as genetics, cybernetics and space-travel: These will be the major areas of contention in the post-postmodern age or what we provisionally will call the *Post-Orwellian Warp*, the Age of Embodied Distortion.

Notes

1. English version of the Prologue to my Italian book *Del Postmoderno* (Milan: Bompiani, 2009), 7- 18. Slightly altered with respect to the original.

2. See my *Prefaces to the Diaphora* (W. Lafayette, IN, Purdue UP, 1991), Ch. 1.

3. Although it must be said that, compared to the Americans, Europeans had clearly a deeper historical sense of the ravages of colonialism, the backlash of various kinds of terrorism and a broad palette of dissent and counterdiscourse. It was simply that no one, for a century and a half, had even thought, let alone dared (except for the brief Pancho Villa invasion in the Southwest), attack the American *civilian* population. I am using the expression Euro-American when the discourse refers to traditions and matrices which are common to the bourgeoisie on both sides of the Atlantic.

4. I am thinking specifically of the committee that drew up the (secret) document for the New American Century in 1996, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Fukuyama, Perle, etc. Dan Quayle (yes!). Independently of this, see the cogent analyses of the world picture in Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessgame* (1996).

5. Reference is to other chapters in *Del Postmoderno*, presently being translated and/or rewritten and soon to be available.

6. See my *Prefaces to the Diaphora*, pp. 133, 160–161.

7. Or is it? From Negri to Chomsky, from Benjamin to Giuliano Ferrara, a ‘traditional’ way of doing politics has been challenged and determined to be moribund, although Joxe, for example, believes it just re-appears in different form elsewhere. (Joxe 35)

8. In trying to understand what the postmodern age was, we have to become accustomed to how general statements about the state of things can change in such a short time. In the mid-nineties, when already some critics had begun to raise the possibility that the post-modern might conceivably be waning, Richard Harvey Brown writes, in a chapter titled “Reconstructing Social Theory After the Postmodern Critique”:

Contrary to the view that America represents the form of civilization ‘best adapted to the probability . . . of the life that lies in store for us (Baudrillard 1988:10), the waning of Europe’s economic and cultural hegemony has been followed by a ‘crisis of the Pax Americana’ (Eco 1978:76). If the Old World of Europe no

longer seems to be the bearer of universal values and the model for enlightenment and material progress, the New World of America, in its turn, has encountered a relative economic decline, military ineffectiveness in relation to terrorist or political resistance, and a political and social crisis of legitimation. Moreover, the demise of the Soviet Union, far from ensuring the continued hegemony of America, has created a more polycentric, less controllable world in which American ideologies are increasingly anachronistic. (Simons & Billig 15)

It appears as if Brown is trying to convince us that the “Empire” was already falling apart, that Bush senior exaggerated with his “new world order” speech of 1991, after the Gulf War, and that a much-desired polycentric or multipolar geopolitical reconfiguration was under way. Well, so much for this laconic yelp of optimism, which may be associated to the hope for a “peace dividend.” It is clear that something happened in the intervening years, for American ideology and foreign policy attempted, factually after 2001, to reinvent empire, and prevent or render maddening precisely the rise of a multipolar geopolitics. Especially with the arrival of the European Union.

9. See below, *Topica of the Postmodern*.

10. I address the effective *pragmatic* base of the relation between rhetoric as methodic discourse and method as a rhetorical discourse in my *The Elusive Hermes* (Aurora, CO: Davies, 2012), Intr. pp. 3–78. In later chapters (pp 293–361), I foreground the thinkers of a Protogorean notion of rhetoric (mostly from Communications or Rhetoric Departments, as well as from Classics/Greek Studies), which is grounded upon the body, the concrete social reality of speakers, and juxtapose it to that of the “continental philosophers,” who approach the topic from a different angle (hermeneutics, phenomenology, existentialism, and deconstruction). My notion of the pragmatic is not of the Rortian kind, more between Peirce and Dewey. Cf. *The Elusive Hermes* pp. 257–73.

11. In both my *Prefaces* (1991) and *Del Postmoderno* (2009) I included a chapter on Jean Gebser and his *Ursprung und Gegenwart*, which theorized the Integral, Four-dimensional Aperspectival world as what will mark the twenty-first century. But I don’t see any references to Gebser in the literature on the postmodern.

12. Further down, he writes: “In the age of irony, even the most serious things were not to be taken seriously. Movies featuring characters who ‘see dead people’ or TV hosts who talk to the ‘other side’ suggested that death was not to be seen as real.” We will have opportunity to comment

on how the media in general has been in great part responsible for creating a culture in which death, and the suffering “of others,” have been either excluded or sanitized from broad circulation to the point of making them precisely unreal, inexistent.

13. In Valli 2003.

14. See in the broad literature, besides various articles in *The Nation*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, some of the first-rate journalism by John Pilger (2002) and, closer to today, Mark Taibbi.

15. Besides Daalder and Lindsay’s *America Unbound. The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*. Washington, Brookings Institutional Press, 2004, I will mention *The Sorrows of Empire. Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*, by Chalmers Johnson, and *After the Empire. The Breakdown of the American Order*, by Emmanuel Todd (which I discuss in my book, *Del postmoderno*), and the symbolic counterpoint offered by George Soros, *The Bubble of American Supremacy. Correcting the Misuse of American Power*.

16. At the end of his review Schmemmann, an editor of *The International Herald Review*, is exasperated: “Though I have lived abroad for many years and regard myself as hardened to anti-Americanism, I confess I was taken aback to have my country depicted, page after page, book after book, as a dangerous empire in its last throes, as a failure of democracy, as militaristic, violent, hegemonic, evil, callous, arrogant, imperial and cruel.”

17. Translated from *Del Postmoderno*, cit., pp 34–47.

18. See selected works of Rorty, Margolis, Danto. See also the anthology edited by Rockmore.

19. “Postmodernism emphasizes constructed, mediated and encoded processes that provide us with the effect of Truth, meaning and Reality. It is therefore way of a Big Science that unproblematically construes itself as knowledge either discovered or discoverable. Furthermore, some branches of postmodern thought claim not only that scientific knowledge is a construct that makes reality in its own image, but also that it is a system of thought which is insecure. Science’s purchase on truth comes at a price: it can validate itself only by unconscious process of exclusion.” (Appignanesi 6–7). Further down, we read, that it is no longer possible to ignore “other” knowledges, for instance Chinese or Islamic science, and that the disciplines have collapsed their traditional distinctions to “highlight the complicity of fact and value, truth and falsity, knowledge and power.”

20. Among the authors who addressed these topics, and representative of highly differentiated approaches to the relevance of interpretive

communities, are Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Umberto Eco, and Bakhtin.

21. There are various interrelated theories about the postmodern which find common roots in the writings of Nietzsche, of whom there have been recurring major conferences from the sixties on in the major European and American universities.

22. See in the book *Del Postmoderno*, cit., the first two chapters of Part One, which look in detail into this very complex theoretical and historiographic knot.

23. Translated from *Del Postmoderno*, cit., pp. 517–23.

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