



Max Headroom

THE POSTMODERN PREDICAMENT

by Todd Gitlin

Something must be at stake in the edgy debates circulating around and about something called postmodernism. What, then? Commentators pro, con, serious, fey, academic, and accessible seem to agree that something postmodern has happened, even if we are all—or virtually all—Mr. Jones who doesn't know what it is. (At times the critical world seems to divide between those who speak with assurance about what it is and those who are struggling to keep up.)

The volume and pitch of the commentary and controversy seem to imply that something about this postmodern something *matters*. In the pages of art journals, popular and obscure, abundant passion flows on about passionlessness. It would be cute but glib and shortsighted to dismiss the talk as so much time-serving or

space-filling. There is *anxiety* at work, and at play, here. I think it is reasonable, or at least interesting, to assume that the anxiety that surfaces in the course of the discussion—and I confess I share in it—is called for. A certain anxiety is entirely commensurate with what is at stake.

"Postmodernism" usually refers to a certain constellation of styles and tones in cultural works: pastiche; blankness; a sense of exhaustion; a mixture of levels, forms, styles; a relish for copies and repetition; a knowingness that dissolves commitment into irony; acute self-consciousness about the formal, constructed nature of the work; pleasure in the play of surfaces; a rejection of history. It is Michael Graves's Portland Building and Philip Johnson and John Burgee's AT&T, Rauschenberg's silkscreens and Warhol's

Brillo boxes; it is shopping malls, mirror glass façades, Robert Venturi, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, Monty Python, Don DeLillo, *Star Wars*, Spalding Gray, David Byrne, Twyla Tharp, the Flying Karamazov Brothers, George Coates, Frederick Barthelme, Laurie Anderson, the Hyatt Regency, the *Centre Pompidou*, *The White Hotel*, *Less Than Zero*, Foucault, and Derrida; it is bricolage fashion, and remote-control-equipped viewers "zapping" around the television dial.

To join the conversation I am also going to use the term to refer to art located somewhere in this constellation. But I am also going to argue that what is at stake in the debate—and thus the root of the general anxiety—goes beyond art: It extends to the question of what sort of disposition toward the contemporary world is going to prevail throughout Western culture. The entire elusive phenomenon which has been categorized as postmodernism is best understood not just as a style but as a general orientation, as what English critic Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling," as a way of apprehending and experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness, in it.

Not for the first time, debates over cultural politics intersect with larger intellectual and political currents, prefiguring or tracing conflicts that have emerged, or ought to emerge, in the sphere of politics strictly understood. When the *Partisan Review* embraced modernism in the 1930s, for example, they were taking a position on more than style: They were taking a position on reason, the State, the (ir)rationality of history; finally, they were driving a revisionary wedge into left-wing politics in the large. American versions of modernism that emerged after World War II, both as artistic practice and critical exegesis, can also be understood as a way to inhabit a drastically changed political realm.

I am going to take the position that the discussion of postmodernism is, among other things, a deflected and displaced dis-

cussion of the contours of political thought—in the largest sense—during the 1970s and 1980s. The aesthetics of postmodernism are situated, historical. The question is, what is postmodernism's relation to this historical moment, to its political possibilities and torments?

I want to broach some intersecting questions: What do we mean by postmodernism, both as a style and a "structure of feeling"? Why has it come to pass? What is so troubling about postmodernism? Finally, postmodern is pre-what? What is the relation between postmodern aesthetics and a possible politics?

What is postmodernism? A sortie at definition is necessary. Things must be made to look crystalline for a moment, before complications set in. Here, then, is one person's grid, hopelessly crude, in the manner of first approximations for distinguishing among premodernism (realism), modernism, and postmodernism. These are ideal types, mind you, not adequate descriptions. And they are not necessarily ideal types of the work "itself"; rather, of the work as it is understood and judged by some consensus (albeit shifting) of artists, critics, and audiences.

The premodernist work, whether a painting by Leonardo da Vinci or a novel by Balzac, aspires to a unity of vision. It cherishes continuity, speaking with a single narrative voice or addressing a single visual center. It honors sequence and causality in time or space. Through the consecutive, the linear, it claims to represent a reality which is something else, though to render it more acutely than happens in ordinary experience. It may contain a critique of the established order, in the name of the obstructed ambitions of individuals; or it may uphold individuals as the embodiments of society at its best. In either event, individuals matter. The work observes, highlights, renders judgments, and exudes passions in their names. Standing apart from reality, the premodernist work

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aspires to an order of beauty which, in a sense, judges reality; lyrical forms, heightened speech, rhythm and rhyme, Renaissance perspective and compositional "laws" are deployed in the interest of beauty. Finally, the work may borrow stories or tunes from popular materials, but it holds itself (and is held by its audience) above its origins; high culture holds the line against the popular.

The modernist work—T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Picasso's *Guernica* to take three examples—still aspires to unity, but this unity, if that is what it is, has been (is still being?) constructed, assembled from fragments, or shocks, or juxtapositions of difference. It shifts abruptly among a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, materials. Continuity is disrupted, and with enthusiasm: It is as if the work were punctuated with exclamation marks. The orders of conventional reality—inside versus outside, subject versus object, self versus other—are called into question. So are the hitherto self-enclosed orders of art: poetry versus prose, painting versus sculpture, representation versus reality. There is often a critique of the established order; the work is apocalyptic, fused with a longing for some long-gone organic whole sometimes identified with a fascist present or future. The subject is not so much wholeheartedly opposed as estranged. Instead of passion, or alongside it, there is ambivalence toward the prevailing authorities. The work composes beauty out of discord. Aiming to bring into sharp relief the line between art and life, modernism appropriates selected shards of popular culture, quotes from them.

In the postmodernist sensibility, the search for unity has apparently been abandoned altogether. Instead, we have textuality, a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces. The work calls attention to its arbitrariness, constructedness; it interrupts itself. Instead of a single center, there is pastiche, cultural



AT&T headquarters in New York City. Architects John Burgee and Philip Johnson abandoned "form-is-function" modernism for decorative postmodern flourishes.

recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else. Everything takes place in the present, "here," that is, nowhere in particular. Not only has the master voice dissolved, but any sense of loss is rendered deadpan. The work labors under no illusions: We are all deliberately playing, pretending here—get the point? There is a premium on copies; everything has been done. Shock, now routine, is greeted with the glazed stare of the total ironist. The implied subject is fragmented, unstable, even decomposed; it is finally nothing more than a crosshatch of discourses. Where there was passion, or ambivalence, there is now a collapse of feeling, a blankness. Beauty, deprived of its power of criticism in an age of packaging, has been reduced to the decoration of reality, and so is crossed off the postmodernist agenda. Genres are spliced; so are cultural gradations. Dance can be built on Beach Boys songs (Twyla Tharp, "Deuce Coup"); cir-

THE LESSONS OF LAS VEGAS

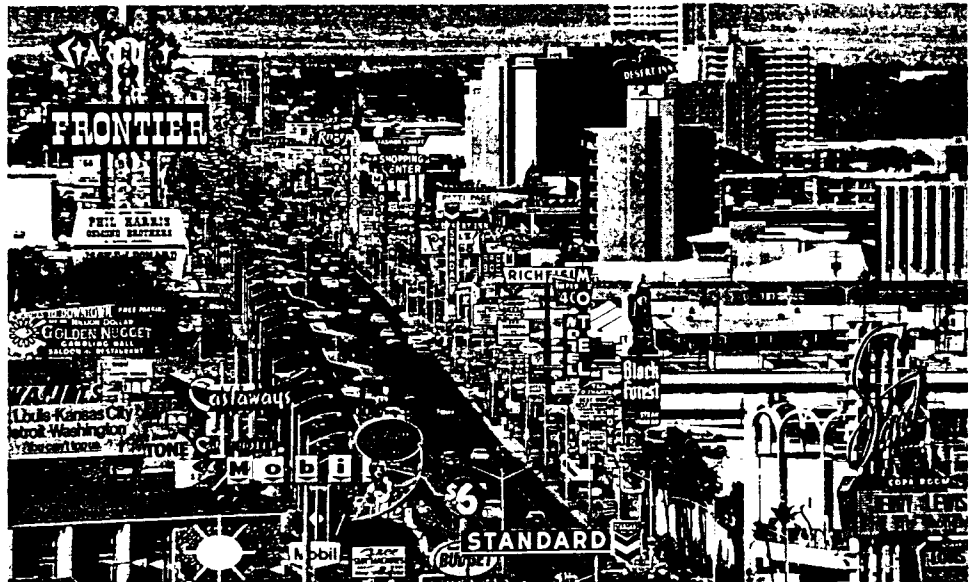
Almost two decades ago, Robert Venturi and some fellow architects decided to take a close look at the American commercial "strip." They liked what they saw. Their book, Learning from Las Vegas (1972), endures as a classic statement of the postmodern aesthetic:

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with *existing* conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: Architects have preferred to exchange the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

For the architect or the urban designer, comparison of Las Vegas with others of the world's "pleasure zones"—with Marienbad, the Alhambra, Xanadu, and Disneyland, for instance—suggest that essential to the imagery of pleasure-zone architecture are lightness, the quality of being an oasis in perhaps a hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role—for three days he may imagine himself a centurion at Caesar's Palace, a ranger at the Frontier, or a jet-set playboy at the Riviera rather than a salesman from Des Moines, Iowa, or an architect from Haddonfield, New Jersey.

However, there are didactic images more important than the images of recreation for us to take home to New Jersey and Iowa: one is the Avis with the Venus; another, Jack Benny under a classical pediment with Shell Oil beside him, or the gasoline station beside the multimillion-dollar casino. These show the vitality that may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion or, by contrast, the deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design. The Strip shows the value of symbolism and allusion in an architecture of vast space and speed and proves that people, even architects, have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else, perhaps the harems or the Wild West in Las Vegas, perhaps of the nation's New England forbearers in New Jersey. Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the everyday in the environment, sacred and profane—these are what are lacking in present-day Modern architecture. We can learn about them from Las Vegas as have other artists from their own profane and stylistic sources.

From Learning from Las Vegas, by Robert Venturi et al. (MIT).



cus can include cabaret jokes (Circus Oz); avant-garde music can include radio gospel (David Byrne and Brian Eno, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*). "High culture" doesn't so much quote from popular culture as blur into it.

All master styles aim to remake the history that precedes them, just as T. S. Eliot said individual talents reorder tradition. In one sense, then, postmodernism remakes the relation between premodernism and modernism: In the light of postmodern disdain for representational conventions, the continuity between the preceding stages comes to seem more striking than the chasm dividing them. Yet it is worth noticing that "postmodernist"—in the spirit of its recombinant enterprise—is a compound term. It is as if the very term had trouble establishing the originality of the concept. If the phenomenon were more clearly demarcated from its predecessor, it might have been able to stand, semantically, on its own feet. Instead, *postmodernism* defines the present cultural moment as a sequel, as what it is not. Postmodernism is known by the company it succeeds. It differs from modernism by nothing more than a prefix. It shadows modernism.

So what's new? It has been argued, with considerable force, that the lineaments of postmodernism are already present in one or another version of modernism; that postmodernism is simply the current incarnation, or phase, in a still unfolding modernism. Literary historian Roger Shattuck, for example, has recently made the point that Cubism, Futurism, and artistic spiritualists like Kandinsky "shared one compositional principle: the juxtaposition of states of mind, of 'different times and places, of different points of view.'" Collage, montage, these are of the essence of modernism high and low. Then what is so special about (1) Philip Johnson and John Burgee's AT&T building, with its Chippendale pediment on high and quasi-classical columns below; (2) the Australian Circus Oz, which combines jugglers commenting on their juggling and cracking political jokes with (their list) "Aboriginal influences, vaudeville, Chinese acrobatics, Japanese martial arts, fireman's balances, In-

donesian instruments and rhythms, video, Middle Eastern tunes, B-grade detective movies, modern dance, Irish jigs, and the ubiquitous present of corporate marketing"; (3) the student who walks into my office dressed in green jersey, orange skirt, and black tights?

Put it this way: Modernism tore up unity and postmodernism has been enjoying the shreds. Surely nothing is without precedent; surely modernism had to set asunder what postmodernism is mixing in and about. Modernism's multiplication of perspectives led to postmodernism's utter dispersion of voices; modernist collage made possible postmodernist genre-splicing. The point is not only juxtaposition but



Postmodern food in a postmodern setting: At New York's retro-chic Empire Diner, one reviewer notes, patrons "ooh and aah over piggy platters laden with turkey croquettes and pigs-in-blankets and the brownies."

its attitude. Postmodern juxtaposition is distinct: There is a deliberate self-consciousness, a skating on the edge dividing irony from dismay or endorsement, which make up a distinct cultural mood. Picasso, Boccioni, Tatlin, Pound, Joyce, Woolf in their various ways thundered and hungered. Their work was radiant with passion for a new world/work. Today's postmodernists are blasé; they've seen it all. They are bemused (though not necessarily by bemusement). The quality of deliberateness and the sense of exhaustion in the postmodern are what set it apart.

It might be objected that we are talking about nothing more than a fad. We read in a "Design Notebook" column in *The New*

York Times of March 12, 1987, that "Post-Modernism Appears to Retreat." Apparently *Progressive Architecture* is no longer giving its awards to pastiches of columns, capitals, and cornices; the writer suggests that the popularization of the premium architectural style of the last ten years signals its uniformity, mediocrity, and impending end. Actually, postmodernism, as a stylistic avant-garde movement in architecture had probably already reached a plateau (but does this mean it ended?) at the moment when photographs of Michael Graves's buildings were featured in *The New York Times Magazine* (1982). But what is interesting about postmodernism goes beyond the fashion in architecture—for the recombinatory thrust, the blankness, the self-regarding irony, the play of surfaces, the self-referentiality and self-bemusement which characterize postmodernism are still very much with us. What is interesting is not a single set of architectural tropes but postmodern as what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling"—an interlocking cultural complex, or what he calls "a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones"—that forecasts the common future as it colors the common experience of a society just at or beneath the threshold of awareness. In this flickering half-light, postmodernism is significant because its amalgam of spirits has penetrated architecture, fiction, painting, poetry, urban planning, performance, music, television, and many other domains. It is one wing, at least, of the *Zeitgeist*.

Why has postmodernism happened, why here, and why now? We can distinguish more or less four approaches to an answer. These are not at all necessarily incompatible. To the contrary: Several forces are converging to produce the postmodernist moment.

The first is the bleak Marxist account sketched with flair in a series of essays by Fredric Jameson. The postmodernist spirit, with its superseding of the problem of authenticity, belongs to, is coupled to, corresponds to, expresses—the relation is not altogether clear—the culture of multinational capitalism, in which capital, that infinitely transferable abstraction, has abolished particularity as such along with

UTOPIA ACHIEVED—OR, IS AMERICA WHAT "PoMo" IS ALL ABOUT?

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, in his brilliant, quirky book, America (1988), suggests why the United States may be not only the locus but the meaning of postmodernism:

America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. . . . But this is of no importance—America has no identity problem. In the future, power will belong to those peoples with no origins and no authenticity who know how to exploit that situation to the full.

The U.S. is utopia achieved.

We should not judge their crisis as we would judge our own, the crisis of the old European countries. Ours is a crisis of historical ideals facing up to the impossibility of their realization. Theirs is the crisis of achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence. The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the center of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. And this conviction is not so much founded on natural resources,

the coherent self in whom history, depth, and subjectivity unite. Authentic use value has been overcome by the universality of exchange value. The characteristic machine of this period is the computer, which enthrones (or fetishizes) the fragment, the "bit," and in the process places a premium on process and reproduction which is aped in postmodernist art. Surfaces meet surfaces in these postmodern forms because a new human nature—a human second nature—has formed to feel at home in a homeless world political economy. Postmodernists ransack history for shards because there is no "here" here; because historical continuity is shattered by the permanent revolution that is capitalism. Uprooted juxtaposition is how people live: not only displaced peasants cast into the megalopolis, where decontextualized images proliferate, but also TV viewers confronted with the *interruptus* of American television as well as financial honchos shifting bits of information and blips of capital around the world at will and high

technologies, and arms, as on the miraculous premise of a utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of—justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe it too.

In the present crisis of values, everyone ends up turning towards the culture which dared to forge right ahead and, by a theatrical masterstroke, turn those values into reality, towards that society which, thanks to the geographical and mental break effected by emigration, allowed itself to imagine it could create an ideal world from nothing. We should also not forget the fantasy consecration of this process in the cinema. Whatever happens, and whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffers most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true.

in *America*, by Jean Baudrillard (Verso/Routledge, Chapman & Hall).

speed. Art expresses this abstract unity and vast, weightless indifference through its blank repetitions (think of Warhol or Philip Glass), its exhausted anti-romance, its I've-seen-it-all, striving at best for a kind of all-embracing surface which radiates from the world temple of the postmodern, the glorious *Centre Pompidou* in Paris.

A second stab at explanation calls attention to our political rather than our strictly economic moment. In this light, the crucial location of the postmodern is *after the '60s*. The postmodern is an aftermath, or a waiting game, because that is what we are living in: a prolonged cultural moment that is oddly weightless, shadowed by incomplete revolts, haunted by absences—a Counterreformation beating against an unfinished, indeed barely begun, Reformation. From this point of view, postmodernism rejects historical continuity and takes up residence somewhere beyond it because history *was* ruptured: by the Bomb-fueled vision of a possible material end of history, by Vietnam, by drugs,

by youth revolts, by women's and gay rights movements—in general, by the erosion of that false and devastating universality embodied in the rule of the pyramidal trinity of Father, Science, and State. It was faith in a rule of progress under the sway of that trinity that had underlain our assumptions that the world displays linear order, historical sequence, and moral clarities. But cultural contradiction burst open the premises of the old cultural complex. The cultural upwellings and wildness of the '60s kicked out the props of a teetering moral structure, but the new house has not yet been built. The culture has not yet found a language for articulating the new understandings we are trying, haltingly, to live with.

Postmodernism dispenses with moorings, then, because old certitudes have actually crumbled. It is straining to make the most of seriality, endless recirculation and repetition in the collective image warehouse, because so much of reality *is* serial. As Donald Barthelme's fiction knows, we live in a forest of images mass-produced and endlessly, alluringly empty. Individuality has become a parody of itself: another world for a fashion choice, a lifestyle compound, a talk-show self-advertisement logo. It might even be argued that postmodernism plays in and with surfaces because that is what it must do to carry on with its evasions: because there are large cultural terrors that broke into common consciousness during the 1960s and there is no clear way to live out their implications in a conservative, contracting period.

From this point of view, postmodern-



ism is blank because it wants to have its commodification and eat it, too. That is, it knows that the culture industry will tailor virtually any cultural goods for the sake of sales; it also wants to display its knowingness, thereby demonstrating how superior it is to the trash market. Choose one: The resulting ironic spiral either mocks the game by playing it or plays it by mocking it. A knowing blankness results; how to decode it is a difficult matter. Take, for instance, the "Joe Isuzu" commercials of 1987, in which the spokesman, a transparently slick version of the archetypal TV huckster, grossly lies about what the car will do, how much it costs, and so on, while the subtitles tell us he's lying, and by how much. The company takes for granted a culture of lies, then aims to ingratiate itself by mocking the conventions of the hard sell.

Consider the early episodes of *Max Headroom* during the spring of 1987, which in nine weeks sped from a blunt critique of television itself to a mishmash of adorability. "20 Minutes into the Future"—so the pilot film shows us—the computer-generated Max fights the tyranny of the ratings-crazed Network 23, whose decidedly sinister (shot from below with wide-angle lens) boardroom tycoons will stop at no crime in their pursuit of profits. (*Cherchez la japonaise*: The venal Zik-Zak corporation which brings on the ratings panic is conveniently Japanese.) Is Max a revolutionary guerrilla or a sales gimmick? In the British prototype, he throws in with a revolution against Network 23; in the American version, the self-proclaimed revolutionaries are thuggish terrorists, as

despicable as the Network bosses. In any event, Max in his early American weeks reaches out of the fictional frame to yawn in the face of ABC's impending commercials. As the weeks pass, however, Max loses his computerized bite and becomes regressively cuter. The same Max is deployed to promote Coca-Cola over Pepsi, as if Coke were both subversive and mandatory (the "wave" to be "caught")—to an audience encouraged to laugh at the distinction and still, as consumers, act on it. Commerce incorporates popular cynicism

and political unease while flattering the audience that it has now, at least, seen through all the sham: Cynicism, Inc. Andy Warhol would have grasped the point in a second, or fifteen.

A third approach to explaining post-modernism is a refinement of the second: an argument not about history in general but about a specific generation and class. Postmodernism appears as an outlook for (though not necessarily by) Yuppies—urban, professional products of the late baby boom, born during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Theirs is an

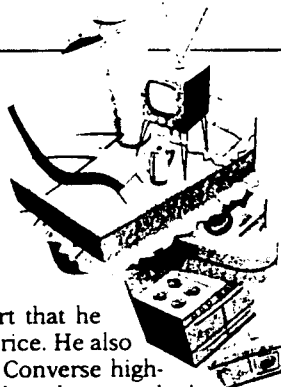
experience of aftermath, privatization, weightlessness: They can remember political commitment but were not animated by it—more, they suspect it; it leads to trouble. They cannot remember a time before television, suburbs, shopping malls. They are accustomed, therefore, to rapid cuts, discontinuities, breaches of attention, culture to be indulged and disdained at the same time. They grew up taking drugs, taking them for granted, but do not associate them with spirituality or the hunger for transcendence. Knowing indifference is



Man-Child in Toyland. TV's Pee-wee Herman, with friend Globey, epitomizes "PoMo" camp.

THE POSTMODERN COUPLE

A slick, gossipy chronicle of New York City trends and personalities (and itself something of a postmodern artifact), *Spy* magazine recently featured an article by Paul Rudnick and Kurt Andersen called "The Irony Epidemic." It included what may become the definitive portrait of the postmodern couple:



Meet Bob and Betty. Bob is wearing a hibiscus Hawaiian shirt that he purchased for approximately six times the garment's original 1952 price. He also carries his lunch in a tackle box and wears a Gumby wristwatch, Converse high-tops and baggy khakis from Banana Republic; at the store, the pants have been stacked in an artfully ruined Indiana Jones-style jeep. Bob describes his looks as "Harry Truman mixed with early Jerry Mathers." Bob assumes that you know that Mathers played the title role on *Leave it to Beaver*.

Betty wears Capri pants, ballet flats and a man's oversized white shirt, along with a multizippered black-leather motorcycle jacket imprinted with Cyrillic letters. She's "Audrey Hepburn by way of Patty Duke as James Dean's girlfriend waiting on the drag strip." Betty refers to herself as Bob's "old lady." Bob calls himself "Dad." When Bob and Betty describe themselves in these ways, they raise the middle and forefingers of both hands, momentarily forming twitching bunny ears—*air quotes*, the quintessential contemporary gesture that says, *We're not serious*.

Betty and Bob have a child, a two-year-old whom they call "Kitten." This child is probably too young to catch the reference to *Father Knows Best*, even though she sits with her parents when they watch *Nick at Nite*, the cable TV service devoted almost entirely to the quasi-ironic recapitulation of shows from the early 1960s. The invitation to Betty and Bob's wedding were printed with sketches of jitterbugging couples; for their honeymoon, they rented a station wagon and drove south, visiting Graceland, Cypress Gardens and the Texas School Book Depository. Betty and Bob buy Fiestaware and Bakelite jewelry and beaded "Injun" belts, as well as souvenirs from the 1964 World's Fair and "atomic" furniture from the fifties—"real Jetsons stuff." Bob has taught the family mutt, Spot, to do the twist. Bob dreams that his animal will one day appear on the "Stupid Pet Tricks" segment of *Late Night with David Letterman*. Bob works in advertising, "like Darrin on *Bewitched*." Betty is a corporate attorney—"a lawyer from hell," she says. Bob and Betty are fictional, but Bob and Betty are everywhere.

From *Spy* (March 1989). Copyright © 1989 *Spy* Publishing Partners, L.P. Distributed by UFS, Inc.

their "structure of feeling"—thus a taste for cultural bricolage. They are, though, disabused of authority. The association of passion and politics rubs them the wrong way. Their idea of government is shadowed by Vietnam and Watergate. Their television runs through *Saturday Night Live* and *MTV*. Their mores lean toward the libertarian and, at least until the AIDS terror, the libertine. They like the idea of the free market as long as it promises them an endless accumulation of crafted goods, as suggested by the (half-joking?) bumper sticker. "THE ONE WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS."

The idea of public life—whether party participation or military intervention—fills them with weariness; the adventures

that matter to them are the adventures of private life. The characters of *The Big Chill* spoke to them: The "Sixties" stand for a cornucopia of sex and drugs; they can easily gather for a weekend in The "Eighties" without bringing up the subject of Ronald Reagan and Reaganism. But they are not in any conventional sense "right-wing": They float beyond belief. The important thing is that their assemblage of "values" corresponds to their class biographies.

A fourth approach starts from the fact that postmodernism is specifically, though not exclusively, *American*. Literary critic Andreas Huyssen makes an interesting argument which carries us part way but needs to be extended. Postmodernism couldn't have developed in Germany, be-

cause postwar Germans were too busy trying to reappropriate a suppressed modernism. Where it developed in France at all, it did so without antagonism to or rupture from modernism. But in America, the artistic avant-garde, in order to break from Cold War orthodoxy and corporate-sponsored smugness, had to revolt against the officially enshrined modernism of the postwar period; had to smash the Modern Art idol.

I would add the obvious: that postmodernism is born in the U.S.A. because juxtaposition is one of the things we do best. It is one of the defining currents of American culture, especially with Emancipation and the rise of immigration in the latter part of the 19th century. (The other principal current is the opposite: assimilation into standard American styles and myths.) Juxtaposition is the Strip, the shopping mall, the Galleria, Las Vegas; it is the marketplace jamboree, the divinely grotesque disorder, amazing diversity striving for reconciliation, the ethereal and ungrounded radiance of signs, the shimmer of the evanescent, the good times beat of the tall tale meant to be simultaneously disbelieved and appreciated; it is vulgarized pluralism; it is the cultural logic of laissez-faire but perhaps, the suspicion arises, even more—of an elbows-out, noisy, jostling, bottom-up version of something that can pass as democracy. We are, central myths and homogenizations and oligopolies notwithstanding, an immigrant culture, less melting pot than grab bag, perennially replenished by aliens and their singular points of view.

As long ago as 1916, Randolph Bourne wrote that "there is no distinctively American culture. It is apparently our lot rather to be a federation of cultures." Hollywood and the radio and TV networks flattened the culture, but there is still life in Bourne's vision. The postmodernist, from this point of view, is hitching high art to the raucous, disrespectful quality that ac-

companies American popular culture from its beginnings. And indeed, the essential contribution of postmodernist art is that it obliterates the line—or the brow—separating the high from the low.

The postmodernist arts, then, express a spirit that comports well with American culture in the 1980s—and with American politics. The standard ideological configurations of "liberal" and "conservative" belief are decomposing, although the decomposition is masked by the fact that the old political language is still in force. The patriotic words are mouthed while the performers signal, in the manner of *Moonlighting* (and Reagan at his self-deprecating best), that they don't really mean them (quite). There is laissez-faire in economics, as long as you can find an apartment you can afford and as long as you have not thought too long about near-collisions between passenger planes. In the film *Stranger Than Paradise* and David Letterman as well as in the Republican Party, there is a love for the common people and their kitsch tastes that is indistinguishable from contempt. In politics as in the arts, distrust runs rampant while beneath the surface, as David Byrne and Brian Eno have put it, "America is waiting for a message of some sort or another."

Postmodernism is an art of erosion. Make the most of stagnation, it says, and give up gracefully. That is perhaps its defining break from modernism, which was, whatever its subversive practices, a series of declarations of faith—Suprematism's future, Joyce's present, Eliot's unsurpassable past. What is not clear is whether postmodernism, living off borrowed materials, has the resources for continuing self-renewal. A car without a generator can run off its battery only so long. Postmodernism seems doomed to be an intermission. But historical time is treacherous to assess. Intermissions can last a very long time, and who is counting?