

The Soft Aestheticism of Post-Modernity*

Danièle Letocha (University of Ottawa)

Let us agree to label as «post-modern» those intellectuals who describe the end of our century as if the beginning of a new aesthetic age were *fait accompli*. In their opinion, it is the task of intellectuals in general, and of theorists of culture in particular, to discover the shape and structure of a representation of the world, of the other and of the Self which, when compared to the modern picture, would be new, original, and discontinuous. Post-moderns claim that such a rift can be observed in the fact that we are today governed by another logic, different values and distinct expectations which are expressed in a new discourse and are given a new impetus by it. The tacit assumption in which the new voices concur would be found in an aesthetic norm powerful enough to penetrate all the manifestations of Western culture: whence the category of «aesthetic paradigm». For the moment let us consider this category as a heuristic tool rather than as a rigorously defined entity.¹

As of yet, there is no mainstream theory of post-modernity. But there is a growing number of proclamations, drafts, pleadings, analyses and essays concerning our break from a way of being, feeling, reasoning, communicating, acting and enjoying which reigned unquestioned for about four centuries. The burden of proof is borne by those who argue for radical discontinuity. From a philosophical standpoint, problems accumulate, but the theoretical interest also intensifies. «The philosopher thinks out what others live», wrote Nietzsche. A fascinating challenge, in this case.

Several preliminary questions arise if the debate over the actuality of a post-modern aesthetic paradigm is to assume a rigorous form. Empirical evidence for discontinuity is in principle incapable of legitimating the claim of an historic rift which the post-modern thesis postulates. One needs more than

* I wish to express gratitude to professors Marc Renault and Douglas Moggach who improved the English version of this paper.

¹ The semantics of the term «paradigm» oscillates between a sociological model propounded by T.S. Kuhn, and the «structural épistémè» that Foucault restricts to configurations in the field of knowledge (*savoirs*). I shall use it with the general extension of a «cultural structure».

factual occurrences to determine whether changes constitute merely a new variant within modern culture (still capable of fertile new developments), or rather a wholly new order.

A paradigm lives by an internal network of intuitions which it authorizes. It emerges, spreads and exhausts itself through multiple, often unexpected, variations which may be felt as profound changes from a micro-historical point of view. Sectoral transformations do not, though, entail a break up of the paradigm. On the contrary, they may allow the paradigm to react and adapt by restructuring its network. The Protestant Reformations of the XVIth century did not kill but rather revived Judeo-Christian axiomatics in the West. As long as the post-moderns have not demonstrated, by a convincing philosophy of history, that the present discontinuities rupture the unifying thread of modernity, I shall continue to consider their conceptions as nothing more than working hypotheses.

This first question requires some measure of consensus on terminology. What do we mean by modernity?² What is its historical point of origin? In what sense does it consist of one single paradigm with an invariant structure?³ Is it legitimate to assert that all of modernity falls under the rule of rationalism?

² My views, and those of other participants in this workshop, can be found in

a collective edited by Roberto Miguelez, *Qu'est-ce que la modernité?*, in *Carrefour* 13.1, Ottawa, 1991.

- ³ The early Foucault accentuated the disparity of the rational segments that make up the modern epistemological sequence, to the point that he advocated their incommensurability; cf. *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, Ch. III «Don Quichotte».

There is no agreement on the answers to these questions. A brief sampling suffices to show extreme divergences in the basic inferences: from Reiss⁴ to Taylor⁵, from Bloom⁶ to Johnson⁷, from Lyotard⁸ to Lipovetsky⁹, from Habermas¹⁰ to Touraine¹¹, the conception of modernity changes in content, form and chronology. Each author has his own conception of the present: for some (like Taylor, Habermas and Touraine), modern culture today faces a challenge, but this crisis, like previous ones, can be overcome, by modern means, if only we are determined to preserve the precious attainments of modernity. But then, where does modernity emerge? At the Renaissance? With Descartes? With the Enlightenment? Or even (Johnson) with the Congress of Vienna (1815)? How should one take bearings in such a polysemy?

There is no point in silencing this diversity. Once the fluid semantics have been taken into account, I notice that what is most relevant in post-modern hypotheses is their contribution to a better understanding of what makes up this modernity from which they pretend to break away. They provoke us to a critical

⁴ Timothy J. Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁶ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987.

⁷ Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern*, World Society 1815-1830, New York, Harper Collins, 1991.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

⁹ Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, [1981], Paris, Fayard, 1987.

¹¹ Alain Touraine, *Critique de la modernité*, Paris, Fayard, 1992.

reflection on the turbulent relations between modernity and reason, relations which seem to get muddled when the scale changes from micro-history to macro-history.

In any case, post-moderns claim that we are all under the spell of a new aesthetic paradigm. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that there is a radical cleavage. By what operations has such a shift come about? How do we recognize the inception of a paradigm? And how can it be qualified as aesthetic?

If we maintain the dominant definition of a paradigm, there can be only one at a time, so that a post-modern paradigm could only set in by deconstructing the preceding rationalist structure, which had lost relevance and legitimacy. The new paradigm must then have imposed its own horizon of meaning that cannot be inferred from modernity: it must assert its legitimacy by another principle. My claim is the following: it takes more than a change, even deep and overwhelming changes, to produce a paradigm shift. A given culture may experience important inflections of meaning without a substitution of paradigms. The authoritative foundations of a paradigm must be shattered by the succeeding one, in order to recede and disappear.

As a criterion, I propose that the creation of meaning is to be understood as the rise of a new set of questions, rather than as the addition of further elements to the former corpus of answers. For instance, let us consider events which seem to us strikingly new, like the complete mapping of human genes, like the fascination of big corporations for a Japanese-style cooperative management, like the new images produced by the digital technology of the Hubble space telescope, like the easy stocking and retrieval of mountains of information. We are dealing here with the evolution of the modern paradigm. These novelties fall within the continuity of modern rationalism with its technological and «technocratic» offshoots. They all share the status of new significations within the same grammatical framework. These events evolve within the homogeneous horizon set by the questions that organised modernity. They fit in a structure which is already operational.

I would compare this to the evolution of a language dictionary, taking in new words and discarding old ones in each new edition. What I call a «system of significations» is analogous to the lexical system of a given language, open to semantic contingency but closed by rules of construction. A paradigm provides such regulation; it allows for the closed system of questions which regulates the production of meaning. In the same way, modernity is a hermeneutic totality regulated by some fundamental questions like these: In the production of theoretical knowledge, ethical rules and technological procedures, how is man to be the master, the agent and the end? How must reason approach nature if it intends to substitute a stable conceptual representation and a rational efficiency for its contingent factuality? How can the ideas of universal reason contribute to the liberation of communities and individuals?

Such questions, (the accuracy of which is of course debatable), determine the general matrix of modernity. It institutes a realm of «meaning», a regulative core, distinct from the indeterminate number of significations it makes possible, receives or rejects. In the linguistic analogue, meaning is the grammatical dimension of the paradigm; it is stable in comparison with the evolution of the dictionary. Therefore, a paradigmatic shift would be analogous to a change where the grammar and the lexicon crumble together.

That would bring about more than an evolution. Only this full revocation of a structure of meaning indicates a cultural revolution. I require from the post-moderns that they demonstrate the coming of a matrix of meaning and define which radically new set of questions has now established its dominance. Let them give us an aesthetic grammar that supersedes the old metaphysical regime.

I do not think that the topics of the post-moderns, in the last thirty years, show any case for a cultural revolution. A paradigm consists in the constitution of order, be it *le dérèglement raisonné de tous les sens* (the reasoned disorder of all the senses) advocated by Arthur Rimbaud. If there is a new paradigm, one should be able to discriminate the power it has to displace the old one and to deploy a world representation, theoretical and practical, which permeates all levels of culture from the most sophisticated sciences and philosophies to the most common behaviour of ordinary people, from the most abstract theories of nature to the most concrete culinary arts, from elementary social relations to complex economic systems. By definition, a paradigm shows an all-pervading power.

Let us consider an interesting precedent: in Italy, between 1450 and 1550, an aesthetic paradigm disrupted the authority of the rationalist scholastic paradigm. Of course, history does not repeat itself and it would be absurd to look for a reprint of what happened at the outset of the Renaissance. There is however a sense of «déjà vu» in the scattered topics that are publicized today. Would post-modernism, without knowing it, be staging a remake of the Renaissance *virtù*? There are some striking analogies, and the Nietzschean venture would suggest such a hypothesis.

Nietzsche's is the sole discordant voice, in the modern harmony, to plead loudly for a return to a pure and firm aesthetic *art de vivre*. He blasts away at unified systematic thinking and at all smuggling of meaning into an after-life or into some transcendent reality: no to metaphysics, no to historicism, yes to a cruel and accepted finiteness. Nietzschean ferocity is not to be underestimated. It consciously gathers huge energies needed to destroy the rationalist paradigm. It constantly insists on the most threatening trait of aesthetic choice: its uncompromising selectivity. Some Renaissance individuals knew the price of such a choice. If all scientific knowledge is, for Nietzsche, vulgar and castrating, a blithe spirit that can dance over knowledge is as rare a manifestation as *virtù* ever was. As for excellent artists, they will be found only two or three times per century, at random.

Nietzsche acts out his own precepts like a Renaissance hero. His syncopated, figurative and often narrative writing is intent on the production of the work without regards for any canons of discourse. The Self, he says, multiplies its facets in all kinds of speech without consideration for expertise, and without respect for the boundaries of academic disciplines. There is here an aggressive subversion that seeks to oust the unified rational Self and replace it with a dynamic polycentric subjectivity. I do not doubt that Nietzsche's work offers, in the literate world, the necessary and sufficient conditions to *herald* a paradigm shift. But has this announcement been followed by reality?

Nietzsche sets a line of direction in his wake. He tried to revive a Dionysean *Quattrocento* as a normative model, and some intellectuals try to use his credit to shore up the predominance of aesthetic

norms. The more substantial propositions came from: Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida. In my judgment, the many writers who seek support in such authors today do not have a clear representation of this very exacting descendance from the Italian Renaissance.

Of course, the post-modern umbrella covers a whole constellation of topics, propositions and individualities which should discourage hasty generalization, but in a workshop like this one I am pressed for time and cannot pay attention to the scattered allegations one by one. They say that we are now in the folds of a new paradigm. But I think that being anti-modern is not enough to produce post-modernity. Modern reason has been denounced as senseless with old arguments that seem new to many. The understanding of philosophy as a kind of art is one of those «new» propositions. Putting images above concepts is another. Some so-called philosophers practice a type of literary discourse that rambles in the warehouses of culture: sponging, collage, echoing, amalgamation. From their synchronic point of view, all of representation is a tapestry of facts and fictions. No weight is given to the background and origin of the materials. Assessing logical order as irrelevant is considered as a sign of maturity. Any combination, any transformation can be tried without critical misgivings. The whole of representation is given over to an indefinite, open language game. Discourses look more like collections than systems.

I think that this can make sense only from an individual perspective. The new sense of self-identity is that of a monad. The modern constraint of a linear and integrative consciousness is now forsaken in favour of intense disconnected time fragments. The post-modern monad concentrates on its iridescent stream of consciousness, thus shutting out the reference to the objective world. It focuses on its idiosyncrasy, anecdotal experiences and preferences as the exclusive source of disconnected pleasures and discoveries. The more singular it is, the more interesting. What the modern Self struggles with as confused and contradictory, the post-modern calls fecundity and diversity, in short: loyalty to atoms of duration. And from such a standpoint, *différence* does not arise from the experience of an internal/external discrepancy, but from the perception of plurality in the core of the Self: this is the blurring of the modern strict opposition of subjectivity to objectivity. Consequently, individuality does not logically come first, since it is merely the receptacle of events that flow through it. The making of the individual is wrapped in the folds of contingent happenings rather than self-constituted and affirmed as a stable necessary principle. Identity is as much the result as the source of experiences. Foucault argues for this in his critique of the concept of authorship¹². Symbiosis rather than dialectics. Renaissance authors had such an outlook long ago. What is at stake in the deconstruction of the subject promoted by the post-moderns? They wish to privilege happening over and

¹² This idea has become commonplace. In *Le Monde* (May 13, 1994), René de Ceccaty reviews some biographies of Foucault under the title: *The Philosopher as the Object of his Artistry (Le philosophe comme artiste de soi)*.

against structure. The faceless modern rational subject controlled and subsumed all events under its laws. The new post-modern monad promotes an elastic receptiveness that has enough flexibility to metamorphose itself and enough openness to embrace the multiple calls of the moment, under the sign of Proteus.

In learned post-modern works, therefore, different disciplines mingle in all kinds of cross-overs, where the narrative regime tends to replace demonstration. Writing becomes polymorphic. Why would an individual not weave together a philosophical essay, a theory of literature and art critique, if he feels like it? Bits of different «genres» flow by: portrait writing, personal confessions, free theology, erotic stories, historical fragments, diatribe, gossip and whatnot. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera gives a lesson in dissemination with his multiple brush-strokes which are not meant to totalize in a coherent picture.

The post-modern Self aims at autarchy and therefore denies the relevance of any conception of the Self that takes into account what the modern considered as the necessary mediations through which the monad becomes a subject. Events come without forms of expectation and they exit without leaving a trace: freedom implies that one gets rid of transcendent aesthetics, logics, and historical categories. The modern Self sought liberation through commitment in the social, political or national frameworks, in logics, in the sciences, striving to overshoot individual limits and converge with others on a common platform of thought and action. This has no meaning for the post-moderns. They believe that the modern mentality negates individuality. In my opinion, these are the more visible aspects of a conflict between two worlds. There is a great variety of individualistic worldviews but generally they share the postulate of an emancipation of the Self which contradicts the modern heritage with its conception of a liberation conquered through historical process. It seems, then, that the basic problem is a conflict of anthropologies.

As this conflict became apparent, some of the outstanding analysts of modernity, highly critical of its errors, illusions and shortcomings, became defenders of its achievements. We can see two minds as different as Taylor and Habermas committed to the defence of the attainments of modernity in its capacity of self-decentering. Which is the way to self-accomplishment? The long laborious modern way? or the immediate aesthetic way? To an individualist aesthetic answer, we can object that it seems unable to think out the coexistence of individual differences. It can only feel them with a benevolent tolerance, which was also the illusion of Renaissance thought: aesthetic optimism counts on a spontaneous social and political harmony emerging naturally, if one is patient enough to let things happen. The disrepute in which collective action has fallen, in an age where only individual rights seem real, compels people to view differences through the non-discrimination of aesthetic feeling.

The anti-rationalist postulate offers some analogies with the struggle of the humanists against scholasticism in the XIVth century. Post-modern discourse challenges the three major mainstays of modern rationality; metaphysics, instrumental reason, and dialectics. It aims at cutting the link between knowledge and power, flattening all hierarchies. It advocates a purely horizontal arrangement of existence. Rhetorical reason is in favour, once again.

Let these sketchy indications suffice. I conclude that the thematic content of post-modern rhetoric reproduces only part of the pre-modern stance of the humanist Renaissance. The missing ingredient is *virtù*. I cannot identify any dynamic vector powerful enough to transfix the pleasant tid-bits of post-modernists and mould them into a fountainhead. The cultural mutation claimed by the post-modern shows no signs that it could ever find the strength to revitalize the multiple levels of a paradigm. As long as it sticks to an individualistic aesthetical imperative, post-modernity is too weak to found a new paradigm.

When I examine post-modern individualism, I am struck by its inconsistency and by a shuddering to draw all the necessary conclusions from its own premises. I have claimed earlier that a paradigm possesses dominance and organic orientation, that it weaves the threads of meaning under the authority of a determined set of evidences. Our learned post-modern individuals do not show much of that. They float to and fro in the stream of miscellaneous circumstances without the critical discrimination that a paradigm would impart.

The post-modern individualist has two balance sheets: aesthetics and morals. Machiavelli and Nietzsche have already analysed the fundamental incompatibility between this double book-keeping. There is no such thing as a «soft» aestheticism. One should make a choice between aesthetics and rationalism. No one seems tough enough to do it. Do you know of people disciplined and willful enough to take the imperative of style as an end in itself? Do you know of people sufficiently strong to express their singularity without consideration for the common mores? Do you know of any movement that beckons to the risks of self-assertion? Do we hear of some clear and widely-followed imperative that requires elegance in thought, feelings, language, dress and manners? Are the works of artists evaluated according to purely formal aesthetic rules? Do we acknowledge the overruling priority of talent alone? Are we ready to experience the grind and jostle of criticism that goes with creative work? On the other hand, is the democratic ethics of justice, merit, respect, effort, dwindling away? These values cannot but clash with the aesthetic option and I see no sign of their fading out. I am not trying to promote a romantic or paroxysmal kind of art. I am only trying to make clear how much sweeping energy and pitiless candor goes with the aesthetic imperative. I do not think that the post-modern aesthetics goes much further than the adornment of the cozy intimate fireside.