

Terri Jane Hennings  
Writing Against Aesthetic Ideology

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Terri Jane Hennings

Writing Against  
Aesthetic Ideology

Tom Sharpe's *The Great Pursuit*  
and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to my daughter Alyssa, who put up with a myriad of daycare situations on two continents, and to my husband, Gerd, whose encouragement, support, and love enabled me to finish what Alyssa still refers to as “Mommy’s book.”



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## Foreword

This book aims to offer a retrospective “slice” of the debate between modernism and postmodernism that dominated academia in the 1980’s, particularly in the United States. Looking at two works of fiction from two different authors from this period I hope to show how the debate and the influence of postmodernism was not confined to academic ivory towers but rather became “mainstream”; spreading postmodern ideas among the general reading public even if the public was not consciously aware of it. Although postmodernism itself was highly sceptical of narrative linearity, my strategy will be quintessentially narrative: to offer a flashback. What follows reflects the thinking of a certain period in critical and literary theory that raised heretofore unheard of questions: what exactly is a “text” and where are its boundaries? How are these boundaries produced and policed? Who has the authority to decide what is a “proper” literary text? In short, the last 40 years witnessed a radical transformation in the way literary scholars conceive of the terms “text” and “meaning,” and not without fierce controversy. By looking back at this raging debate we can better understand where we are today in literary criticism and theory. But before diving into the work a bit of background is in order.

Before post-structuralism arrived on American shores New Criticism clearly dominated the literary criticism scene. During the 1950’s and 1960’s Yale University was THE American center for the New Criticism as it later would be for post-structuralism, and the most powerful force in literary studies at the time. Advanced by critics such as I.A. Richards and W.K. Wimsatt, New Criticism treated the text as an autonomous entity, self-contained and separate from historical and social contexts. There were no meanings to be imported from outside of the text; the meaning of a text was recoverable through close reading and formal analysis. This movement grew out of impatience with the vague, comfortable criticism as practiced through the forties that had mixed literary history, biography, cultural commentary and personal opinion, and instead zeroed in on the elements within a poem by

which an author achieved his artistic effect. (The masculine pronoun “he” is a conscious choice, as most of the writers deemed “worthy” of critical analysis were male).

The New Criticism inspired controversies of its own. In an attempt to defend their practice and castigate the New Critics, traditional literary theorists viewed New Criticism’s rhetorical bases of critiquing poetry — irony, paradox, tension — as abstract notions that would reduce poetry to logical order. The New Critics, however, insisted on the uniqueness of a poem. Rather than reducing poetry to a logical order, their intention was to preserve the uniqueness of a poem by fencing it off within the bounds of their chosen rhetoric. William K. Wimsatt’s reference to the poem as “verbal icon” became the New Critic’s rallying cry for the privileged autonomy of poetic language. The poem was a sacrosanct object, its meaning incapable of being rendered into any kind of prose equivalent (the “heresy of paraphrase”), and as an autonomous “sacred” object, demanded respect for the difference between it and the language used to critique it. But it would not be the old school traditional literary critics that caused the demise of the New Criticism rather the “European invasion,” especially the influence of deconstruction and post-structuralism.

If one had to define a “moment” when the American critical scene changed it would be with the arrival of a little known philosopher named Jacques Derrida and his first lectures at a symposium held at John Hopkins University in 1966. Here he put forth a new approach to textual analysis he termed deconstruction, thus starting a movement that was to overturn the way critical theory was done in the U.S.

By no means was Derrida the only European “invader”; French and German intellectual thought had already found their way into American academic circles. Schools as diverse as Hermeneutics (Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer), Reception Theory and Reader Response (Ingarden, Iser, Jauss), Marxism (Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer), Structuralism (Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Kristeva, Barthes, Genette), and Post-structuralism (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Irigaray) redefined what the literary object is and how it signifies. But the one who really changed the whole notion of what serious critical thought was was Derrida. He arrived in the U.S. at precisely the moment when many literary theorists were chafing under the constraints of what they considered the outdated methodology of the New Critics. Derrida’s influence became widespread and his influence greater than any of the other French post-structuralists. One of the most radical

effects of Derrida's approach has been to transform the very notion of what constitutes "serious" critical thought. The influence of continental thought, particularly that of post-structuralism, led to a methodological conflict, heralding a shift in literary criticism that would result in an intense debate between modernism and postmodernism.

In order to grasp post-structuralism and deconstruction we need first to investigate structuralism. All were French "imports" but there are important differences between them. Structuralism was one of the first European "arrivals" to challenge the dominance of the New Critics. It sees language and culture determined by an unvarying, timeless structure. In its more conservative bent, particularly as it was practiced in American literary circles, structuralists viewed texts as bearers of meanings, even if complicated meanings. The critic is the seeker of these "truths" (meanings) in the text, although it is not clear if these meanings (structures) are inherent in the human mind or represent the force of established convention, a sort of "second nature" to the practiced reader/critic. This latter seems the more likely explanation.

By the late 1960's structuralism came under attack by a new wave of French intellectual thinkers (all advocates of post-structuralism) such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and, of course, Derrida. This "new" approach was adopted and domesticated by a group of Yale English professors who shared many intellectual concerns and who would be referred to by various names: "The Yale School," the "Wild Men" or just the "Yale Critics." Yale would once again become THE center for literary criticism and theory, but embracing a vastly different approach than the one it superseded.

Though elements of their work necessarily relate to structuralism and are informed by it, these theorists have generally been referred to as post-structuralists. Post-structuralism or deconstruction does not accept the idea of a structure as in any sense given or objectively "there" in a text to be "uncovered." It especially questions the assumption that structures of meaning correspond to some deep-laid mind (mental) pattern or response. Structuralists believed that theory is the search for invariant structures or formal universals, which reflect the nature of human intelligence; it is a total explanation of human thought and culture. Theory is assured of its methodological bearings by claiming a deep, universal relationship with the systems of meaning that it proposes to analyze. Here its ties to Kantian philosophy and the entire Western philosophical tradition become glaringly visible.

Derrida's post-structuralist method which became known as deconstruction rigorously suspends this assumed correspondence between mind,

meaning, and the concept of method that claims to unite them. To “deconstruct” a text is basically to do what it sounds like: to take the text carefully apart, exposing the central fact and, up until recently, the well-kept tragic little secret of Western philosophy – namely, the circular tendency of language to refer to itself. Because the language of a text refers mainly to other languages and texts – and not to some extra textual reality – the text tends to have several possible meanings, which usually compete with one another. The “meaning” of a piece of writing, and it doesn’t matter whether it is a poem, a novel or a philosophic treatise, is indeterminate.

There were so many individual and varied responses to post-structuralism that to speak of a “movement” would be to blur some very crucial differences in emphasis and style. What they all shared, however, was the singular distinction of being attacked by the political left and right. Post-structuralism, especially Derrida’s practice of it, was accused of being apolitical and therefore not a viable critical tool. The political left castigated deconstruction at Yale as an empty, elitist, bourgeois game. Notable Marxists such as Terry Eagleton purported that the deconstructionists’ obsession with the self-immolation of texts was sheer escapism. The political right saw in post-structuralism a threat to traditional values and meaning as it did not adhere to any authority, including the authority of language. Post-structuralism’s assertion that words — regardless if they are in a work of prose or non-prose — have no stable meaning. All words refer only to other words ad infinitum. This doctrine of the “prison house of language”<sup>1</sup> (words referring only to other words) was deemed absurd.

Critics of post-structuralism still abound but they aren’t assailing it as bourgeois or pernicious, but from the perspective of hindsight. They point out that postmodern theory did not foresee that the hope and vision of replacing Enlightenment metanarratives with local micro narratives would backfire; that these micro narratives would themselves become grand or metanarratives. Disciplines such as feminism, minority studies, queer/gender studies, etc. came to rely on a grand, all-encompassing theory, a narrative common to all, a “transcendental and universal truth” just as the metanarratives of progress and Enlightenment emancipation had formed an essential part of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Frederic Jameson’s *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) for an elaboration and discussion of this notion.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowl-*

Perhaps it was disillusionment with postmodern theory with its questioning and deconstructing of the center, the subject, and history; in other words, questioning all the things we hold as “self-evident truths” that drove many to seek a new authority. Foundation-shaking is all well and good if there is something to put in its place, but the postmodern movement undermined the certainty of everything and offered little in an era of increasing uncertainties. Events such as 9/11, the Iraq War, the sub-prime debacle etc., left us unanchored in a new unfamiliar world. Yet we had come too far to find our way back to the old concepts and standards; too many things had been put into question.

It is difficult to pin down precisely what has emerged to fill the gap left by the postmodern, however one might cite a renewed interest in religion. The rise in radical religious fundamentalism that gained steam in the late 1990’s is still going strong. This spreading tide of radical forms of various world religions propelled an interest in the study of religion. In academia religious studies has, to a large extent, replaced the postmodernism offshoots of gender studies, race studies, theory, etc. Take a look at any university curriculum and you will see a plethora of courses on religion, be they comparative, historical or theoretical.

The geopolitical events of the last 14 years have made us acutely aware that there are many people in many parts of the world that do not make a distinction between belief and knowledge, citizenship (state) and culture (religion) — fundamentalism on the rise in East and West.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, religion both defies the tenets of postmodernism with its boundaries and reassurances, and emulates it with permeable boundaries. Although on the surface fundamentalist radical religions seems to offer the certainty of modernism — firm rules to navigate our messy existence and a doctrine based on binary concepts: good versus evil, sinners versus saints, believers versus non-believers etc., religion still retains some of the not quite definable, the neither this nor that, the Derrida in indeterminacy, the grey area that characterized deconstructionist thought. We need only think of the principle Christian tenet of life after death. Christians die to be born again, living on in an afterlife but not as this life. Or the tenets of radical Islam, offering a

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*edge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Fish. “One University under God?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51:18, 2005: 1-4.

better life after death, particularly if one dies for Islam; a motivating factor in recruiting terrorists. This speaks to the lasting influence of postmodern thought that one now looks at these things in terms of binaries that break down.

Although the renewed academic focus on religion is just one example among many, no doubt our approaches to culture and texts have never been the same since post-structuralism “hit” academia. As we find ourselves in the aftermath of the heated postmodern-modern debate, we are given the chance to view postmodern thought with a bit more *sang-froid*. By taking an in-depth look at the postmodern and how modernity not only took umbrage with postmodern thought but felt threatened by it, we can offer a so-called “critique of postmodern” in the fullest sense of the word “critique,” one enriched by the benefit of hindsight. The following work traces the trajectory of the debate and observes its repercussions for and within the novels of Tom Sharpe and Paul Auster. I hope it provides food for thought as we seek to map that which has succeeded theory, race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual inquiry and the opportunities it holds.

\*

I would like to thank Wlad Godzich, who first awakened my interest in the modern-postmodern debate, and who spent many hours discussing its consequences for our profession. Special thanks also to Jochen Schulte-Sasse for his close readings and constructive criticism of my project. Sadly he is not here to read this and see the fruits of his commentary and insights, all of which helped me to clarify my own thoughts.

I would also like to offer thanks to best friend, Linda, without whose help and support, especially in terms of her time and patience, this book would not have been possible.

# Introduction

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games.

*Jean-François Lyotard*<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written and said about postmodernity and postmodernism. The aim of this project is not to add yet another voice in the attempt to define precisely what the postmodern is, but rather to explore how the theories subsumed under the label "postmodern" helped us question a humanism that, in its very inception, was founded on the exclusion of issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender and to illustrate how two contemporary authors' works display an understanding and ultimately deconstruction of these cultural underpinnings.

Although it is not within the scope of this study to examine whether there was an intent to exclude these issues or whether the exclusion resulted from choices made — even if the choice for "rationality" was not seen as a choice at the time — the interrogation of Enlightenment humanistic values challenged the notion of universal applicability and consensus which form the basis for a humanism that disregards race, gender, class, and ethnicity. In order to chart this "interrogation," my focus is on the institution of the aesthetic, for here the homogenizing attempts, through the conveyance of humanistic values in the form of the literary canon, were transmitted and re-

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" trans. Régis Durand in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 76.

enforced. A close reading of Sharpe's and Auster's novels yield a deconstruction of these values and demonstrate that most of the time we are not aware we are making choices and exclusions; calling attention to what seems "natural" and then exposing it for the construct that it is. In looking at our "inherited" liberal humanism by tracing the modern-postmodern debate my goal is two-fold: to refute the claims made by those who argue that postmodernism (along with its attendant theories) is dangerous, as it leads to an abdication of political responsibility, and to demonstrate that the contrary applies; that rather than leading to an apolitical stance, postmodern theories' challenge to received notions of art, the aesthetic, and liberal humanism is profoundly political. Their political effect lies in the interrogation of art as an institution, for example a cultural canon that establishes standards of taste that are class-based, but not acknowledged as such.<sup>2</sup>

The question of what it means to be human is commonly addressed within a framework deriving from the Enlightenment with its apparatus of nation, state, and general poetics; ideas that have their beginnings in ancient Greek thought. It has been the merit of postmodernism not only to identify the categories involved in the perspective of the Enlightenment; but also to show how inadequate and limiting these categories are. Unspoken within this framework has been that new categories were made possible for what may be called the economy of subject formation along the lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. What is meant is the different processes or procedures, conscious or unconscious, which are embedded in the mechanisms of socialization and acquisition of a culture and language, and which lead one to identify oneself as this particular person with these particular habits, customs, and system of beliefs. Hence, if we accept the premise that significance for us is the apprehension of our own material and that our apprehension is linked to Enlightenment notions of nation, state, and general poetics (aesthetics) it follows that we cannot remain in a purely "traditional" critical mode but must come up with new categories.

This acknowledgment that the archeological mode is inadequate to read and remap multiple historicities, led to new practices of "reading." The old

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<sup>2</sup> Here a distinction is drawn between politics being 1) that which is involved in the life in common with others, in institutions and in values, and politics being 2) that which holds a coherent, consistent and justifiable stance regarding the foregoing; a stance that rests on clear and stable principles. Postmodern is political in the first sense, but is not necessarily political in the second sense.



categories of high and low literature, of canon formation and the ensuing totalizing, homogenizing mode constitute a hegemonic agenda that many (including myself) could only partially identify with. A re-mapping of the field of significance was in order to challenge liberal humanist notions and to find new modes of thinking Being in a world in which social reality is structured by plural discourses; a world where one of the continuing problems will be the political economy of subject formation. And it is within what has become known as postmodernism that we are able to negotiate new modes of thought — it is the postmodern that has presented us with the possibility for deconstructing deeply ingrained *Weltanschauungen*.

In the early stages of the modern-postmodern debate, the detractors of these new and “radical” practices held that postmodernism (and its attendant theories), was inimical to social and political change. They stated that with the collapsing of the division between high and low culture, postmodernism produced a leveling effect, a homogeneity, whereby everything tended to be measured according to the masses. I perceive this charge stemming more from a fear of postmodern theory, since postmodernism challenged heretofore established authorities, including that of the critic. Postmodernism argued that precisely the erasure of boundaries between high and mass culture could help us understand the social phenomena I described above. Many “post” structuralist psychoanalytical theories point to the fact that the reception of so-called mass culture differs among its “audience” and thus produces a heterogeneity instead of a homogeneity. Yet again, this admission of heterogeneity was a relatively new phenomenon, posing a threat to the bastions of liberal humanistic values: values that were (and still are) employed in totalizing notions of the state and in the maintenance of hegemony. Such “post” readings served to make us more aware of how our world is constructed and thus were a first step in breaking up ideology and a hegemony that contained neat attempts at unifying coherence, whether it be formal or thematic. Postmodernism, in its questioning of the fundamental organization of the subject and of knowledge — our everyday commonly held assumptions regarding the self, language, and meaning — opened us up to the possibility of an epistemological critique of the West.

But what exactly is modernism vs. postmodernism? Even the very definition of the terms modernism-postmodernism has been anything but clear-cut, as prominent thinkers in the 1970’s and 80’s understood the distinction in quite different terms; there was much disagreement on what constitutes the above. As the debate unfolded several views appeared: Some, such as

Jean-François Lyotard, saw the postmodern as “a mood, or better a state of mind”<sup>3</sup> which enabled him to classify Rabelais and Sterne as postmodern. Others, such as Fredric Jameson, attempted to define it in terms of a historical distinction. Jameson based this on the premise that within modernity there exists a separation between high and low culture; modernity being the movement of high culture, popular culture being its refraction. According to Jameson, this separation no longer exists; what we have instead is a blurring or erasure of boundaries, and this is what he labeled the postmodern. Jochen Schulte-Sasse’s definition is a good working definition and starting point. He defined modernity as “a form of society or social organization characterized by industrialization.”<sup>4</sup> The cultural reproduction of this industrialized society he termed modernism. He also argued that modernism should include not only works of “high” culture, but also of mass culture, relying on the claim that the “mode of material reproduction of a given society corresponds to the mode of its cultural reproduction”....<sup>5</sup> Thus, according to Schulte-Sasse, postmodernity and postmodernism would be defined in the same manner; postmodernity being the material reproduction of society that follows modernity, postmodernism the cultural reproduction of that society. Hence his definition remains grounded in a linear timeframe.

My understanding of the postmodern, however, draws from Lyotard as well as from Schulte-Sasse. I agree with the distinction Schulte-Sasse makes between modernity and modernism, in other words, between the material and cultural reproductions of society, and with his social theory of modernity as that which exists in a functionally differentiated society; that is a society that is characterized by a division into separate, though dialectically interdependent, social spheres with the aesthetic gaining autonomous status in the eighteenth century. However, I do not see a strict historical distinction of the postmodern necessarily *following* the modern; in this sense I feel more akin to Lyotard arguing for moments of the postmodern throughout modernity. The essence of the postmodern lies not in a historical division, but in a form of critical activity that attempts to deconstruct the very established boundaries from within which it operates. In doing so, it re-maps the

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<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, “Rules and Paradoxes and Svelte Appendix,” *Cultural Critique* Number 5 (Winter 1986-87): 209.

<sup>4</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism: Framing the Issue,” *Cultural Critique* Number 5 (Winter 1986-87): 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

field by remaining inside the signifying system. Modernism, by contrast, claims that the artist/critic can critique society from without; that he/she can occupy a space outside of society and of the discourses institutionalized in society.

But as is the case with all of these definitions, they are merely readings among a proliferation of readings of the modern or of the postmodern which point to the fact that what we are dealing with are readings of the historical moment, readings which are inextricably intermingled with the rhetorical and representational problem of “language.” The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a major shift as important thinkers (e.g., Wittgenstein and Heidegger) moved the focus of analysis away from mental ideas to the language in which thought is expressed. Thus it was our notion of language that became the ground for the debate of the modern versus the postmodern. And it is our notion of language which has become the ground for the present-day debate of the modern versus the postmodern.

In order to chart the debate I examine the centrality of the human subject in a world that is made intelligible — politically, socially, even perceptually — through what a subject has amassed (customs, habits, narratives, concepts), whether these “tools” are in adequacy with the world or are mere instruments for articulating a brute facticity. We can say in short that the world exists through representation for a subject. These are presuppositions of modernity that have their roots in ancient Greek thought. I first examine theories of Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man, who, from different perspectives and with divergent conclusions, criticized the presuppositions of modernity and pointed to the necessity of returning to the ancient Greeks to study what constitutes the boundaries of modernity; in other words, to critique how a certain reading of ancient Greeks determined our notions. Some of the beliefs that both investigate are the modern opposition between theory and *aisthesis* and the ensuing conception of praxis as autonomous, and the repercussions this has had on our concepts of aesthetics, nation, and state. From here I turn to a discussion of Kant, particularly the third Critique, and what became known as the Kantian project — Kant’s attempt to form a connection between the discourse of knowledge and the discourse of practice. Why is Kant important for the present discussion? It is because he is seen as the codifier of modernity. His mapping out of the human mind, his (as read by modernity) distinctions between aesthetics, cognition, and ethics can be seen as parts of a historical formation if read on the basis of language, subject positions, and textuality. A rereading of Kant enables us to

rethink the terms in which general knowledge was deemed possible in modernity: the (re)production of the modern divisions of the theoretical, practical, and aesthetic realms of the mind. The use of this Kantian “project” as the foundation of modernity lies at the base of a hegemonic hold over the interpretive disciplines in that it constituted their untranscendable historical horizons.

As noted, for my discussion it will be the notion of aesthetics that is of prime importance. Aesthetics is implicated in various ways in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* in his attempt at doing the impossible; namely, to link the discourse of knowledge with the discourse of praxis. In the third Critique, the concept of aesthetics becomes the locus of the notion of the constitution of the subject. This occurs in its encounter with the sense data of experience, which cannot be synthesized under an already existing concept. The aesthetic produces the effect that in modernity the constitution of the subject, the construction of identities, is achieved on the emotional level through linear narratives. In other words, it is in modernity that aesthetics emerges as a separate sphere in which cultural artifacts perform the sentimental regeneration of the subject. This process becomes institutionalized and imbued with value. My first chapter investigates the institution of the aesthetic and examines the grounds upon which it is founded. I then contest the viability of these grounds, drawing on the theoretical framework of Paul de Man, in particular, to frame my discussion.

In chapter two I further interrogate the notion of value outlining briefly the history of the division between high and low culture as it developed during early modernity; a development that relied heavily on the Kantian division of the aesthetic as a separate sphere. This division came to function as a mode of compensation for the individual caught up in an increasingly differentiated society. And it is this notion of compensation that carries over to mass culture. I will argue that mass culture, in the form of popular literature, does not necessarily result in mere entertainment or in a working through of frustrations, alienation or disenfranchisement. Nor does it lead to a homogenization. All of these “charges” leveled against postmodernism and popular literature rely on notions of a critical mode within modernity. These are notions that may well apply to popular literature (and in terms of homogenization and compensation, to so-called high literature as well, all the time keeping in mind that the distinction between “high” and “low” culture is an imposition fostered by literary history and its inventors) within the mode of the modern when viewed from a historical position. This valorization of the

historical above all else entails making history itself the *a priori* of any system. Fredric Jameson is an adherent of just such a notion of history. Here history is the playing out of an inexorable logic. In terms of narrative, according to Jameson, this logic becomes apparent in the course of the narrative. In other words, narrative takes the form of history and can thus show us how history functions.<sup>6</sup> Thus Jameson also views language as limiting; he laments the limits of language, the inability of language to say something is present, for we are always caught up in the logic of history being played out in narratives. This logic in turn is based upon philosophical notions of time, which deal in concepts. According to common perception, time is thought to be linear, infinite, and homogeneous. Jameson claims that we always find ourselves within a “prison house of language,” for if we can say it, it is. For the poststructuralist, however, language is tense, temporal; we speak of what is not there, of the representation of the absent in the present.

Popular literature, if read in a certain way, rather than offering us solace in the form of texts with understandable signs and a sense of origin and conclusion, challenges us to re-think our relations to the notions of liberal humanism, which produced grand or metanarratives (Lyotard) that, via an ideology of universal “human essence,” served to create and maintain social systems that included power, marginalization, and exclusion (Foucault). In particular I will argue against Stanley Fish’s concept of an interpretative community of readers. Fish postulated that this interpretative community of readers shared values and that these create informed individual reading/readings as well as providing criteria for assessing their validity. On the surface, much of what such reception theory says about the reading process may seem unproblematic; its theory is grounded on the split between high and low cultural standards. Fish’s theory, relying on the notion of a division between high and low, operates on a principle of exclusion that allows for canon building and the institutionalization of literature.

As my primary interest is in aesthetics as it relates to the postmodern, in chapters three and four I undertake close readings of two novels of popular literature that fall under the rubric postmodern. Both work to problematize our relationship to the institution of the aesthetic by imploding value. If we accept the premise that the institution of the aesthetic is a modern process of institutionalization that developed out of the Kantian division of

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<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 98-105.

the human mind, and that thrives on gestures of transcendence and value, the postmodern novel reasserts these gestures only to undermine these humanist notions of transcendence. Concepts such as value, meaning, order, control, and identity are all exhibited only to be undone. This move allows us to view these as ideological constructs, which does not necessarily work to destroy their “truth” value, but rather to redefine the conditions of truth, and argues for a re-thinking of institution and canon formation. Novels by Tom Sharpe and Paul Auster are read in reference to de Man, Benjamin, Bakhtin, and Theweleit, among others, in order to rearticulate the problems of identity and subjectivity in postmodern popular narrative.

In examining the two novels I have chosen as central paradigms, we shall see that the “tools” we normally apply to understand literature can no longer be relied upon. These samples of popular literature present us with problems of reading and thus illustrate the heterogeneity involved in the act of reading. The paradigms I have used will show how the postmodern opens up the question of art, especially the institution of the aesthetic. Postmodern’s collapsing of the high culture/mass culture dichotomy served to problematize the straight jacket of the literary canon as it has been institutionalized as well as the hegemonic interests of those purveyors of liberal humanistic values.

My afterword returns to broad questions still very much with us. One of the issues still facing us is what happens to nations as these become more and more heterogeneous and as states become less important in the way in which social cultural life becomes determined? Analogous to this is the way canon formation in the institution of the aesthetic has to be re-conceptualized to allow for multiple historicities in a global rather than a national economy. And this must also take into account the shrinking position of language and the growing influence of images in (post)postmodernity.