

A Venture Beyond the Script

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Second Field preliminary examination

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Professor Eric Savoy formulated the Second Field Examination Question:

In the essay "Reflections on Red Delicious", you describe your experience of "suffocation" with the "rigid academic rules with regard to the form and method of inquiry" -- which you later describe as the "script" of academia. This affect of claustrophobia might be said to form the temporal base of the evolution of "Red Delicious", a text that bears witness to the need for "radical change and break with [academic, critical] tradition.

Much of what you conceptualize in this essay -- the merging of critical and creative work, the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, the re-scripting of "the script" -- reflects the basic tenets of postmodernism. Yet -- strangely, perhaps -- the word "postmodern" never appears in your text.

Write an essay in which you (a) articulate the "postmodern" condition of "Red Delicious" and (b) entertain the question of whether the postmodern, being unnamed in your commentary, might be the "unconscious" of your critical text -- that is, the animating "script", or epistemology, that lends coherence to your avowed intention to shatter all scripts.

My Response:

The key to understanding the absence of the term 'postmodern' or 'postmodernism' in my *Reflections on Red Delicious* resides in my invitation itself to venture beyond the script. I spell out this invitation in the *important disclaimer*, the play itself and reiterate it in my commentary. In this essay, I'll discuss two of the problems of the academic practice of grouping or categorizing and how 'postmodernism' constitutes one such problematic category.

I'll begin by stating the obvious, namely that no one writes in a vacuum. Our reality surrounds us with its own concerns; we meet it with our own concerns and then thoughts happen. However, I hesitate to identify the condition of *Red Delicious* as postmodern because I find it limiting and problematic to assume the

totality of my "reality" or "conditions" as postmodern. The same reasons that I discuss below will also respond to the second part of your question, namely that it is the postmodern that is the unconscious of my critical text (in any case, it would take me a long time and a lot of assumptions and guesses (tantamount to lies) to consciously speak of my own unconscious incarnated in my critical text).

In order to identify the postmodern here I would need to discuss the definition or the category of the postmodern and identify its problems or limitations.

Postmodernism, like any other academic or scientific category implies several problematic issues. For one, these categories always follow a chronological order, implying a specific sequence and attributing an order that is convenient to the "organizer" but which is not free of bias and artificiality imbued with political "convenience". Once we recognize something as artificial or as what Baudrillard refers to as the *simulacra*, our recognition then defies the artifact's relation of sameness to the "original" or the "real" and thus remains as something unrelated except in its superficial characteristics and is thus unnecessary in the quest of knowledge of the "world". That is not to say that it may not be useful or necessary in itself. However, the characteristics by which we are supposed to assume the sameness or the similarity of an original experience and another meant to reproduce it, simulate it, or resemble it do not contain the whole truth or the whole range of the characteristics of those two experiences and are therefore incomplete and impossible to be "judged" or - as I claim - categorized.

My basic argument is that grouping together Baudrillard, Whittgenstein, Foucault, or say Lyotard tames them more than it liberates us. More dangerous however is the false confidence that this categorization gives to the students and teachers of postmodernism: if we study everyone that is mentioned in the books of history or in the academic curriculae in their specific "categories", then we know all that is necessary (within the framework of passing exams, getting hired for jobs, writing publishable manuscripts, etc.) about those categories and epochs. However, if we study all the creative writers deemed postmodern we get an understanding of only what goes on in the intellectual experience of the authorized and published sphere and we largely and conveniently ignore the other possible developments of the script.

The second problem with the term 'postmodern' is its implied evolutionary property. This problem is related to the original question that Terry Cochran raised in that seminar, namely that if we are to assume that something (in his case it was literature) was and now may no longer be we also assume a specific set of parameters that identify the "body" that this literature composes and the change in the nature of this body, even its ceasing, annihilation, mutation beyond recognition, etc. In other words, it assumes the validity of the concepts and categories that are used to define its nature. However, if we realize that the categories due to their own organizational nature are based on exclusions or eliminations (of difference), they cannot be taken at face value, because exclusions are based on logic and logic is always culturally (i.e. politically)

motivated. Organization, whether scientific or not, is therefore wrought with danger.

This is the same problem with the term 'postmodern'. "Postmodernism" is a category that implies a body of culture or knowledge (arts, science, academia, et al). Furthermore, the term and the body are not entities in themselves, they have been established and are used by a specific group of people and do not constitute a universal reality. The etymology of the word itself contains the "evolutionist" idea present in the question on what has become of modernism today (or in the context of the seminar it was: what remains of literature today); i.e. there used to be a "modern" and now there is the after that or the "postmodern" (or there used to be one form of literature and now there is a different, another). "It" (the concept or its users?) takes for granted the same concepts "it" purports to "deconstruct".

My real question in *Red Delicious* is whether our concepts and we have really been "evolving" or "changing" or whether it is but a convenient illusion to veil with the truth of our "isms". The sinister truth is that it is all a mirage that we have invented for ourselves, a lie and that we have done everything in our power to submit to it. The "isms" are part of the play, the script. In fact, this is what God warns Her and Him in the first act: you'll invent a lot of things and you'll do it so as to forget, so as to remember that you need to forget and so you'll keep reinventing it until...

In the second act, scene 1, Professor Tin Shnitt in his first speech on the podium also mentions the "isms" in the context of the problems of "ultramodernism" and the "postmodern culture", and it comes through his "unconscious" that the "elaborate study of intricate detail" is but a lie.

In other words, the question is: apart from the superficial details, is our inherent nature and experience any different at any point in history? Moreover, if these historical categories purport to join the definitions of concerns and questions under the various labels (enlightenment, romanticism, structuralism, poststructuralism, feminism, modernism, postmodernism, etc.), do they successfully sum up the intellectual experiences of the epoch and do they really capture any significant historical change? Doesn't enlightenment in itself contain juxtaposition to its predecessor who by implication is unenlightened? The modern implies the unmodern? The postmodern implies that the modern is less true, less accurate, less knowledgeable than itself? And so forth. That is, the implication is always a temporal movement towards a better state/stage.

The term postmodernism also contains in it a claim to having surpassed the circumscribed space of modernism and all those other "pre"s. The scholars who embrace this term conveniently tame all those potentially dangerous thinkers, such as Whittgenstein, Foucault, Bakunin, etc. They achieve this by the method described above, i.e. by categorizing, eliminating the difference, finding similarities, then grouping and curtailing. After that, the postmodernist student or academic draws the conclusions. It is these conclusions that finally achieve the

real disarmament while keeping the script of life and death, the inevitability of death, the inevitability of oblivion in check to be reworked and reiterated.

Now to venture beyond my criticism of *postmodernism*; I do not mean in my objection to the *script* and my omission of the term 'postmodern' from my theoretical piece to deny the effect of the context and of the thousands of years of human experience on my own reasoning and work. Also, this is not the only possible effect on my point of view: there is my own reality, with my physicality, spirituality, emotionality, and all else that merges with and converges from the *collective consciousness*.

I therefore do not deny the possible effect of the various thinkers who may be categorized as postmodern on my work or on many aspects of my awareness: Michel Foucault, Virginia Woolf, Edward Said, Emily Martin, Mikhail Bakunin, or Frederic Jameson, the list goes on. However, if I accept to talk about the effect of postmodernism on my conscious or unconscious, it would, once again, give preference and legitimacy to those thinkers that have been "accepted", "digested" by academia. Such reconfirmation necessarily excludes all the other possible influences of people who have not been reclaimed by the "authority", such as the unauthorized¹, the homeless, the toothless, the illiterate, and what not, whether they run on two, three, four, or none at all. This equally would make invisible an influence of pre-postmodernisms, my personal experiences, or the influences that any interaction on any level of the mundane that has ever taken place in my life and that has affected this work and my perception of it - all these influences would ultimately be eliminated by the mere nature of categorization itself. For, categorization renders the "other" invisible by selecting the similar, the familiar, the knowable thus contradicting the postmodernist premise itself.

Of course one of the arguments with which postmodernophiles comfort themselves is that postmodernism already includes all these views (and implies that you need look no further): the shattering, the fragmentation, the multitude of voices, opinions, views, experiences, the illustration of the unreliability of science which is based on personal experience and language, the treacherous nature of language, and so forth, and therefore have it all covered, labeled, categorized and under control. So, we can go on living as we did before under modernism and pre-modernism and all. It is precisely this: "we'll go on living as we have before" that makes all these "isms" obsolete to my quest.

Here's a mundane illustration of what I mean when I implicitly accuse the postmodern of hypocrisy.

At a playground, a 7-year old boy was telling me how disgusting those Africans were. "Imagine, they get these cockroaches and worms and eat them!"

¹ For example, the current definition of a writer given by the various "writers' manuals" is someone who got published. It is not someone who writes, it is someone who has been "authorized" to write by the editors and publishers. A writer who never published is not a profession, thus. The same goes for thinkers. A thinker is not someone who thinks, it is someone who has been published, studied, reclaimed.

Raw! Gross! This one guy on TV, he swallowed this worm and then it came crawling out of his nose. That's what they do in Africa".

I: "Is that all they do in Africa?"

Boy: "Of course. They don't have anything to eat, so that's all they do. How gross!"

Unfortunately, we didn't have the chance to delve into the economic, anthropological (cultural or social), and political issues with the boy. However, what strikes me in what this boy has learnt in his supposedly "postmodern" educational "reality" is not different from what boys and men, girls and women of previous pre-postmodern epochs have thought of the "world" of the "other" and by implication of the "self": the African is poor, poverty is bad and is linked to primitivity, the African is primitive, the African is gross. The African is different from "us", we know that, we see that in National Geographic, which is not primitive - *bien au contraire* - we know that from the various anthropologists, geographers, writers, etc. who sometimes even let the African speak to us first, only so that "we" can then comment on the speech, domesticate it and render it harmless.

Needless to say that the "us" juxtaposed to the "African" above is the "occidental" (even though sometimes colourful, still ideologically occidental) and the "other" in this case as in most other cases is of course the African, the Oriental.

It would help to keep in mind that this was a Canadian boy. Canadian multicultural programmes and policies make a big effort to bring diversity and multiculturalism to the social spectrum. This Canadian boy impressed me by his mere knowledge of that "they eat cockroaches in Africa" by contrast to a group of five male US university graduates who in 1990 tried to persuade me that they knew perfectly well where Sudan was, and only couldn't make up their minds as to whether it was the new state that had joined the USA and which they had crossed on their way from upstate New York to Alabama or whether it was a mountain in Mexico.

The problem here is that despite the awareness of many intellectuals and artists of the need, perhaps the necessity, to hear the other, the constant struggle for power uses knowledge as one of its tools and ultimately denies the "knowable" an equal right to exist as a separate, untamed, uncurbed force. Thus, instead of really lending an ear to the different experience or point of view we continue to be immersed in the essentialist and "orientalist" images of the other. Once again, refer to the uses and applications of ethnography, anthropology, the National Geographic and the various "educational" programmes and documentaries.

The postmodern has failed to include the "other" in its method and therefore, despite its claim to have accepted the "women", the "gays", and the "coloroids", it lacks any real difference in political or economic opinion. The belief in science and in progress is as strong today under the aegis of postmodernism as it had been before it. The "women", the "gays" and the "coloroids" that have

been supposedly accepted play a double role here: 1. what Noam Chomsky would call a trick to make multiculturalism and democracy seem real: "look, we accept freaks too, and we even let them speak, so we're alright. Trust us and work for us, then". 2. "work for us, then". What really happens, is that those "freaks" who are supposedly accepted into the system really reconfirm the system with its economic and political status quo of the distribution of power and wealth. In addition, these tamed "others" themselves learn quickly how to depend on the system and to "read" right and judge correctly what is sensible and "good" and what is in turn different, freakish, bizarre, and outright dangerous. They participate in providing the necessary conclusions that would render the bizarre and the dangerous harmless and thus collaborate in reconfirming the status of science and the notion of progress in this illusory yet painful script. Needless to say, the real different "freaks" remain unheard and unseen.

Since literature, art, or philosophical inquiry (as well as academic or scientific research) ultimately derive their meaning from the "method" and from the method of life, i.e. the political/economic/cultural organization and sense, then the "women", the "gays" and the "others" who have been accepted are those who can benefit the "us" - all else still remains "gross", "freakish", "bizarre" often "dangerous" and "terroristic". These "freaks" constantly face the threat of elimination through bombs, starvation, stiflement...

The most potentially and radically different social or cultural critic from the "other" - the non-occidental - world is perhaps Edward Said who somehow escaped the conclusive stamp. If we look at the whole spectrum of the names that include non-occidental sounds, we find that in the final score they all serve the present imperialist forces in one way or another. As an example we can take the illustrious name of Salman Rushdie and his 'postmodernising' of Islamic culture (i.e. criticising it). Probably Rushdie's own intentions go beyond this simplicity. However, the fact that it is as such that he has been incorporated into the elitist band of the postmodern monopolies, speaks of the disarmament and the domestication of the real anarchist that is at the basis of the method. In the final score, it is murder.

Hence, to conclude my response, it is the conclusions that we draw and how these conclusions affect our lives and actions that determine our meaning. The reason why I do not wish to be identified with any category is because I believe that the only true freedom lies in being outside category, uncurbed, uncontrolled, unconditioned. Even if it risks peril and oblivion here on earth, in the scope of cosmic chaos it gets the light liberty of flight through the universal blackness. It heeds its own life. While boundaries impose mortality.

Hence, of course, while my attempt to venture beyond, though highly personal, is never strictly a solitary endeavour, and although I share this urge and this process with other comrades, be they around me or whether I meet them through books, I refuse to be squeezed into an artificial category, a label that would read my attempt as something subjugated and tamed. I recognize this urge - in itself - in many of the readings of thinkers deemed postmodern. Yet, my call is

to look honestly beyond the claustrophobic labels that rewrite one's method with its own method and that feed notions to terms that act like germs and formulate conclusions. Wittgenstein was there too.