Book Reviews

E. Ann Kaplan, ed. *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices.* London: Verso, 1988. pp. xi, 188. $14.95 pb.

In a lucid introduction, E. Ann Kaplan points out that the book's title, like the title of Freud's famous essay which it echoes, foregrounds a "delicate tension in relation to the discourse of postmodernism" (1). The "discourse of postmodernism" is, of course, complex, elusive and multivocal as Kaplan recognizes. Moreover, it has also triggered a publishing boom as the number of books, articles and special issues of journals devoted to postmodernism testify. Protean and inflationary, postmodernism has become a "buzz" word at once perplexing and marketable. Discontentment with postmodernism, the cynic might well maintain, is just another way of prolonging its life. But what is valuable about this collection of essays is that apart from providing useful analyses of postmodernist practices in a variety of popular cultural forms, a number of them also radically recast the terms of analysis by raising questions about the very subject of postmodernism, about its social and historical formation, its ideological constitution and constituency, in short, about its theoretical and political efficacy.

Fredric Jameson's by now classic essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" provides the starting point for most writers who wish to maintain a critical distance from postmodernism without completely dismissing it as a return of neo-conservative irrationalism as Habermas and others have. It is appropriate, therefore, that Kaplan's collection should open with Jameson's essay. It is unfortunate, however, that she has chosen to reproduce a shortened and less coherent version of that essay (to be more accurate, it is a composite version of Jameson's longer, definitive version and an earlier draft, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," the title of which is retained). Jameson's essay argues that the social, cultural and aesthetic presuppositions of postmodernism are deeply complicitous with commodity production in the age of late capitalism. Not only everyday life, Jameson maintains, but also the privileged space

of aesthetic practice, long regarded as a sacrosanct, oppositional sphere in which protests against bourgeois culture may be mounted, has been colonized and turned into the media saturated world of commodified simulacra, an infinite series of market-generated images whose rationale is well expressed in that cynical advertising slogan: "Sell the sizzle, not the steak!" Central to Jameson's dazzling and difficult essay is his claim that postmodernism is not merely the description of a particular style but a periodizing concept, a cultural dominant that enables us "to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" (15). Implicit in this statement (and explicitly developed in the longer version) is the pedagogical, political practice Jameson calls "cognitive mapping." "Cognitive mapping" with its imperative to connect and correlate allows the (Marxist) critic to gain a heightened critical and historical sense of the individual subject's place in the global system of postmodern, multinational capital. What Jameson wishes to do is to provide not some Archimedean point from which to conduct a critique — no such vantage point is possible — but a dialectical awareness, obtained from *within* the postmodern moment itself, which enables the critic to see it as both baleful catastrophe and possible progress. Nonetheless, the tenor of Jameson's essay appears to me to be generally pessimistic, and a resigned ambivalence informs the concluding sentences of "Postmodernism and Consumer Society": "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces — reinforces — the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open" (29).

In one way or another, the essays in *Postmodernism and its Discontents* grapple with Jameson's question. Though, in general, they warily acknowledge postmodernism's susceptibility to commodification, they also provide a more hopeful picture of its politically progressive elements. In a subtle analysis of music television, for example, Ann Kaplan argues that though rock videos are commercial, co-opted forms that exploit potentially revolutionary desires by turning them into marketable pop images of teenage rebellion, they should not be dismissed hastily as a puritanical Left might be inclined to do. She argues for a patient analysis of popular postmodernist culture that will resist its co-opted aspects while remaining alert to those subversive, utopian elements which provide models for radical political and feminist action.

But even as the essays by Kaplan, Linda Williams, William Galperin, David James and Robert Stam skilfully negotiate the utopian/co-opted doublet Jameson had isolated as *the* cultural problematic of postmodernism, those by Mike Davis, Dana Polan, Fred Pfeil and

Warren Montag challenge such a privileging of postmodernisms by questioning the need for such a periodic or theoretical concept. They argue that postmodernism can easily turn into an unproductive, totalizing theory that ignores or elides uneven cultural and economic developments that only more specific historical analyses can bring to light. Montag argues, for example, that by refusing to consider the present as a conjuncture of contradictory, conflicting forces, theories of postmodernism foreclose "progress in thought by denying the possibility that the fissures, disjunctions, breaks in contemporary social reality are symptoms of an impending crisis" (102).

Politically alert though all these essays are, what is finally missing in them is a sustained analysis of that most significant disjunction or fissure that runs through all theories of postmodernism — namely, the Third World. Even as white, predominantly male theorists debate the progressive and regressive aspects of postmodernist culture, the large, increasingly female workforce of developing Third World countries assemble the materials and provide the economic surpluses that help to maintain the West's postmodern condition and the debates that swirl around it. As Gayatri Spivak points out in a telling juxtaposition of the "postmodern" and the "pre-modern": "[W]hereas Lehman Brothers, thanks to computers 'earned about $2 million for . . . 15 minutes of work,' . . . a woman in Sri Lanka has to work 2,287 minutes to buy a t-shirt."[1] The question that is usually elided in discussions of postmodernism, as Spivak again reminds us, is: "Whose postmodern? For whom, and at whose expense, is the postmodern produced?"[2] If postmodernism and its discontented critiques wish to avoid becoming just more examples of academic fashion, they must ensure that their "cognitive mapping" include the task of placing the postmodern West in political and economic relation to those regions of the world for whose populations the modern, let alone the postmodern, remains utopian.

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NOTES

[1] *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 171.

[2] Cited in E. A. Grosz, "Introduction," *Futur*Fall: Excursions into Post-Modernity*, ed. E. A. Grosz et al. (Sydney: Power Institute, 1986) 13.

Lennard J. Davis. *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction.* New York and London: Methuen, 1987. pp. x, 262. $49.00; $17.00 pb.

Lennard J. Davis's *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* makes an important contribution to current debates about the relation between politics and fictional prose narrative. Davis's thesis is highly

provocative. Novels, Davis maintains, "are not life, their situation of telling their stories is alienated from lived experience, their subject matter is heavily oriented towards the ideological, and their function is to help humans adapt to the fragmentation and isolation of the modern world" (12). Davis's position is likely to raise the hackles of both liberal humanists and post-structuralists, for he essentially denies novels an emancipatory function, either as bearers of oppositional values or as subverters of dominant ideologies. Apparently answering people's need to "resist" the forces of alienation and reification, novels perform the same function for a culture that defence mechanisms do for an individual: that is, they contain and defuse adversarial energies, counselling acceptance and adjustment rather than rejection and rebellion. And they accomplish this function not so much through their content as through their form, which is, Davis argues, intrinsically "conservative" and likely to "derai[l] . . . even novels of progressive political content" (231).

Davis pursues this argument by analyzing what he sees as the essential components of fictional form — space, character, dialogue, and plot. Correlating the treatment of setting in the early bourgeois novel with the experience of colonialism, Davis notes that space in later novelistic modes — whether the nineteenth-century's apologetic justification for property or the twentieth-century's aestheticization of a commodified terrain — must always "be controlled, and therefore becomes 'property' which is after all controlled space or location" (64). Character, he then argues, serves to distort and contain the irreducible complexity of its "real-life" analogue, personality, and thus reduces urgent political issues to the dimensions of personal moral development. Through eroticizing its protagonist, the novel "in effect becomes a social form that changes the complexity of personality into a rather simplified commodity of desire. Like a desirable commodity that seems to offer the promise of an improved life, . . . character holds out the possibility of personal fulfillment in a world that is increasingly making such fulfillment inconceivable" (128). Dialogue aids in this process of taming and controlling potentially oppositional consciousness, Davis adds, by "denud[ing]" conversation — its "real-life" analogue — of its "more dangerous and threatening aspects, giving the illusion of a group practice and a multiplicity of voices without the attendant obligations and responsibilities of membership in a group" (181). And plot further "serves as a defensive structure for readers" by "normaliz[ing] behavior and naturaliz[ing] change so that it appears more a feature of reading and of the individual than it does a social and progressive aspect of history and politics." Plot, Davis concludes, thus "always gives priority to individual change over and above social transformation" (217).

Davis's thesis is bold, schematic and polemical, and, like all polemics, open to criticism on various fronts. While I find Davis's large literary-historical generalizations exciting, no doubt others might come up with enough countertexts and countertrends to call into question some of his claims about the evolution of the bourgeois novel. And while I am largely convinced by Davis's claim that the form of the novel is intrinsically burdened with conservative ideological baggage, no doubt others — of various political stripes, as I indicated before — will object to the ethical dethroning of the novel that this argument entails.

In spite of my genuine admiration for Davis's accomplishment in *Resisting Novels*, I do feel compelled to register a couple of demurrals. First, I find that Davis's heavy reliance upon an Althusserian model of fictional representation — "[novels] are bound to represent not the real world but some paradigm of it" (228) — leads him to underrate the extent to which fictional worlds do in fact render cognition of their "real" historical referents, and thus break through some of the ideological confinements produced by the largely conservative nature of novelistic mimesis. Second, and as a corollary, I would maintain that novelists who strive to articulate "progressive political content" can at times succeed in avoiding many of the "defensive" political effects of novelistic form, even as they use the (admittedly problematic and ideologically charged) representational devices of space, character, dialogue, etc. I would certainly concede to Davis's argument that such oppositional texts have generally not reached a mass audience. But I remain somewhat bothered by his almost offhand dismissal of the literary-historical and political importance of entire adversarial traditions — defined by race, gender, class or leftist political stance — that have sought not only to represent oppositional subject matters but also (I think here of some of the "collective" novels of the 1930s' proletarian movement) to develop oppositional forms that might relinquish at least some of the ideological baggage of inherited literary traditions. Davis is correct to focus his attention upon classic texts and to argue for their lack of emancipatory effect. Had he also addressed noncanonical texts and traditions, however, he might have found more instances of — and possibilities for — resistance than he seems to have discovered.

At a time when even the most apparently "leftist" criticism is finding subversion and oppositionality under virtually every textual bush, however, Davis's passionately argued and intelligent study serves a very important function. For *Resisting Novels* reminds us that bourgeois hegemony is powerful indeed, and that the overwhelming effect of Western literary traditions is to produce not resistance but reconciliation to the status quo.

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Andrew Ross, ed. *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. pp. xviii, 300. $20.95.

In postmodern discourse the abandoning of universals generally entails the abandoning, at any rate "the weakening," of all foundational or "essentialist" thought, especially "class essentialism," and all totalizing and dialectical modes of analysis (grand narratives, meta-narratives, etc.). Andrew Ross, in his introduction to this collection of essays, asks the following question: "In whose interests is it, exactly, to declare the abandonment of universals?" (xiv). It is this question, with all it entails, I wish to pursue. To do so means, unfortunately, to abandon a number of very fine essays that do not directly address this question — most notably, the essays by Morris, Rose, Grossberg and Foster, which deal with the problem of appropriation and commodification in postmodern aesthetics.

For postmodern discourse, Marxist and totalizing forms of explanation are no longer adequate to reality. As Ross argues, "the comforts provided by the totalizing, explanatory power of Marxist categories are no longer enough to help us make sense of the fragmented and various ways in which people live and negotiate the everyday life of consumer capitalism" (xv). The abandonment of the Marxist-Leninist party as a political form and its replacement by a generalized micropolitics are appropriate responses to a changed world. A "politics of the local and the particular and a politics of racial, sexual and ethnic difference are . . . essential strategies for coping with a postmodernist culture that advertises itself as decentered, transnational, and pluralistic" (vii). In accordance with these changes, the "universal intellectual" has been replaced by the "specific intellectual." Chantal Mouffe argues that Marxism has been superseded, not only because of "the discredit brought upon the Soviet model by the analysis of totalitarianism, but also the challenge to class reductionism posed by the emergence of new social movements" (31).[1] Stanley Aronowitz too argues that "the renunciation of foundational thought, and of the ideological master discourses of liberalism and Marxism" is related "to numerous changes in our political and cultural problematic since world War II" (46). In our information age, "the grand narratives," according to Jean François Lyotard, "are no longer credible" (86). In his ideology critique of the chain store "Banana Republic," Paul Smith tells us that if we are to historicize appropriately we must not be satisfied "by the imposition of historical templates, cyclical forms, and abstract totalities onto material history" (140). Marxism is the totalitarian imposition of philosophy upon existence: "Marxist manias cannot be allowed to stand as science, and Marxist myths cannot be allowed to stand as history" (140).

There are numerous problems with these assessments, but I will limit myself to two. First, all these critiques presuppose a realist and

therefore foundationalist epistemology which postmodernism claims to renounce. Postmodern discourse is responding to an independent reality not to a reality already constituted by that discourse. Second, while these discourses overtly renounce totalizing modes of analysis, such modes creep back in. Ross, in critiquing Marxism's monolithic concept of Capital, tells us that the culture of everyday life is "saturated with the effects of commodification" — as if this is a surprise to Marxists, as if the analysis of reification on which it depends is not heavily indebted to Marxism and a totalizing mode of analysis (xv). Mouffe talks about "the growing domination of relations of capitalist production" (31). Aronowitz tells us that "as a modernizing strategy, socialism fails in an international economy dominated by Capitalist commodity relations" (60). Smith, following Hal Foster, tells us that "even in the postmodern age, it is still capital that structures and destructures social forms" (128). His thesis is to show "how the discourses of postmodernism — their conditions originally primed by capitalist structuring and destructuring — are then reassumed for the use of capital itself" (129).

The postmodern aesthetic practices Smith will analyze in "Banana Republic" ads are set in the context of the *world capitalist economy*, specifically the world textile industry. Smith's (and Aronowitz's) analysis depends upon concepts like class interest, uneven development of contradiction, and the international division of labour — all totalizing and Marxist forms of analysis deriving most obviously from Marxist dependency theory and Mandel's analysis of late capitalism. Even Mouffe, much of whose work is predicated on the repudiation of the key Marxist concept of class interest, assumes totalizing forms of analysis, though they are often of a distinctly anti-Marxist sort. I am talking here about theories of totalitarianism — which she accepts unquestioningly. This re-emergence of totalizing analysis seems to refute the foundation of the anti-totalizing micro strategies. Reality, it seems, is not "radically plural."

Grand narratives even sabotage Lyotard's absolute refusal of metanarrative. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson argue in their superb essay on postmodern philosophy and social critique, Lyotard's vision of a society constituted by a multiplicity of language games each of whose criteria are practice-immanent fails. For Lyotard recognizes a structural tendency for these language games to become subordinate to an overarching criteria of efficiency or "performativity" in postmodern society that "threatens the autonomy and integrity of science and politics" (90). In Fraser and Nicholson's words, "even as he argues explicitly against it, Lyotard posits the need for a genre of social criticism that transcends local mini-narrative" (90). Such criticism "calls for judgments that are not strictly practice-immanent," normative judgements that are in fact "metapractical" (90). We

might note in passing that the very assertion that society is constituted by a proliferation of language games that do not add up to a "social totality" presupposes the ability of the interpreter to pass hermeneutically from one game to the other and this seems to require some meta-narrative capacity if it is to remain intelligible.

Not all of the participants in the collection repudiate totality only to have it re-emerge in other ways. Jameson, West and Kipnis all reject the easy (and to my mind politically disastrous) equation of totality and totalitarianism. At any rate, what this often counter-intentional reliance on totality might suggest is that to abandon totality (universality) is to abandon explanation — to render it either impossible or unintelligible.[2] Nevertheless while Lyotard's argument might deconstruct itself, his rhetoric, at this time, is powerful, and if we were to take it seriously, it would "rule out the sort of critical social theory that employs general categories like gender, race, and class" (89). "Social-theoretical accounts of macro-structures that institutionalize inequality" would be ruled illegitimate (though it is difficult to say according to what criteria he would do this since these criteria would presumably be relativized to a particular game [89]). Concretely, what this means is that rival theories of the "information age" (one of the many synonyms for the postmodern condition) with, to my mind, immense explanatory power, would be ruled out, rendered unthinkable.

The recent work of Herbert Schiller and Chomsky/Herman, which hypothesizes the dominant structuring power of ruling interests in order to explain recent changes in the international division of labour (Schiller) and the behaviour of our mass media (Chomsky), comes to mind. It is a great irony that the paradigm of postmodernist tolerance, multiplicity, proliferation and heterogeneity would pre-empt a process, what Richard Miller calls "the fair causal comparison of rival theories," basic to the disciplines whose "integrity and autonomy" it would preserve.[3]

Though some form of totalizing analysis might be a prerequisite for explanation and explanatory power, totalizing analysis is not free of its own aporias. In postmodern discourse, often enough, when we do find totality, it is an undialectical, often classless, totality. Totality without dialectics produces totality as absolute determination by structure (total reification) or totality as absolute (or radical) indeterminacy, total fixity or total unfixity.[4] What I would assert, since I do not have the time to argue it, is that, paradoxically, absolute determination tends to produce absolute indeterminacy and vice versa. According to such a "logic," oppositions like identity/difference, centre/margin (or totality/marginality), universality/particularity, homogeneity/heterogeneity become, not dialectical oppositions mutually conditioning each other's possibility, but non-dialectical an-

tagonists. The latter term becomes the non-dialectical *other* of the former.

Aside from leading to a multiplicity of aporetic language games, this totality/marginality dynamic is intimately related to the problems, in my view, of the postmodernist politics of marginality (or micro-politics). The abstract totality of total reification promotes an equally abstract margin, a marginality which becomes, ironically, so homogeneous as to lose its meaning or become inseparable from what it opposes (George Yudice's contribution is especially good here). In addition, the politics of marginality promotes a spontaneism, which, though apparently anti-élitist, easily turns into its opposite. Since theories of the spontaneous margins depend upon a theory/practice dichotomy in which intellectuals reflect while marginals act (rebel, revolt), it is easy to see how such theories might, in Neil Larsen's words, "rest on an intellectual contempt for the masses."[5] When the margins fail to act spontaneously, intellectuals become the political authority by default. It is here that we get the "radical democracy" of Laclau-Mouffe where politics is entirely constituted by discourse (presumably that of intellectuals). The substitution of the "radical indeterminacy" of ideology and politics for class interest and related "class discourses" (discourses which play a prominent role in Laclau's first book) can plausibly be read as, ironically, the universalization of their class position.[6]

Andrew Ross asks the following question: "In whose interests, is it exactly, to declare the abandonment of universals?" In typical postmodernist fashion, he leaves this question suspended. He nevertheless pretty strongly suggests that the abandonment of universality is in the interests of marginalized groups — feminist, ethnic, gay, non-metropolitan (symptomatically, class is altogether absent). I would suggest something quite different. First, the abandoning of universality, with, for postmodern discourse, its concomitant concepts of totality, dialectics, and, very often, class, very definitely benefits the ruling classes since postmodern discourse denies their existence as well as their scope and so functions perfectly as ideology in the classical Marxist sense of false consciousness. Second, while providing a radical cover for some leftist intellectuals, it might very well function primarily to further the professional careers of all too "specific" intellectuals. Finally, I would assert, and hope to argue elsewhere, that micro-politics works, in the main, *against* the interests of the majority members of "marginal" groups.[7]

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NOTES

[1] Though postmodern discourse normally repudiates any concept of expressive causality — where, in the Hegelian model for example, phenomena ex-

press essence or, in one Marxist model, superstructure reflects base, consciousness reflects social being, etc. — it is often inconsistent regarding totalitarianism, which is viewed as the social reflection of totalizing modes of thought.

The totalitarian model has recently come under increasing criticism (often by non-Marxist scholars) in Soviet historiography. This research goes unmentioned, not surprisingly, in the mass media. It also goes unmentioned in postmodern discourse, whose existence, in my view, greatly depends upon such a model for an antagonist. An excellent example of the recent historiography is J. A. Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges* (Cambridge UP, 1985). See also the work of Manning, Rittersporn, Viola, Siegelbaum, and Bettelheim.

[2] As Laclau says, it is "a question of narrating the *dissolution* of a foundation, thus revealing the radical contingency of the categories linked to that foundation. My intention is *revelatory* rather than *explanatory*" (73).

[3] See Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) and Herbert Schiller, *Who Knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 500* (New York: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1981). On the fair causal comparison of rival theories, see Richard W. Miller, *Fact and Method: Explanation, Confirmation, and Reality in the Natural and Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987).

[4] This I take to be the Laclau-Mouffe position. Since political ideology does not spontaneously reflect class interest, since politics is not totally determined by structure (the class structure), it is, therefore, radically indeterminate. Since there isn't total fixity, there must be total unfixity!

[5] See Neil Larsen's excellent unpublished essay, "Postmodernism and Imperialism: Theory and Politics in Latin America."

[6] In *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, non-class discourse, what Laclau also calls popular discourse, is situated between the two dominant class discourses. Hegemony involves the practice of appropriating popular discourse to one class discourse or another. This non-class discourse Laclau clearly associates with "middle strata" — the petit-bourgeoisie, intellectuals, etc. By his next book, the class discourses have disappeared. The discourse of the intelligentsia has been universalized. For an excellent critique of the élitism in the Laclau-Mouffe position, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986).

[7] Briefly, if racism, for example, helps to divide a working class (and portions of the middle class) already divided by the segmentation of labour, itself not unrelated to racism, then I would assert that multi-racial unity is the best response to racism (see Michael Reich's work). Such a response, however, is unavailable as a strategy to postmodern discourse, except perhaps in the temporary form of coalition politics, since unity means for postmodern discourse "the totalitarian transparancy [*sic*] of the social bond." Multi-racial unity, under such a construal, would mean the domination of whites, to my mind a racist assumption enabled by the inability of much postmodern discourse to conceive of unity dialectically. Multi-racial unity conceived dialectically as *unity in struggle* could accommodate contradiction and difference — obviously within certain limits, as no social formation, despite certain postmodernist fantasies, can accommodate limitless contradiction.

Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* New York and London: Routledge, 1988. pp. 268. $65.00; $19.95 pb.

Postmodernism is a term which has been much used and abused. Although never clearly defined, it has been both celebrated as a revolutionary mode of discourse and denigrated as an expression of a neo-conservative backlash. Hutcheon's thoroughly researched study is a welcome addition to the debate, clearing up confusion about the characteristics of postmodernism and offering a synthesis that avoids the pitfalls of reductive analysis.

Stressing the paradoxical and contradictory aspects of postmodernism, Hutcheon contends that its value lies in a questioning of all totalizing systems. For her, "postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (4). Her most useful insight is that postmodernism cannot help but be both complicitous with and critical of the positions it discusses. Reacting against the either/or tendencies of most other postmodernist theories, she emphasizes the double coding of texts which self-consciously recognize that no discourse can ever operate outside the system it seeks to subvert. It is this self-consciousness about its own contradictions that separates postmodernism from modernism. Where modernism nostalgically yearned for epistemological and ontological foundations, postmodernism acknowledges its limited and provisional status. Postmodernism can be seen as ideologically potent because its anti-totalizing impulses problematize the "truths" on which our cultural assumptions and institutions are based.

Hutcheon playfully calls her theory a "problematics" rather than a "poetics," thereby indicating that postmodernist texts acknowledge being open to contradictory interpretations. Her main targets are Marxist theorists (Jameson, Eagleton) who, she maintains, reductively accuse postmodernism of being ahistorical and complicit with capitalist consumer society. Hutcheon contends that Marxist denigrations overlook the critical or questioning efficacy of postmodernism; they fail to see that the postmodern is "ironic, distanced; it is not nostalgic — even of the 1960s" (203).

The question of history is indeed central to *A Poetics of Postmodernism.* Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism is based on postmodern theories of architecture, leading her to narrow the concept in the literary field of "historiographic metafiction" (5), namely "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: *The French Lieutenant's Woman, Midnight's Children, Ragtime, Legs, G, Famous Last Words*" (5). It is important for Hutcheon to show that in these novels the past as such is not denied; what is questioned is its accessibility outside of textual traces. Al-

though historical events have taken place, we can know them only through texts. Hutcheon seems to me at her best when confronting the relationship between fiction and history. Emphasizing that "to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually" (88), she arrives at the useful realization that the postmodern "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (89). Postmodern texts do not ignore history; they enable their readers to ask a different set of questions about historical truth claims. Hutcheon is undoubtedly justified in claiming that Marxist commentators are less perturbed by postmodernism's supposed ahistoricism than by its anti-Utopian or anti-dialectical stance.

Considerations of the problematical status of such concepts as narrative, representation, textuality, subjectivity, and ideology demonstrate Hutcheon's highly impressive grasp of key issues in current theoretical debates. If anything, her thorough knowledge leads her to overload her argument, weighing the text down with too much heavy documentation. Her real strength is her ability to synthesize difficult material while still offering her own insights. However, I do find it rather irritating that many points are reiterated as if Hutcheon doubted her own ability to communicate clearly or the reader's intelligence to follow what is in fact a highly readable text.

What I liked best of all in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is the way it situates both theoretical considerations and actual discussions of literary texts in their enunciative as well as in their historical, social, and political contexts. The study's intertextual and interdiscursive scope permits Hutcheon to intertwine theory and practice in ways that make for the kind of skilful connections we expect from an expert comparatist. Although her main concern is with the novel, she also uses examples from architecture, painting, photography, film, theatre, and dance. Such interdiscursivity is not gratuitous; it is in keeping with her focus on the text as discursive process instead of linguistic and textual system. This focus allows Hutcheon to demonstrate how the paradoxes she works out on the theoretical level manifest themselves in historiographic metafiction as a "particularly postmodern fear and loathing: the terror of totalizing plotting is inscribed within texts characterized by nothing if not by over-plotting and overdetermined intertextual self-reference" (133). It is perhaps somewhat unfortunate that theoretical issues dominate at the expense of more detailed analyses of actual novels. Although I consider the theoretical issues discussed to be of great importance, I nevertheless wish Hutcheon had spent less time quarreling with other theorists so as to give us more insights of the kind she offers in the more extended readings she gives of novels like D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, Christa Wolff's *Cassandra*, or E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*.

It seems to me somewhat doubtful that *A Poetics of Postmodernism* will persuade everybody that historiographic metafiction is as politically *engagé* as Hutcheon maintains. At the very least, though, her emphasis on the double coding operative in postmodernism ought to stand as a warning against easy oversimplifications. Although, as Hutcheon herself admits, postmodernism is "not radically innovative" (182), it is refreshing to be reminded that it both asserts and contests what we now like to call liberal humanist beliefs. I suspect that her stress on paradox and contradiction will most likely offer Jameson and Eagleton ammunition for the claim that postmodernism is politically anemic. At the same time, though, Hutcheon may well have the last word when she claims that "[t]o operate paradoxically (to install and then subvert) may be less satisfying than to offer resolved dialectic, but it may be the only non-totalizing response possible" (101).

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