

Detotalising or meaninglessness: on the continued relevance of poststructuralism for postmodern art and culture

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This article analyses how the poststructuralist deconstruction of fixed knowledge and universal experiences, presents itself in two opposing ethical positions in postmodernist art and culture. On the one hand the deconstruction of “absolute” knowledge and a universal, timeless aesthetic regulation can lead to liberation, but on the other, the deconstruction of such secure principles could lead to meaninglessness.

Key words: Poststructuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, detotalising, meaninglessness

Detotalisasie of betekenisloosheid: oor die voortdurende relevansie van die poststrukuralisme vir postmoderne kuns en kultuur

Hierdie artikel analiseer hoe die poststrukuralistiese dekonstruksie van standvastige kennis en universele ervarings, sigself in twee opponerende etiese posisies in postmoderne kuns en kultuur manifesteer. Aan die een kant kan die dekonstruksie van “absolute” kennis en ‘n universele, tydlose estetiese regulering tot bevryding aanleiding gee, maar aan die ander kant kan die dekonstruksie van sulke standvastige prinsipie tot betekenisloosheid lei.

Sleutel terme: Poststrukuralisme, dekonstruksie, postmodernisme, detotalisasie, betekenisloosheid

It is well known that the broad structuralist and poststructuralist movements give primacy to language in the human psyche. However, as poststructuralists in particular argue, language is radically arbitrary, labile and endlessly complex. In this complexity signifiers do not refer to things outside of language in a one to one correspondence, but meaning is rather generated by a network-like play of differences between signifiers within the system. This means that the only meaning we have is generated in a mediated, intertextual, decentred game in which we cannot trace any final causes or consequences.¹

If knowledge and experiences are language-bound, and language itself is an unreliable creation, does this mean meaninglessness? Are we entering a world in which all hierarchical distinctions are literally exhausted and lacking in authority, and in which no form of experience can be regarded as less, or more, valuable than another? A world in which we can identify no qualitative distinction between rap and Beethoven, Tretchikoff and Manet, Wilbur Smith and James Joyce? If there are no external points, no positive terms, to serve as final authorities in the hierarchical evaluation of knowledge, experiences and values, does this mean that all things are equal and that nothing then has particular value?

Whereas modernity identified the beauty of art as a universal, regulating principle, as a universal language, postmodernism denies this universal aesthetic regulation.² In all spheres we therefore need to acquaint ourselves of contingent relations and, as Foucault says: (quoted by Degenaar, 1986: 45) “We must conceive of power without the king”. We must, that is, try to develop a concept of power in which there is no longer any question of a sovereign in whom all power resides. And because one of the modern kings, universal beauty, has abdicated, Conner (1992: 291) draws this comparison between modernism and postmodernism:

Where modernist aesthetics stresses that the work of art provides what T. S. Eliot ... called “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” postmodernist aesthetics tends to accept and even to embrace the disorderliness and complexity of the world.

Whereas modern artistic endeavours tried to create order, harmony and a universal sense of coherence from the chaos of life, postmodernism is more inclined to confront this chaos as an irrefutable fact.

This article shows that post-structuralism despite its deconstructive tendencies, is in many ways, ironically, the underpinning for more general post-modern artistic and cultural practices. It particularly analyses how the poststructuralist deconstruction of fixed knowledge and universal experiences present itself in postmodernist art and culture. On the one hand, many people experience the poststructuralist abdication of the king as liberation and emancipation. On the other, the king's abdication makes many people panicky as they fear that it could lead to meaninglessness. In short, postmodern detotalising and meaninglessness are played off against one another.³

The final section on postmodern panic and meaninglessness mainly deals with aspects that concern the human body, aspects such as the sublimation of the weather, the abject, food, clothes, cloning, disembodiment, virtual reality, and so on. This is done as a counterpoint to the poststructuralist emphasis on language and parallel developments in reproductive technologies (especially digital), which both undermine the notion of origins and can be seen as conspiring to undermine human embodiment. The focus is thus on the panic that is caused by the disembodiment that is associated with the poststructuralist emphasis on language as well as the perception of digital disembodiment.

Postmodern detotalising

What some people experience negatively as an absence of foundations, relativism and contingency can be liberating and emancipating to others. The latter possibility – the democratising and the detotalising of intellectual culture, the raising of silenced voices – is the focus of this section. It is a focus constructed around the expectation that, in Sim's (1992: 403) words, the postmodern "distrust of totalizing theory and of notions of unity" and the postmodern "commitment to contingency and discontinuity" have the potential to develop into the democratising and detotalising of culture.

As far as detotalising is concerned, one can begin with Derrida and binary oppositions. Derrida excels in unmasking traditional metaphysics by showing how it consistently elevates one of such terms to a superior position. As he writes (Derrida 1982: 41):

In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis (facing terms), but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment.

What deconstruction often does with regard to detotalising social emancipation is to show how Western philosophy has for no reason that transcends human relations of power, elevated one term of a binary pair to an honorific.

Degenaar (1987: 7) considers the following dualistic pairs, of which the first has been traditionally favoured: speech/writing, truth/fiction, male/female, conscious/subconscious, literal/metaphorical, sign/signifier, present/absent and reality/appearance. With special reference to art, we can look at binary pairs like fine arts/applied arts, fine art/handcraft, art museum/cultural history museum, Euro-American/"others", genius/Sunday painter, genius/dilettante, talent/plodder, theatre/television and so on. In order to further social and artistic detotalising, deconstruction brings about a destabilisation and a strategic reversal of such hierarchies.⁴

Just as Derrida rewrites binary oppositions to achieve democratisation, so Lyotard wants to achieve democratisation by emphasising what he sees as the incommensurability of different language games. In *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (1984: 66) Lyotard refers to "the heteromorphous nature of language" and says that while modernity created "grand",

all-inclusive discourses, metanarratives or master narratives, the most important feature of postmodernism is an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984: xxiv). Lyotard believes that the master narratives of modernity have no intrinsic value, but are simply undesirable, totalising, legitimising discourses, and points out (1984: 60) that our postmodern condition is usually such that “we no longer have recourse to the grand narrative – we can resort neither to the dialectic of the Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse”.

Because Lyotard endorses poststructuralism, he believes that we have absolutely no access to some or other outside point, telos or Archimedes point which can serve as the final authority in cultural matters. All that we have is the endless play of differences, and Lyotard accordingly sees the world, as Sim (1992: 402) puts it, as a

multiplicity of little narratives, all of which have their own particular integrity and sense of importance, but none of which can be considered to take precedence over any of the others. Grand narrative is held to dominate and suppress little narratives, and is therefore to be resisted.

Lyotard (1984: xxv) is even opposed to classical consensus politics, because as he sees it, a consensus arrived at through debate in fact violates the heterogeneity of language games. For that reason, he says that we are tasked to develop an idea and a practice of justice which is not based upon consensus. As he puts it: “A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language is a first step in that direction [a just ethics]. This obviously implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that they [languages] are isomorphic and tries to make them so (1984: 66)”.

As far as art is concerned, Lyotard’s analysis amounts in Sim’s (1992: 402) opinion to a rejection of grammatical theories of art such as those of modernity. Here I will distinguish between two modern “art programmes” which have attracted criticism. The first of these is the idea of an ontological art, an art in other words which claims that the artistic genius, privileged by nature to be born with a special talent, produces products that correspond to a given, universal, timeless aesthetic. On this topic, Conner (1992: 289) says that:

Postmodernist aesthetics proposes to go beyond what it perceives as the fictive and restrictive claims for unity, identity, and purity of the aesthetic object, and embraces the opposite principles of heterogeneity, hybridity and impurity. Fredric Jameson has suggested correspondingly that the passage from modernist to postmodernist aesthetics can be seen as the movement away from a “deep” aesthetic of unique personal style to a “flat” aesthetic of pastiche and the multiplication of styles.

According to this, the modern programme in which the artistic genius is tasked to discover a reputedly “deep”, timeless artistic centre has lost validity and is replaced by a “flat” multiplication of styles, a network of little narratives, all having some validity. I call this *The postmodern reaction to the idea of an ontological art*.

The second modern programme which postmodernism rejects is the idea that there is a teleological principle which regulates the development of art. Vattimo (1988: 105) says in this regard:

... we are struck by the dissolution of the value of the new. This is the meaning of the post-modern ... From architecture to the novel to poetry to the figurative arts, the post-modern displays, as its most common and most imposing trait, an effort to free itself from the logic of overcoming, development, and innovation.

Vattimo is of course referring here to the modern dynamics of progress and, with reference to the arts, to the avant-garde notion of inevitable artistic progress. I call this section *The postmodern reaction to the idea of an artistic teleology*.

The postmodern reaction to the idea of an ontological art

The fundamental distinction drawn by modernity between fine art, which supposedly possesses ontological truth, and “applied” art forms which are either “simple” and conservative, aimed solely at satisfying a superficial consumer mentality, serve only as ornament, decoration and embellishment, or serve a purely practical purpose, has been under pressure for quite some time. One reason for this is the emphasis now placed on the process bound nature of all knowledge. In this context Degenaar (1986: 108) ascribes his personal appreciation of poststructuralist deconstruction to the insight that “... man (sic) is a meaning-giver who cannot disengage the meaning he creates from the process which brings it forth”. Whereas an ontology implies the existence of “positive” terms which might escape the network quality of language, poststructuralism emphasises that we are in fact dealing with nothing else than a game of endless differences.

In respect of the ontological distinction which modernity drew between “fine art” and other art forms, Bürger (1990: 48) refers to the dialectic of a border. By this he means that: “A border has disappeared that as late as Adorno had the unquestionable status of a metaphysical principle guaranteeing the possibility of art: the border between art and the culture industry, and, simultaneously, between art and non-art”. Vattimo (1988: 106) makes a similar point, that “... the post-modern experience of art appears as the way in which art occurs in the era of the end of metaphysics”.

Today the question posed by Bell (1913: 8) on the common, ontologically quality which artefacts must possess in order to be classified as “fine art”, would simply be regarded as a poor question. His answer, that “significant form” (Bell 1913: 8) is both common and particular to art, will furthermore be viewed as inadequate. Attempts like Bell’s to pin down, once and for all, the ontological quality of “real” art are rejected by postmodernists because, as Van den Berg (1989: 43) rightly points out, a work of art operates in various ways:

The very structural make-up of the art work, like that of any other entity, is one of functional diversity. Besides being a visual image, technical artefact and aesthetic object, the work can also function as game, symbol, expression, concept, clue, demonstration, puzzle, communication, commodity, display, protest, idol, fetish, relic, offering, testimony, celebration or credo.

According to this, a work of art is in fact different things to different people in different places and at different times. Postmodernists reject the existence of a “master” artistic ontology with absolute sovereignty – works of art possess nothing more than a peculiar, local authority and legitimacy. In this way, postmodernists eradicate the fundamental distinction modernists had made between the fine arts and other art forms.

Because there is no “master” artistic ontology, the philosopher Danto (1964: 571-84) laid the foundations, in an article called *The Artworld*, for a theory of art which Dickie (1974) and others later developed into the institutional theory of art. As Dickie explains: “The institutional theory of art concentrates attention on the ... characteristics that works of art have in virtue of being embedded in an institutional matrix which may be called the ‘artworld’ and argues that these characteristics are essential and defining”.

According to this, when we allocate meaning to works of art, we have no access to any higher authority than the institution of art itself. In fact, the international fashion of the moment provides the only guideline for the determination of artistic value.

In architecture, this de-ontologising often leads to a regional approach.⁵ Contemporary regionalism rejects the ontologically international style of architects such as Wright, Le Corbusier and Van der Rohe in favour of a renewed appreciation of contexts. This means that the value

of a building cannot be measured according to a context-free, ontological centre or even to the functionalists' "form follows function" theory, but that value should rather be allocated in terms of a building's relation to local history, local materials, its unique situation, other buildings, the environment and the people for whom it is intended. In a reference to "critical regionalism", Frampton (1983: 21) writes: "It would seem therefore that postmodernism is ridding itself of the cultural hegemony associated with the ontological primacy allocated to specific styles such as the international style".

In addition to this, postmodernism is also querying the idea of specific ontological distinctions between various artistic disciplines. We can refer to Greenberg (1961: 139) in this context, as he was of the opinion that "The arts are to achieve concreteness, 'purity' by acting in terms of their separate and irreducible selves". In what could almost be read as a direct parody of Greenberg, Krauss (1983: 36) describes the "decentered" American sculpture of the 1960s as "... what was on or in front of a building that was not a building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape ... [S]culpture itself had become a kind of ontological absence ...". From that viewpoint, neither the landscape nor the building itself has a centre, and so the building is that which stands behind the sculpture which stands in the landscape, etc, etc. That is, we are actually dealing with an inexhaustible, decentred network where there are no "positive" terms which can escape the net. In other words, there is quite simply no absolute, ontological means of classification for different artistic disciplines.

In fact, postmodernists have unmasked attempts to give certain artefacts the special status of authentic works of art to be an instrument of exclusion aimed at preserving the status quo. Thinkers like Lyotard and Derrida differ from modernists like Kant, Schiller, Bell and Greenberg, who believed that art might possess an ontological truth which everybody all over the world can experience; that art is a universal language, and that it could therefore have a reconciliatory, humanising social effect. Kant (1952: 75) said for instance that aesthetic judgement arises from "grounds deep-seated and shared alike by all men". Owens's response (1983: 58) is that "Not only does the postmodernist work claim no such authority, it also actively seeks to undermine all such claims; hence, its generally deconstructive thrust". Many postmodernists believe that one will only be able to take the "other" into account and develop a practice of fairness if one from the outset takes into account what Lyotard (1984: 66) calls the heteromorphous nature of language.

Although the idea that we are all basically the same deep down inside and that "universal" art helps to cement this common identity can be seen as a magnanimous one, there are good reasons for arguing that this is not necessarily the case. This is because this kind of humanism can be revealed to imply, hypocritically, that the "other" needs only the right kind of exposure to be able to embrace the moral high grounds of "my" tastes and values. West (1996: 211) sums it up succinctly by saying that humanism can be criticised as "a denial of the 'other' [and a] reduction of difference to a devalued otherness for the sake of the security of our own identity".

To summarise, it would appear that denial of an aesthetic ontology, of "positive" terms, can have a detotalising social effect; and that this might result in the democratisation and detotalising of intellectual culture and in the raising of silenced voices.

The postmodern reaction to the idea of an artistic teleology

Although the concept of teleology has been under pressure for some time, Iggers (1982: 63) states that Euro-American historiography only started rewriting the "old", modern, Eurocentric

concept of history as progress from the 1970s onwards. What Iggers (1982: 63) calls an “anthropo- and Eurocentric” concept of history has been replaced since the 1980s by a “Copernican view of history, for which rational man no longer occupies the centre of the stage and Europe appears as one among many cultures”.

With reference to the writing of art history, Belting (1987: ix) points out that the idea of a universal, united art history which in various ways has served both modern artists and art historians has been queried by postmodernists. Postmodern artists refuse, for instance, to be a part of what he calls “an ongoing history of art”. Belting (1987 :ix) says: “Both the artist and the art historian have lost faith in a rational, teleological process of artistic history, a process to be carried out by the one and described by the other”. The avant-garde kind of art history, where technical and artistic innovations follow each other in rapid succession, is according to Belting simply not being written any more.

One response to the fact that an avant-garde art history cannot be written any more is a new willingness on the part of postmodern artists to rework old styles and images. On the one hand we are dealing here with a revaluation and incorporation of traditional, pre-modern styles. We can also observe this in local architecture: what was referred to slightly a few years ago as pseudo-Cape Dutch kitsch has now become chic in the Boland.

On the other hand, Sim (1992: 403) points out rightly that postmodern artists do not necessarily respect old traditions in their historical reworkings; instead, they often parody them. He writes: “Irony and pastiche, it had frequently been pointed out, are the staples of the postmodernist repertoire” (Sim 1992: 403). The most “classic” example of this must be Duchamp’s *Mona Lisa* with a moustache, but the work of Sharp, Rivers, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Anderson and Ballagh also rate a mention. As far as the class struggle is concerned, *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall’s (2001) parody of *Gone With The Wind*, is a version of the classic story from the viewpoint of Scarlett O’Hara’s slaves, who are delighted to be rid of her.

Another response to the fact that the end of the avant-garde left a vacuum is the rise of what has been called a revisionist art history. This art history has as one of its objectives to correct the idea of one eminent development of style, for example in the rapid succession of style-isms of late modern abstraction. This often leads to a revaluation of art which were “silenced” during the modern period, such as embroidery and other applied art forms which, in spite of the dominance of the avant-garde, nevertheless continued confirming certain societal contexts. In South Africa this has manifested in exhibitions in national art museums: *The Neglected Tradition* (1988) and *Images of Wood* (1989). We can also think of Rickie Burnett’s *Tributaries* exhibition, and the 1995 Johannesburg Biennale, *Africus*, both of which exhibited hybrid works, somewhere between the high art of the traditional centre and marginalised applied art.

A popular artistic discipline which is increasingly being re-valued is cinema. It is almost incomprehensible from a contemporary perspective, that by the middle of the 20th century when films were enjoying great popularity and good ones like Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* had already been issued, influential art critics like Greenberg were writing almost as if films did not exist, and a prominent philosopher like Adorno (1991: 154–61) chose only to emphasise the negative aspects of films. It would appear that, quite simply, no space had yet been created in which the potential of the film could be positively appreciated. Perhaps it seemed initially that films, with their network quality, lacked authenticity. In contrast, today we are more inclined to regard theorists like Greenberg and philosophers like Adorno as conservative. Even though they championed their protégés Pollock and Schoenberg as progressive, they could not make the leap to a positive appreciation of the really revolutionary new production modes like television and the cinema. In the context of the more recent past, Belting (1987: 55–6) writes that “... the

real nostalgics today are the champions of classical modernism. They hold fast to abstract art as a symbol of modernism without noticing that in the meantime it has ‘lost its content’”.

Revisionist feminist art history became prominent in the 1970s, when the idea of the male artistic genius and the artistic representations of women as inferior beings were unmasked as mere cultural constructs. Just as feminists in general argue that traditional societal structures like marriage, heterosexuality and the nuclear family cannot lay claim to ontological *naturalness*, they also tend to reject ontological and teleological art history. They do this by showing that the canonical, supposed ontological art from the past was in fact part and parcel of the battle of the sexes. An example of this is Pollock’s *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (1999). One of the strategies it follows is to analyze “masters” such as Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec in terms of personal pathologies, raising the questions whether the traditional canon should be rejected, replaced or revised.

Revisionist postcolonial aesthetics sets out specifically to expose the myth of the superiority of first-world, Euro-American “fine” art. The accepted paradigm today is that Western art cannot lay claim to universal validity on ontological or teleological grounds, but should be seen simply as a particular construction of the Western world.⁶ On the subject of metaphysics, though it also applies to art, Derrida (1982: 213) writes: “Metaphysics – the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason”. Here, Derrida deconstructs thinking which regards Western philosophy as objective and rational while denigrating the thinking of the “other” as mythological and irrational. Similarly, revisionist postcolonial aesthetics challenges the alleged superiority of Western art by: unmasking flagrant Eurocentrism, experimenting with homogeneity and heterogeneity, setting up hybridity and creolism to purity, noting inclusivity and exclusivity, destabilising hierarchical binary opposites, analysing the relationship between globalisation and regionalism, and analysing the tensions between artistic centres and the margins. In this regard consider the *Africa Remix* exhibition where art from Africa, as well as the African Diaspora, toured from Dusseldorf where it opened in 2004 to London, Paris, and Tokyo before coming to Johannesburg in 2007.

One can summarise by saying that it would appear as if the present-day rejection of both an aesthetic ontology and teleology makes a contribution to detotalising and the incorporation of silenced voices. This dynamic does also however have a negative side, since the end of the avant-garde has left a vacuum, a loss of direction, in its wake. In this context, Crimp (1983: 50) observes that: “... the criterion for determining the order of aesthetic objects ... has been broken, and as a result ‘anything goes’”. Although “anything goes” can be seen as the democratisation of culture, it also has a negative side which will be considered in the next section.

Postmodern panic and loss of meaning

Because we live in a purported world where, to repeat, there are no positive terms, which makes it nearly impossible to separate cause and effect, reality and representation, Lyotard emphasises the systemic nature of knowledge. By this he means that nothing exists outside the maintenance of the system itself against which knowledge and policy in respect of knowledge can be weighed up. This is why, according to Lyotard (1984: 48), “... higher learning will have to continue to supply the social system with the skills fulfilling society’s own needs, which centre on maintaining its internal cohesion”. He goes on to explain:

The idea of an interdisciplinary approach is specific to the age of delegitimation and its hurried empiricism. The relation to knowledge is not articulated in terms of the realization of the life of spirit or the emancipation of

humanity, but in terms of the users of a complex conceptual and material machinery and those who benefit from its performance capabilities. They have at their disposal no metalanguage or metanarrative in which to formulate the final goal and correct use of that machinery.

Although Lyotard claims that there is no metalanguage or metanarrative in which final aims can be formulated, he does make the satirical point that there is one king who has not yet abdicated: King Midas – money! He writes (Lyotard 1984: 45): “No money, no proof - and that means no verification of statements and no truth. The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right”. In other words, there is nothing, no meaning apart from the money = power game, which can act as arbiter in matters of knowledge. Understandably, this scepticism makes many people panic.

Conner (1989: 32–33) refers to the “dark side” of Lyotard’s analysis with reference to contemporary universities:

The university or institution of learning cannot in these circumstances [language-centred postmodernism] be concerned with transmitting knowledge in itself, but must be tied ever more narrowly to the principle of performativity – so that the question asked by teacher, student and government must now no longer be “is it true?” but “What use is it?” and “How much is it worth?” ... This side of Lyotard’s analysis leads to the nightmare prospect envisaged by the Frankfurt school of Marxist social theorists, of a world subordinated not to a rational ideal, but to the absolutely ungoverned, principle of rationalization, the search for higher output from lower input.

Where do we stand today with regard to the “nightmare” predicted by Adorno in *The culture industry* (1991) and Horkheimer and Adorno in *The dialectics of Enlightenment* (1979)? Were they prophetic? What about the other side of detotalising? Is the effective management of meaninglessness our greatest norm and challenge?

We can begin here by discussing Kearney’s “application” of the poststructuralist language model to the hermeneutics of the human imagination. Kearney (1988: 1) says that an interesting change is taking place in respect of the artistic imagination (that is, the making of “original” images). Whereas mass media images play such a large role in our society – to the extent that it is practically impossible nowadays to imagine a natural landscape without envisaging some or other advertisement in the background – the idea of a unique artistic imagination or aesthetic reality looks highly suspect in today’s world. In fact, says Kearney (1988: 251), the idea of a unique, original artistic imagination is currently regarded as an “outdated humanist illusion spawned by the modern movements of romantic idealism and existentialism”. He sees the collective concept of fantasy as still remaining. However, it is something that individuals, as in modernism, have no control over any more. He sees Duchamp’s anti-art and Warhol’s impersonal images as precursors of a new antihumanism and anti-individuality.

Kearney goes on to mention that the postmodern imagination is characterised by parody. The modern metaphor of the imagination as a lamp has become one of a maze of reflecting, parodying mirrors (Kearney 1988: 253).⁷ What has happened is that “images” can no longer be distinguished from a presumed true reality. One wonders, for instance, if the images on the TV are not reality, which life imitates: “... the representational image soon began to overshadow reality itself “, he writes (Kearney 1988: 252).

According to Kearney (1988: 2), a deep-rooted crisis exists today because there is a growing realisation “that images have displaced the ‘original’ realities they were traditionally meant to reflect. The real and the imaginary have become impossible to distinguish”. He sees postmodernism as representing a strange kind of return to the premodern model of mimesis. This is no longer, though, the idea of mimesis as the representation of a “profound” beauty lurking in all good things, and not even straightforward pictorial mimesis. It is because mimesis

now amounts to an eternal imitation of an imitation: “mime without end ... Mimesis without origin” (Kearney 1988: 255&281). In postmodernism therefore the idea of a profound artistic imagination has been subverted. “Postmodernism undermines the modernist belief in the image as an *authentic* expression”, writes Kearney (1988: 3).

Clearly, therefore, Kearney’s analysis has been informed by the poststructuralist language model with regard to the untenability of the modern idea of a particular aesthetic centre. This is underlined by the insistence on the part of the poststructuralist language models that language or signs or signifiers or works of art refer to nothing outside themselves. This means that everything, including works of arts, is essentially representations of representations.

Given that we are bombarded every day with mass media images, it seems that whilst this glut makes everything equal it simultaneously sacrifices everything to meaning. Until recently, the effect of the mechanical and electronic mass reproduction of art, of images, was according to Crimp (1983: 51–3) a factor that only Benjamin (1969) took seriously. Crimp (1983: 53) says that a “... denial of this power of photography to transform art continued to energize modernist painting through the immediate postwar period in America. But then in the work of Rauschenberg photography began to conspire with painting in its own destruction”. Crimp does not of course mean that people are going to give up painting, but he does imply that painting has sacrificed authenticity, unique humanistic expression and a generally valid authority as a consequence of photography and more specifically of the incorporation of photographic images into painting. As he says (Crimp 1983: 53):

Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with Aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined. Rauschenberg steals the *Rokeby Venus* and screens her onto the surface of *Crocus* ... [and so on, and on].

Crimp (1983: 50–3) also reflects on Malraux’s (1978) “museum without walls”, and specifically on Malraux’s fascination with the possibility of shuffling all the heterogeneous art works of the world into a homogeneous mass like a pack of cards, by means of photography; of removing divergent artistic styles from their concrete contexts and holding them in your own hands or projecting them next to each other in order to detect in these divergent images one and the same humanity. Crimp (1983: 53) says that Malraux saw the museum without walls as embodied proof of “Art as ontological essence, created not by men in their historical contingencies, but by Man in his very being”. According to Crimp, however, Malraux unwittingly deconstructs his own argument by admitting that it is in fact the simulated photographic images which give the impression of a homogenous humanity. This is because photos take art works out of their cultural environment, make them all two-dimensional and reduce them to the same scale, format, texture and colour quality.

Representations of representations, works of art which lose authenticity as a consequence of being mass-produced, photographs of photographs, reflections of reflections, parody upon parody, the end of originality and the end of modernity’s search for the “real” inner structure of art ... this seems to be the postmodern world in which we live, whether we like it or not. Art works are no more than artefacts or simulations which are *called* “art works” and which are appreciated in certain times and places according to conventional standards. Even the word “appreciation” might be too metaphysically loaded: in today’s world are we not mainly concerned with fascination, consumption, desire and prettification? What should be in an art museum is simply what we choose to put in it. Apart from that, there is essentially no fundamental way of distinguishing between an “art museum”, a “cultural history museum” and even a casino. Some people panic at this blurring of boundaries, as witnessed by the storms of protest when

the South African National Gallery decided, after about 1985, to display “cultural artefacts” such as beadwork.⁸

Even the existence of an individual human consciousness or the centred, unique creative subject is being queried today. Kearney (1988: 253) lends an apocalyptic vision to this by writing that individual originality is being deconstructed by the textual revolution: “The humanist concept of ‘man’ gives way to the anti-humanist concept of intertextual play. The autonomous subject disappears into the anonymous operations of language”. Because the individual evidently has no control over this play, poststructuralism undermines or decentres the supposedly autonomous creative subject.

We have become so used to the modern view that artistic creativity is centred in the individual, is in fact based on “natural” talent or genius, that it is difficult for many people to accept that things may be otherwise. Hans (1980: 307) says, for instance, that: “Derrida would argue that he [the subject] is only giving himself over to the freeplay of the network of signs, which is his real world in a sense, but which offers no truth or understanding in the sense of something that could be confirmed outside of the network of signs”. He also says (Hans 1980: 304) that “The mind does not have any value for Derrida, since it improperly locates the infinite freeplay in a human center rather than in a decentered system of signs”.⁹ To me this seems like an insensitively nuanced interpretation of Derrida, but I will not unpack that because for my argument at this point it is sufficient to realize that people like Hans, Ellis (1989) and Dillon (1995) experience Derrida’s arguments about an infinite freeplay and a decentralised network of signs within which the subject operates as a loss of meaning, and who panic as a result.

The idea that the subject is trapped in a decentred network of signs is also theorized in the work of Baudrillard, who makes the point (1994: 3) that in this postmodern world it is impossible to draw a fundamental distinction between reality and simulations of reality. But everything is not all that negative, because what we lose in authenticity, says Baudrillard (1988: 34), we gain in control: “... The drugstore [the mall] is the *sublimation* of real life, of objective social life, where not only work and money are abolished, but the seasons disappear as well – the distant vestige of a cycle finally domesticated!”. This control, this uniformity, however ends in meaninglessness, because, as Baudrillard (1988: 34) points out, “Everything is finally *digested* and reduced to the same homogeneous fecal matter”.

Sim (1992: 403) says that Baudrillard writes as if “We live in a ‘hyperreality’ surrounded by simulacra and simulations ... and there is no longer any point in trying to engage in interpretation of texts or events”. We must however not make the mistake of regarding hyperreality and “simulacra” as false or spurious, because, as Poster (1988: 6) explains, Baudrillard in point of fact does not draw a fundamental distinction between the false and the real:¹⁰

A simulation is different from a fiction or a lie in that it not only represents an absence as a presence, the imaginary as the real, it also undermines any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself. Instead of a “real” economy of commodities that is somehow bypassed by an “unreal” myriad of advertising images, Baudrillard now discerns only a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs.

Baudrillard simply sees no centre or positive terms which elude language games and enable us to distinguish the true from the false. For that reason, says Poster (1988: 2): “In Baudrillard’s terms, ‘hyperreality’ is the new linguistic condition of society, rendering impotent theories that still rely on materialist reductionism or rationalist referentiality”. Poster (1988: 5) goes on to explain that theories like Marxism and psychoanalysis which try to exchange “shallow” phenomena for a “deep” structure or centre will no longer do.

Since everything, according to Baudrillard (1988: 34), is digested and reduced to the same homogeneous faecal matter, it makes no sense any more to try and make sense of things. Perhaps

all that is left for us is an ironic glance at the crowds in the shopping mall. Or, conversely, if we can't beat them, why not join them and develop a consumer mentality of our own? Why not just accept that all the consumable faecal matter around us has no intrinsic value? After all, we want to have things just for the sake of having them. Why not become part of the culture of excrement? Why not develop a desire to play along in digesting the world and excreting it as homogeneous faecal matter? Poster (1988: 1) explains Baudrillard's position on this as follows: "In a commodity the relation of word, image or meaning and referent is broken and restructured so that its force is directed, not to the referent of use value or utility, but to desire".

For people who panic as a result of the poststructuralist argument that the human psyche is best understood as a network-like play of surface signifiers with absolutely no authentic origins, the situation is exacerbated by parallel developments in especially digital reproduction technology. This is because the effortless multiplication of images also undermines the idea of authentic origins. Here one can ask whether an event like the terrorist attack on the world trade centre that was watched by millions on television as it happened and thereafter repeated countless times, does in effect not carry more authority and symbolic weight than the actual event itself and the very real pain inflicted on so many. In the traditional aesthetics of the sublime, artists express the anguish and the awe, sometimes even the terror of human existence, but because one's own body is not in any immediate danger, experiencing terror via art can be pleasurable. Weighing this against the terrorist attack on the world trade centre and the global broadcasting of the event, one can argue that we (all that did not actually die, or were injured or lost loved ones) experienced the greatest artwork of all times.¹¹

If this is not enough to make one panicky, the effortless digital multiplication of images has resulted in human subjectivity being rewritten in terms of the so-called post-human.¹² The post-human is a decentred human with a variety of mechanical and digital prostheses: artificial intelligence, cyberspace, cyborg technology, virtual realities and so on, all of these developments which make us think that the science-fiction idea of a human being as just a brain in a bottle is not so far-fetched after all.¹³

Although one might think that the digital world, especially virtual reality, would open up new physical, sensory possibilities Crary (1990: 1-15) argues that

computer aided design, synthetic holography, flight simulators, computer animation, robotic image recognition, ray tracing, texture mapping, motion control, virtual environment helmets, magnetic resonance imaging, and multispectral sensors are only a few of the techniques that are relocating vision to a plane severed from a human observer.

Csicsery-Ronay (1999) argues along similar lines when he grants that virtual reality does have the potential to become as real as "natural creation", but claims that we do not at present have the interfacing technology necessary to make this happen. As he states, in a panicky way (Csicsery-Ronay 1999: 322):

Until we have interfaces with that world [the natural world] and the sense of aesthetic pattern [body schemata] it inspires, there seems no reason why the virtual body will not consume as much of the natural as it is able, leaving us not only post-gendered and post-contemporary, but post-alive, post-here and post-now.

Most of the criticism levelled against virtual reality focuses on the decorporealisation associated with it. Brooks (2002: 206) claims that supporters of virtual reality are missing the point totally, as they especially neglect to take into account the "bath of neurotransmitters and hormones in which our neuronal cells swim". They neglect "the role of our body in placing constraints and providing noncomputational aspects to our existence ... [and so they] may be completely missing the *juice*" (Brooks 2002: 206).

In fact, the baseless multiplication and virtuality of the postmodern world has already sucked so much “juice” out of so many people that they are developing schizophrenia. They have, however, not lost contact with their “inner”, physical selves and with “true” reality in the old modern way, as they become schizophrenic in a decentred, poststructuralist manner. Jameson (1983: 119) explains that postmodern schizophrenia can be classified as the collapse of the relationship between signifiers: “... schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence”. He goes on to say that because schizophrenic people’s concept of language has collapsed, they have little concept of time, of a past, a present and a future. Jameson (1983: 120) argues that although this condition might make the present more intense, more material, schizophrenics actually experience this kind of intensity as a frightening loss. Jameson (1983: 121) goes on to compare this kind of schizophrenic experience and the postmodern experience of art:

Anyone who has listened to John Cage’s music may well have had an experience similar to those just evoked [the schizophrenic experience]: frustration and desperation – the hearing of a single chord or note followed by a silence so long that memory cannot hold on to what went before, a silence then banished into oblivion by a new strange sonorous present which itself disappears. This experience could be illustrated by many forms of cultural production today.

As Jameson rightly predicts, many people today have experiences with art which make them doubt their own mental health as well as that of the artist’s.

Think for example of the aesthetics of the abject, that is, if it is at all appropriate to speak of *abject* aesthetics as such terminology constitutes a conflation of categories for many. What has become of the aesthetic regulation of beautiful art, and is there any place left for beauty in a postmodern world? Humanist thinkers like Kant, Schiller and Bell believed that harmonious art is a universal language that reconciles the tensions that sunder human consciousness, but this aesthetic regulation has been turned on its head by the aesthetics of the abject. This is because this aesthetic acknowledges, in an oxymoronic way, that some things attract and repulse us simultaneously. Adorno, who championed the “schizophrenic” music of Cage, had already dismissed harmonious, aesthetic art. Adorno (1997: 15) writes that “the concept of aesthetic pleasure [harmonious art] as constitutive of art is to be superceded”. According to him, harmonious art must be succeeded by a negative dialectic, an inharmonious, discordant art which overturns aesthetic harmonies.

Adorno’s programme of aesthetic disruption prefigures the contemporary focus on the abject: the recognition that people are fascinated by false surface discords, fascinated by things so strange that they simultaneously repel and attract. Abject aesthetics often focuses on the body, but not the beautiful, idealized bodies of traditional art, but the merely functional, the desiring, the oppressed, the tortured, the suffering and the needy body. This is why so much attention is given to topics like amputation, menstruation, bleeding, defecating and urinating. And today it is not just men who concern themselves with such things (men have always enjoyed burping) but women too, feminists. An example is Carolee Schneeman, who extracts a scroll from her vagina in front of an audience in order to read “deep” things from it and into it.¹⁴ What is more, the particularly feminine principles that may spring forth from such vaginal revelatory extractions may have direct consequences for us all, because, as feminists such as Kristeva, Le Doeuff and Irigaray campaign, it is not good enough to simply incorporate women into the long established male order as equals, as a radical re-structuring of society in terms of female principles is what is called for (West 1997: 212-214).

More populist than the above is the *Panic Encyclopedia* (1989) by Kroker, Kroker and Cook, a decentred catalogue of a world in which concrete reality and a simulated reality cannot always be kept apart. The title, *Panic Encyclopedia*, can be read as a parody of modern

encyclopaedias like the ones by Diderot and Hegel, in which the real heterogeneity of the world is literally *bound* into a homogeneous, totalistic unity. By way of contrast, the *Panic Encyclopedia* parodies the notion of “centred” knowledge.

What binds this apparently disparate collection of topics together – topics like “Panic politics”, “Panic sex”, “Panic art in ruins”, “Panic jeans”, “Panic computer capitalism” – is, paradoxically, the general subversion and absence of traditional centres. An example is *Panic Hamburgers* (Kroker 1989: 119) which are “No longer hamburgers under the old (modernist) sign of nutrition, but just the opposite. Hamburgers which have been aestheticized to such a point of frenzy and hysteria that the McDonald’s hamburger has actually vanished into its own sign”.

In the entry headed “Panic jeans” (Kroker 1989: 131), the homophones “jeans” and “genes” are purposefully conflated suggesting that the old slogan of the Eugenics movement, “It’s all in your genes”, has been turned around to mean that today everything depends on your jeans: your sexuality, your identity, in other words your uniqueness has no genetic or psychological depth but is located in what you wear, in the image which you choose to project. Because of their associations with the original working man’s denim trousers, designer jeans even give “new left” yuppies not genuine authenticity but an *aura* of authenticity. That many people today live their lives as if “image” means everything, is a phenomenon which in itself is enough to make other people panicky.

And if I may wax a little panicky in an academic article along the lines of the *Panic Encyclopedia*, I can provide a couple of entries of my own. Entries about panic “modern Victorian residences”, panic “genuine artificial leather”, panic “planned early obsolescence”, panic “newly built ruins”, panic jeans with designer holes in them, panic “successful divorces”, panic “scam elections in Zimbabwe” and panic “simulated colonisation”. This last entry refers to the entrepreneurial American that annexed the moon and is now selling plots over the internet. Another panic jewel is Avroy Shlain’s vitamin supplement, which promises “beauty from within” on its label. Old-time modern inner beauty was predicated on the purity and authenticity of one’s inner psyche, but postmodern inner beauty is a pill to be swallowed in order to pretty up one’s exterior.

What about panic bureaucracy? This happens when the simulated version of truth, the records, have greater authority than the truth itself. To put it poststructurally, it happens when the signifiers have greater authority than the signs to which they should be referring. A “charming” example is that of a woman who had the fight of (and for) her life trying to persuade the authorities that her death-registration was just an administrative error.¹⁵ This might not be an example of meaninglessness, but it is a “good” example of how bureaucracy can, literally, drain (suck the “juice” out of) someone’s life away.

But things are not quite as negative as they might seem, because if the computer declares you dead prematurely, then medical science might still be able to keep you alive. Regarding panic genetic engineering, after Dolly the sheep was cloned, a major breakthrough was achieved with the cloning of headless tadpoles. These are apparently the forerunners of the body bank: rows of bodies with no heads, a place where you can go for custom-cloned, rejection-free, designer spare parts for your own obsolescent joints, your smoke-riddled lungs, your cirrhotic liver and your clogged arteries.

As far as your cosmetic exterior is concerned (because that is all you really are), just think of the advantages of the body bank: scalp transplants for a new head of hair, perky little breasts when the old ones are sagging, delicately sculpted new ears, and a new penis when Viagra no longer works its wonders. But why undergo painful operations? Rather make a few clones of

yourself in good time, and keep them on ice until the old you gives up the ghost and it's time to thaw them out. One great advantage of this is that in your cloned multiplicity, nobody can ever accuse you of modern subject-centredness.

Let's go back to the body bank, where there are a few other interesting possibilities. If you don't feel up to the complications of a real human relationship, you can take a live, but headless, body to bed with you with no accusations of sexual exploitation. And if it's a clone of you, then you can achieve the pinnacle of monosexual narcissism and simulation. Once the X-rated sex is over, it's time for X-rated violence. Just imagine what the film industry could achieve with these bodies: the incredible realism with which physical torture and mutilation could be portrayed, and if you are really perverted, you could even make oxymoronically, simulated snuff movies that would make Pasolini's *Salò* look like a Sunday-school picnic.

There are lots of other very interesting possibilities for physicality apart from the body bank, especially in cyberspace. Some of us are already practicing cybersex, and all that is needed to perfect the formula is cybersemen and a cyberwomb, and then by pushing some buttons we can make a cyberbaby. The great advantage of this is that we can achieve it without the "juice", without the messiness of actual sex or the excremental matter of a real infant. And what if these cyberbabies grow up, become fruitful, and multiply? The possibilities are endless ...

Leaving the simulated bodies aside, the end result of the panic entries above is panic meaning. Panic meaning like that which appeared in the sixties in a Mad Magazine sticker which, if I remember correctly, read: "A family that *oonts* together *groonts* together". In this slogan with its free-falling signifiers, the predicated meaning has become so cheeky that all meaning is nullified. However, if you are still troubled by old-fashioned modern humanistic communication, the strong point of this statement is that you can make it mean whatever you like: an endless multiplication of "meaning" is possible ... you figure it out for yourself. Or, as Baudrillard would say, more and more faecal matter is possible.

These "absolutely" absurd panic examples have enabled me to sketch the other side of postmodernism: the anything-goes side, the ironic-view-of-life side, the apathetic side, the more-effective-production-of-more-and-more-nonsense side, the save-time-in-order-to-do-more-and-more-meaningless-things side, the nihilistic side and lastly but not least, the disembodied side. Perhaps this is the side of postmodernism that motivated Habermas (1983: 3-15) to argue that postmodernism is bringing the incomplete project of modernity to a premature end.

Conclusion

To sum up, it would appear that there are two opposing interpretations of postmodern ethics. On the one hand it can be seen as detotalising because it problematises existing "knowledge". If one is suspicious of existing knowledge, and if that "knowledge" has favoured certain classes, genders and races, then the deconstruction of that knowledge could result in detotalising and emancipation. The deconstruction of existing knowledge and practices could then assist in the silenced voices again being heard. On the other hand, specifically in view of the poststructuralist insistence that language has the ability to undermine its own structure, we can conclude that postmodernism amounts to meaninglessness. Belting (1987: 56) sees the consequences for art as: "One must live with this pluralism of styles and values which apparently characterizes our society, if only because there is no exit in sight. Where before the loss of tradition was lamented, today the loss of the modern is lamented".

Kearney (1988: 358) says that time will tell whether the postmodern exercises in parody should be read as symptomatic of a "trapped mind which knows it can no longer create something

new”, or as “an anti-elitist desire to democratize intellectual culture by making it available to a popular audience”. However, Kearney (1988: 358) gives this problem an extra twist by asking whether postmodernism should be read as the “Twilight of Great Art or as the clearance of a space where alternative modes of communication may emerge”. It is this idea of possible alternative ways of communicating – in my view, totally different from the democratising of culture – which interests me. The main reason for this is that we are confronted by a third option here, such that not only silenced voices are brought back to be heard, but new voices which as yet do not exist are also given the right to be heard; a space for the unfolding of that which cannot be foreseen.

If Degenaar is correct, then this option is also part of poststructuralist deconstruction, since he (1986: 108) appreciates deconstruction for its insight that “... man (sic) is a meaning-giver who cannot disengage the meaning he creates from the process which brings it forth”. People are meaning-givers, creative beings. And because the best “model” we have of human meaning-giving – *language* – is radically metaphorical according to poststructuralists, we have here a third, creative, metaphorical perspective on art, truth and meaning.

This last, metaphorical alternative is also strongly present in Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition – he calls it paralogy. In his poststructuralist vocabulary, this means a space in which to operate outside the rules of the game; not just to argue within the rules of the game with the intention of reaching a final consensus, but to leave a space for an amendment to the rules of the game itself. He writes (1984: 43): “... there are two different kinds of “progress” in knowledge: one corresponds to a new move (a new argument) within the established rules; the other, to the invention of new rules, in other words, a change to a new game”.

Lyotard (1984: 61) says that paralogy must be distinguished from inventiveness, since inventiveness can be deliberately applied to make the existing system more effective. On the other hand, paralogy is in Lyotard’s words (1984: 61) “a move (the importance of which is often not recognized until later) played in the pragmatics of knowledge”. Lyotard (1984: 67) also claims that postmodern ethics should on the one hand strive for “the desire for justice” while on the other hand also satisfying “the desire for the unknown”.

Notes

1. For explanations of poststructuralism, see Rorty (1967), Culler (1983), Norris (1982) and Potgieter (1999: 145-153).
2. Jay (2005: 145) refers to this as “the sovereignty of the aesthetic experience”.
3. Aspects of this article were researched for my doctorate. See Potgieter (1999).
4. One should however not infer from this that deconstruction attempts to nullify oppositional differences as nothing can be further from the truth. Culler (1983: 150) explains: “... To deconstruct an opposition, such as presence/absence, speech/writing, philosophy/literature, literal/metaphorical, central/marginal, is not to destroy it, leaving a monism according to which there would be *only* absence or writing or literature, or metaphor, or marginality. To deconstruct an opposition is to undo and displace it, to situate it differently”.
5. See Frampton (1983).
6. This does not mean that certain locations do not become centres of authority, as they do, but that they cannot justify their authority on ontological and teleological grounds.
7. In this regard Steiner, as quoted by Degenaar (1986: 111), speaks of the “autistic echo-chambers” of deconstruction.
8. Information about this is available from the archives of the South African National Art Gallery.
9. Derrida does not say that the mind has no value, but that one must consider that the mind is language bound. Derrida (1984: 125) explains: “The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure *cogito* of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language. My

work does not, therefore, destroy the subject; it simply tries to resituate it”.

10. See Baudrillard (1994: 3).
11. My reference to the sublime makes this a somewhat adapted interpretation of Baudrillard’s position in *The Spirit of Terrorism: And Requiem for the Twin Towers* (2002).
12. In this regard see the authoritative work by Hayles (1999)
13. The term post-humanism is also used to refer to

the poststructuralist reworking of the humanistic idea of a common humanity in terms of the recognition of differences. See Badminton (2000: 1-10).

14. This refers to Carolee Schneeman’s performance, *Interior Scroll*.
15. See the article *There’s life in me yet, “dead” granny tells court in battle for her pension* that appeared in the *Sunday Times*, 23 November 1997: 3.

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