

Mass Culture As Woman

Modernism's Other

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I

One of the founding texts of modernism, if there ever was one, is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Emma Bovary, whose temperament was, in the narrator's words, "more sentimental than artistic," loved to read romances.¹ In his detached, ironic style, Flaubert describes Emma's reading matter: "They [the novels] were full of love and lovers, persecuted damsels swooning in deserted pavilions, postillions slaughtered at every turn, horses ridden to death on every page, gloomy forests, romantic intrigue, vows, sobs, embraces and tears, moonlit crossings, nightingales in woodland groves, noblemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, impossibly virtuous, always well dressed, and who wept like fountains on all occasions."² Of course, it is well known that Flaubert himself was caught by the craze for romantic novels during his student days in the Collège at Rouen, and Emma Bovary's readings at the convent have to be read against this backdrop of Flaubert's life history—a point which critics rarely fail to make. However, there is ample reason to wonder if the adolescent Flaubert read these novels in the same way Emma Bovary would have, had she actually lived—or, for that matter, as real women at the time read them.

Perhaps the answer to such a query will have to remain speculative. What is beyond speculation, however, is the fact that Emma Bovary became known, among other things, as the female reader caught between the delusions of the trivial romantic narrative and the realities of French provincial life during the July monarchy, a woman who tried to live the illusions of aristocratic sensual romance and was shipwrecked on the banality of bourgeois everyday life. Flaubert, on the other

¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Merloyd Lawrence (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 29.

² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

hand, came to be known as one of the fathers of modernism, one of the paradigmatic master voices of an aesthetic based on the uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read.

As to Flaubert's famous claim: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," we can assume that he knew what he was saying, and critics have gone to great lengths to show what Flaubert had in common with Emma Bovary—mostly in order to show how he transcended aesthetically the dilemma on which she foundered in "real life." In such arguments the question of gender usually remains submerged, thereby asserting itself all the more powerfully. Sartre, however, in his monumental *L'Idiot de la Famille*, has analyzed the social and familial conditions of Flaubert's "objective neurosis" underlying his fantasy of himself as woman. Sartre has indeed succeeded in showing how Flaubert fetishized his own imaginary femininity while simultaneously sharing his period's hostility toward real women, participating in a pattern of the imagination and of behavior all too common in the history of modernism.³

That such masculine identification with woman, such imaginary femininity in the male writer, is itself historically determined is clear enough. Apart from the subjective conditions of neurosis in Flaubert's case, the phenomenon has a lot to do with the increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress—with the realms of business, industry, science, and law. At the same time, it has also become clear that the imaginary femininity of male authors, which often grounds their oppositional stance vis-à-vis bourgeois society, can easily go hand in hand with the exclusion of real women from the literary enterprise and with the misogyny of bourgeois patriarchy itself. Against the paradigmatic "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," we therefore have to insist that there is a difference. Christa Wolf, in her critical and fictional reflections on the question "who was Cassandra before anyone wrote about her?" put it this way:

We have admired this remark [Flaubert's "Madame Bovary, c'est moi"] for more than a hundred years. We also admire the tears Flaubert shed when he had to let Madame Bovary die, and the crystal-clear calculation of his wonderful novel, which he was able to write despite his tears; and we should not and will not stop admiring him. But Flaubert was not Madame Bovary; we cannot completely ignore that fact in the end, despite all our good will and what we know of the secret relationship between an author and a figure created by art.⁴

³ Cf. Gertrud Koch, "Zwitter-Schwern: Weiblichkeitswahn und Frauenhass—Jean Paul Sartres Thesen von der androgynen Kunst," in *Sartres Flaubert lesen: Essays zu Der Idiot der Familie*, ed. Traugott König (Rowohlt: Reinbek, 1980), pp. 44–59.

⁴ Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984), p. 300.

One aspect of the difference that is important to my argument about the gender inscriptions in the mass culture debate is that woman (Madame Bovary) is positioned as reader of inferior literature—subjective, emotional and passive—while man (Flaubert) emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature—objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means. Of course, such positioning of woman as avid consumer of pulp, which I take to be paradigmatic, also affects the woman writer who has the same kind of ambition as the “great (male) modernist.” Wolf cites Ingeborg Bachmann’s tortured novel trilogy *Todesarten* (Ways of Dying) as a counterexample to Flaubert: “Ingeborg Bachmann is that nameless woman in Malina, she is the woman Franza in the novel fragment *The Franza Case* who simply cannot get a grip on her life, cannot give it a form; who simply cannot manage to make her experience into a presentable story, cannot produce it out of herself as an artistic product.”⁵

In one of her own novels, *The Quest for Christa T*, Wolf herself foregrounded the “difficulty of saying I” for the woman who writes. The problematic nature of saying “I” in the literary text—more often than not held to be a lapse into subjectivity or kitsch—is of course one of the central difficulties of the postromantic, modernist writer. Having first created the determining conditions for a certain historically specific type of subjectivity (the Cartesian cogito and the epistemological subject in Kant, as well as the bourgeois entrepreneur and the modern scientist), modernity itself has increasingly hollowed out such subjectivity and rendered its articulation highly problematic. Most modern artists, male or female, know that. But we only need to think of the striking contrast between Flaubert’s confident personal confession, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi,” and the famed “impassibilité” of the novel’s style to know that there is a difference. Given the fundamentally differing social and psychological constitution and validation of male and female subjectivity in modern bourgeois society, the difficulty of saying “I” must of necessity be different for a woman writer, who may not find “impassibilité” and the concomitant reification of self in the aesthetic product quite as attractive and compelling an ideal as the male writer. The male, after all, can easily deny his own subjectivity for the benefit of a higher aesthetic goal, as long as he can take it for granted on an experiential level in everyday life. Thus Christa Wolf concludes, with some hesitation and yet forcefully enough: “Aesthetics, I say, like philosophy and science, is invented not so much to enable us to get closer to reality as for the purpose of warding it off, of protecting against it.”⁶ Warding something off, protecting against something out there seems indeed to be a basic gesture of the modernist aesthetic, from Flaubert to Roland Barthes and other poststructuralists. What Christa Wolf calls reality would certainly have to include Emma Bovary’s romances (the books *and* the love affairs), for the repudiation of *Trivallliteratur* has

⁵ Ibid., p. 301.

⁶ Ibid., p. 300.

always been one of the constitutive features of a modernist aesthetic intent on distancing itself and its products from the trivialities and banalities of everyday life.

Contrary to the claims of champions of the autonomy of art, contrary also to the ideologists of textuality, the realities of modern life and the ominous expansion of mass culture throughout the social realm are always already inscribed into the articulation of aesthetic modernism. Mass culture has always been the hidden sub-text of the modernist project.

II

What especially interests me here is the notion which gained ground during the nineteenth century that mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men. The tradition of women's exclusion from the realm of "high art" does not of course originate in the nineteenth century, but it does take on new connotations in the age of the industrial revolution and cultural modernization. Stuart Hall is perfectly right to point out that the hidden subject of the mass culture debate is precisely "the masses"—their political and cultural aspirations, their struggles, and their pacification via cultural institutions.⁷ But when the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conjured up the threat of the masses "rattling at the gate," to quote Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably accused of causing), there was yet another hidden subject. In the age of nascent socialism *and* the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male dominated culture. It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.

To be sure, a number of critics have since abandoned the notion of *mass* culture in order to "exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art."⁸ Thus Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term culture industry; Enzensberger gave it another twist by calling it the consciousness industry; in the U.S., Herbert Schiller speaks of mind managers, and Michael Real uses the term mass-mediated culture. The critical intention behind these changes in terminology is clear: they all mean to suggest that modern mass culture is administered and imposed from above and that the threat

⁷ Stuart Hall, paper given at the Conference on Mass Culture at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, Spring 1984.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique* 6 (Fall 1975): 12.

it represents resides not in the masses but in those who run the industry. While such an interpretation may serve as a welcome corrective to the naive notion that mass culture is identical with traditional forms of popular art, rising spontaneously from the masses, it nevertheless erases a whole web of gender connotations which, as I shall show, the older terminology "mass culture" carried with it—i.e., connotations of mass culture as essentially feminine, which were clearly also "imposed from above," in a gender-specific sense, and which remain central to understanding the historical and rhetorical determinations of the modernism/mass culture dichotomy.

It might be argued that the terminological shift away from the term "mass culture" actually reflects changes in critical thinking about "the masses." Indeed, mass culture theories since the 1920s—for instance, those of the Frankfurt School—have by and large abandoned the explicit gendering of mass culture as feminine. Instead they emphasize features of mass culture such as streamlining, technological reproduction, administration, and *Sachlichkeit*—features which popular psychology would ascribe to the realm of masculinity rather than femininity. Yet the older mode of thinking surfaces time and again in the language, if not in the argument. Thus Adorno and Horkheimer argue that mass culture "cannot renounce the threat of castration,"⁹ and they feminize it explicitly, as the evil queen of the fairy tale, when they claim that "mass culture, in her mirror, is always the most beautiful in the land."¹⁰ Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer, in his seminal essay on the mass ornament, begins his discussion by bringing the legs of the Tiller Girls into the reader's view, even though the argument then focuses primarily on aspects of rationalization and standardization.¹¹ Examples such as these show that the inscription of the feminine on the notion of mass culture, which seems to have its primary place in the late nineteenth century, did not relinquish its hold, even among those critics who did much to overcome the nineteenth century mystification of mass culture as woman.

The recovery of such gender stereotypes in the theorizing of mass culture may also have some bearing on the current debate about the alleged femininity of modernist/avant-gardist writing. Thus the observation that, in some basic register, the traditional mass culture/modernism dichotomy has been gendered since the mid-nineteenth century as female/male would seem to make recent attempts by French critics to claim the space of modernist and avant-garde writing as predominantly feminine highly questionable. Of course this approach, which is perhaps best embodied in Kristeva's work, focuses on the Mallarmé–Lautréamont–Joyce-axis of

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1982), p. 141.

¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "Das Schema der Massenkultur," in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 305.

¹¹ Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975):67–76.

modernism rather than, say, on the Flaubert–Thomas Mann–Eliot-axis which I emphasize in my argument here. Nevertheless, its claims remain problematic even there. Apart from the fact that such a view would threaten to render invisible a whole tradition of women’s writing, its main theoretical assumption—“that ‘the feminine’ is what cannot be inscribed in common language”¹²—remains problematically close to that whole history of an imaginary male femininity which has become prominent in literature since the late eighteenth century.¹³ This view becomes possible only if Madame Bovary’s “natural” association with pulp—i.e., the discourse that persistently associated women with mass culture—is simply ignored, and if a paragon of male misogyny like Nietzsche is said to be speaking from the position of woman. Teresa de Lauretis has recently criticized this Derridean appropriation of the feminine by arguing that the position of woman from which Nietzsche and Derrida speak is vacant in the first place, and cannot be claimed by women.¹⁴ Indeed, more than a hundred years after Flaubert and Nietzsche, we are facing yet another version of an imaginary male femininity, and it is no coincidence that the advocates of such theories (who also include major women theoreticians) take great pains to distance themselves from any form of political feminism. Even though the French readings of modernism’s “feminine” side have opened up fascinating questions about gender and sexuality which can be turned critically against more dominant accounts of modernism, it seems fairly obvious that the wholesale theorization of modernist writing as feminine simply ignores the powerful masculinist and misogynist current within the trajectory of modernism, a current which time and again openly states its contempt for women and for the masses and which had Nietzsche as its most eloquent and influential representative.

Here, then, some remarks about the history of the perception of mass culture as feminine. Time and again documents from the late nineteenth century ascribe pejorative feminine characteristics to mass culture—and by mass culture here I mean serialized feuilleton novels, popular and family magazines, the stuff of lending libraries, fictional bestsellers, and the like—not, however, working-class culture or residual forms of older popular or folk cultures. A few examples will have to suffice. In the preface to their novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), which is usually regarded as the first naturalist manifesto, the Goncourt brothers attack what they call the false novel. They describe it as those “spicy little works, memoirs of street-walkers, bedroom confessions, erotic smuttiness, scandals that hitch up their skirts in pictures in bookshop windows.” The true novel (*le roman vrai*) by contrast is

¹² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality,” *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1985):516.

¹³ For an excellent study of male images of femininity since the eighteenth century, see Silvia Bovenschen, *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

¹⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, “The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender,” *Semiotica* (Spring 1985), special issue on the Rhetoric of Violence.

called "severe and pure." It is said to be characterized by its scientificity, and rather than sentiment it offers what the authors call "a clinical picture of love" (*une clinique de l'amour*).¹⁵ Twenty years later, in the editorial of the first issue of Michael Georg Conrad's journal *Die Gesellschaft* (1885), which marks the beginning of "die Moderne" in Germany, the editor states his intention to emancipate literature and criticism from the "tyranny of well-bred debutantes and old wives of both sexes," and from the empty and pompous rhetoric of "old wives criticism." And he goes on to polemicize against the then popular literary family magazines: "The literary and artistic kitchen personnel has achieved absolute mastery in the art of economizing and imitating the famous potato banquet. . . . It consists of twelve courses each of which offers the potato in a different guise."¹⁶ Once the kitchen has been described metaphorically as the site of mass cultural production, we are not surprised to hear Conrad call for the reestablishment of an "*arg gefährdete Mannhaftigkeit*" (seriously threatened manliness) and for the restoration of bravery and courage (*Tapferkeit*) in thought, poetry, and criticism.

It is easy to see how such statements rely on the traditional notion that women's aesthetic and artistic abilities are inferior to those of men. Women as providers of inspiration for the artist, yes, but otherwise *Berufsverbot* for the muses,¹⁷ unless of course they content themselves with the lower genres (painting flowers and animals) and the decorative arts. At any rate, the gendering of an inferior mass culture as feminine goes hand in hand with the emergence of a male mystique in modernism (especially in painting), which has been documented thoroughly by feminist scholarship.¹⁸ What is interesting in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, is a certain chain effect of signification: from the obsessively argued inferiority of woman as artist (classically argued by Karl Scheffler in *Die Frau und die Kunst*, 1908) to the association of woman with mass culture (witness Hawthorne's "the damned mob of scribbling women") to the identification of woman with the masses as political threat.

This line of argument invariably leads back to Nietzsche. Significantly, Nietzsche's ascription of feminine characteristics to the masses is always tied to his aesthetic vision of the artist-philosopher-hero, the suffering loner who stands in irreconcilable opposition to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture. Fairly typical examples of this nexus can be found in Nietzsche's polemic against Wagner,

¹⁵ Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Germinie Lacerteux*, trans. Leonard Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 15.

¹⁶ *Die Gesellschaft* 1, no. 1 (January 1885).

¹⁷ Cf. Cäcilia Rentmeister, "Berufsverbot für Musen," *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 25 (September 1976): 92113.

¹⁸ Cf. for instance the essays by Carol Duncan and Norma Broude in *Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) or the documentation of relevant quotes by Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, "'Art Hysterical Notions' of Progress and Culture," *Heresies* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 38–42.

who becomes for him the paradigm of the decline of genuine culture in the dawning age of the masses and the feminization of culture: “The danger for artists, for geniuses... is woman: adoring women confront them with corruption. Hardly any of them have character enough not to be corrupted—or ‘redeemed’—when they find themselves treated like gods: soon they condescend to the level of the women.”¹⁹ Wagner, it is implied, has succumbed to the adoring women by transforming music into mere spectacle, theater, delusion:

I have explained where Wagner belongs—not in the history of music. What does he signify nevertheless in that history? The emergence of the actor in music. . . . One can grasp it with one’s very hands: great success, success with the masses no longer sides with those who are authentic—one has to be an actor to achieve that. Victor Hugo and Richard Wagner—they signify the same thing: in declining cultures, wherever the decision comes to rest with the masses, authenticity becomes superfluous, disadvantageous, a liability. Only the actor still arouses great enthusiasm.²⁰

And then Wagner, the theater, the mass, woman—all become a web of signification outside of, and in opposition to, true art: “No one brings along the finest senses of his art to the theater, least of all the artist who works for the theater—solitude is lacking; whatever is perfect suffers no witnesses. In the theater one becomes people, herd, female, pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot—*Wagnerian*.”²¹ What Nietzsche articulates here is of course not an attack on the drama or the tragedy, which to him remain some of the highest manifestations of culture. When Nietzsche calls theater a “revolt of the masses,”²² he anticipates what the situationists would later elaborate as the society of the spectacle, and what Baudrillard chastises as the simulacrum. At the same time, it is no coincidence that the philosopher blames theatricality for the decline of culture. After all, the theater in bourgeois society was one of the few spaces which allowed women a prime place in the arts, precisely because acting was seen as imitative and reproductive, rather than original and productive. Thus, in Nietzsche’s attack on what he perceives as Wagner’s feminization of music, his “infinite melody”—“one walks into the sea, gradually loses one’s secure footing, and finally surrenders oneself to the elements without reservation”²³—an extremely perceptive critique of the mechanisms of bourgeois culture goes hand in hand with an exhibition of that culture’s sexist biases and prejudices.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 665.

²² Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, p. 183.

²³ Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, p. 666.

III

The fact that the identification of woman with mass has major political implications is easily recognized. Thus Mallarmé's quip about "*reportage universel*" (i.e., mass culture), with its not so subtle allusion to "*suffrage universel*," is more than just a clever pun. The problem goes far beyond questions of art and literature. In the late nineteenth century, a specific traditional male image of woman served as a receptacle for all kinds of projections, displaced fears, and anxieties (both personal and political), which were brought about by modernization and the new social conflicts, as well as by specific historical events such as the 1848 revolution, the 1870 Commune, and the rise of reactionary mass movements which, as in Austria, threatened the liberal order.²⁴ An examination of the magazines and the newspapers of the period will show that the proletarian and petit-bourgeois masses were persistently described in terms of a feminine threat. Images of the raging mob as hysterical, of the engulfing floods of revolt and revolution, of the swamp of big city life, of the spreading ooze of massification, of the figure of the red whore at the barricades—all of these pervade the writing of the mainstream media, as well as that of rightwing ideologues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose social psychology Klaus Theweleit has perceptively analyzed in his study *Male Phantasies*.²⁵ The fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass.

This kind of thinking is exemplified by Gustave Le Bon's enormously influential *The Crowd* (*La Psychologie des foules*, 1895), which as Freud observed in his own *Mass Psychology and Ego Analysis* (1921) merely summarizes arguments pervasive in Europe at the time. In Le Bon's study, the male fear of woman and the bourgeois fear of the masses become indistinguishable: "Crowds are everywhere distinguished by feminine characteristics."²⁶ And: "The simplicity and exaggeration of the sentiments of crowds have for a result that a throng knows neither doubt nor uncertainty. Like women, it goes at once to extremes. ... A commencement of antipathy or disapprobation, which in the case of an isolated individual would not gain strength, becomes at once furious hatred in the case of an individual in a crowd."²⁷ And then he summarizes his fears with a reference to that icon which perhaps more than any other in the nineteenth century—more even than the

²⁴ For a recent discussion of semantic shifts in the political and sociological discourse of masses, elites, and leaders from the late nineteenth century to fascism, see Helmuth Berking, "Mythos und Politik: Zur historischen Semantik des Massenbegriffs," *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 56 (November 1984):35–42.

²⁵ An English translation of the two-volume work will soon be published by the University of Minnesota Press.

²⁶ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Judiths and Salomés so often portrayed on symbolist canvases—stood for the feminine threat to civilization: “Crowds are somewhat like the sphinx of ancient fable: it is necessary to arrive at a solution of the problems offered by their psychology or to resign ourselves to being devoured by them.”²⁸ Male fears of an engulfing femininity are here projected onto the metropolitan masses, who did indeed represent a threat to the rational bourgeois order. The haunting specter of a loss of power combines with the fear of losing one’s fortified and stable ego boundaries, which represent the *sine qua non* of male psychology in that bourgeois order. We may want to relate Le Bon’s social psychology of the masses back to modernism’s own fears of being sphinxed. Thus the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-optation, commodification, and the “wrong” kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture. Again, the problem is not the desire to differentiate between forms of high art and depraved forms of mass culture and its co-optations. The problem is rather the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued.

IV

Seen in relation to this kind of paranoid view of mass culture and the masses, the modernist aesthetic itself—at least in one of its basic registers—begins to look more and more like a reaction formation, rather than like the heroic feat steeled in the fires of the modern experience. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that one can identify something like a core of the modernist aesthetic which has held sway over many decades, which manifests itself (with variations due to respective media) in literature, music, architecture, and the visual arts, and which has had an enormous impact on the history of criticism and cultural ideology. If we were to construct an ideal type notion of what the modernist art work has become as a result of successive canonizations—and I will exclude here the poststructuralist archeology of modernism which has shifted the grounds of the debate—it would probably look somewhat like this:

- The work is autonomous and totally separate from the realms of mass culture and everyday life.
- It is self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous, and rigorously experimental.
- It is the expression of a purely individual consciousness rather than of a Zeitgeist or a collective state of mind.
- Its experimental nature makes it analogous to science, and like science it produces and carries knowledge.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

—Modernist literature, since Flaubert, is a persistent exploration of and encounter with language. Modernist painting, since Manet, is an equally persistent elaboration of the medium itself: the flatness of the canvas, the structuring of notation, paint and brushwork, the problem of the frame.

—The major premise of the modernist art work is the rejection of all classical systems of representation, the effacement of “content,” the erasure of subjectivity and authorial voice, the repudiation of likeness and verisimilitude, and the exorcism of any demand for realism of whatever kind.

—Only by fortifying its boundaries, by maintaining its purity and autonomy, and by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life can the art work maintain its adversary stance: adversary to the bourgeois culture of everyday life as well as adversary to mass culture and entertainment which are seen as the primary forms of bourgeois cultural articulation.

One of the first examples of this aesthetic would be Flaubert’s famous “*impassibilité*” and his desire to write “a book about nothing, a book without external attachments which would hold together by itself through the internal force of its style.” Flaubert can be said to ground modernism in literature, both for its champions (from Nietzsche to Roland Barthes) and for its detractors (such as Georg Lukács). Other historical forms of this modernist aesthetic would be the clinical, dissecting gaze of the naturalist;²⁹ the doctrine of art for art’s sake in its various classicist or romantic guises since the late nineteenth century; the insistence on the art–life dichotomy so frequently found at the turn of the century, with its inscription of art on the side of death and masculinity and its evaluation of life as inferior and feminine; and finally, the absolutist claims of abstraction, from Kandinsky to the New York School.

But it was only in the 1940s and 1950s that the modernism gospel and the concomitant condemnation of kitsch became something like the equivalent of the one-party state in the realm of aesthetics. And it is still an open question to what extent current poststructuralist notions of language and writing and of sexuality and the unconscious are a postmodern departure toward entirely new cultural horizons; or whether, despite their powerful critique of older notions of modernism, they do not rather represent another mutation of modernism itself.

My point here is not to reduce the complex history of modernism to an abstraction. Obviously, the various layers and components of the ideal modernist work would have to be read in and through specific works in specific historical and cultural constellations. The notion of autonomy, for instance, has quite different historical determinations for Kant, who first articulated it in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, than for Flaubert in the 1850s, for Adorno during World War II, or again for Frank

²⁹ Naturalism is not always included in the history of modernism because of its close relationship to realistic description, but it clearly belongs to this context, as Georg Lukács never ceased to point out.

Stella today. My point is rather that the champions of modernism themselves were the ones who made that complex history into a schematic paradigm, the main purpose of which often seemed to be the justification of current aesthetic practice, rather than the richest possible reading of the past in relation to the present.

My point is also not to say that there is only one, male, sexual politics to modernism, against which women would have to find their own voices, their own language, their own feminine aesthetic. What I am saying is that the powerful masculinist mystique which is explicit in modernists such as Marinetti, Jünger, Benn, Wyndham Lewis, Céline, et al. (not to speak of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), and implicit in many others, has to be somehow related to the persistent gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior—even if, as a result, the heroism of the moderns won't look quite as heroic any more. The autonomy of the modernist art work, after all, is always the result of a resistance, an abstention, and a suppression—resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from the pleasure of trying to please a larger audience, suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time. There seem to be fairly obvious homologies between this modernist insistence on purity and autonomy in art, Freud's privileging of the ego over the id and his insistence on stable, if flexible, ego boundaries, and Marx's privileging of production over consumption. The lure of mass culture, after all, has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing.³⁰ Thus, despite its undeniable adversary stance toward bourgeois society, the modernist aesthetic and its rigorous work ethic as described here seem in some fundamental way to be located also on the side of that society's reality principle, rather than on that of the pleasure principle. It is to this fact that we owe some of the greatest works of modernism, but the greatness of these works cannot be separated from the often one-dimensional gender inscriptions inherent in their very constitution as autonomous masterworks of modernity.

V

The deeper problem at stake here pertains to the relationship of modernism to the matrix of modernization which gave birth to it and nurtured it through its various stages. In less suggestive terms, the question is why, despite the obvious heterogeneity of the modernist project, a certain universalizing account of the modern has been able to hold sway for so long in literary and art criticism, and why even today it is far from having been decisively displaced from its position of hegemony in

³⁰ On the relationship of the production/consumption paradigm to the mass culture debate, see Tania Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(s)querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture," forthcoming in *High Theory, Low Culture*, ed. Colin McCabe (Manchester: The University of Manchester Press, 1986).

cultural institutions. What has to be put in question is the presumably adversary relationship of the modernist aesthetic to the myth and ideology of modernization and progress, which it ostensibly rejects in its fixation upon the eternal and timeless power of the poetic word. From the vantage point of our postmodern age, which has begun in a variety of discourses to question seriously the belief in unhampered progress and in the blessings of modernity, it becomes clear how modernism, even in its most adversary, anti-bourgeois manifestations, is deeply implicated in the processes and pressures of the same mundane modernization it so ostensibly repudiates. It is especially in light of the ecological and environmental critique of industrial and postindustrial capitalism, and of the different yet concomitant feminist critique of bourgeois patriarchy, that the subterranean collusion of modernism with the myth of modernization becomes visible.

I want to show this briefly for two of the most influential and by now classical accounts of the historical trajectory of modernism—the accounts of Clement Greenberg in painting and of Theodor W. Adorno in music and literature. For both critics, mass culture remains the other of modernism, the specter that haunts it, the threat against which high art has to shore up its terrain. And even though mass culture is no longer imagined as primarily feminine, both critics remain under the sway of the old paradigm in their conceptualization of modernism.

Indeed, both Greenberg and Adorno are often taken to be the last ditch defenders of the purity of the modernist aesthetic, and they have become known since the late 1930s as uncompromising enemies of modern mass culture. (Mass culture had by then of course become an effective tool of totalitarian domination in a number of countries, which all banished modernism as degenerate or decadent.) While there are major differences between the two men, both in temperament and in the scope of their analyses, they both share a notion of the inevitability of the evolution of modern art. To put it bluntly, they believe in progress—if not in society, then certainly in art. The metaphors of linear evolution and of a teleology of art are conspicuous in their work. I quote Greenberg: “It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at ‘abstract’ or ‘nonobjective’ art—and poetry, too.”³¹ It is well known how Greenberg constructs the story of modernist painting as a single-minded trajectory, from the first French modernist avant-garde of the 1860s to the New York School of abstract expressionism—his moment of truth.

Similarly, Adorno sees a historical logic at work in the move from late romantic music to Wagner and ultimately to Schönberg and the second school of Vienna, which represent *his* moment of truth. To be sure, both critics acknowledge retarding elements in these trajectories—Stravinsky in Adorno’s account, surrealism in Greenberg’s—but the logic of history, or rather the logic of aesthetic evolution,

³¹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 5.

prevails, giving a certain rigidity to Greenberg's and Adorno's theorizing. Obstacles and detours, it seems, only highlight the dramatic and inevitable path of modernism toward its telos, whether this telos is described as triumph as in Greenberg, or as pure negativity as in Adorno. In the work of both critics, the theory of modernism appears as a theory of modernization displaced to the aesthetic realm; this is precisely its historical strength, and what makes it different from the mere academic formalism of which it is so often accused. Adorno and Greenberg further share a notion of decline that they see as following on the climax of development in high modernism. Adorno wrote about "Das Altern der neuen Musik," and Greenberg unleashed his wrath on the reappearance of representation in painting since the advent of Pop Art.

At the same time, both Adorno and Greenberg were quite aware of the costs of modernization, and they both understood that it was the ever-increasing pace of commodification and colonization of cultural space which actually propelled modernism forward—or rather, pushed it toward the outer margins of the cultural terrain. Adorno especially never lost sight of the fact that, ever since their simultaneous emergence in the mid-nineteenth century, modernism and mass culture have been engaged in a compulsive *pas de deux*. To him, autonomy was a relational phenomenon, not a mechanism to justify formalist amnesia. His analysis of the transition in music from Wagner to Schönberg makes it clear that Adorno never saw modernism as anything other than a reaction formation to mass culture and commodification, a reaction formation which operated on the level of form and artistic material. The same awareness that mass culture, on some basic level, determined the shape and course of modernism is pervasive in Clement Greenberg's essays of the late 1930s. To a large extent, it is by the distance we have traveled from this "great divide" between mass culture and modernism that we can measure our own cultural postmodernity. And yet, I still know of no better aphorism about the imaginary adversaries, modernism and mass culture, than that which Adorno articulated in a letter to Walter Benjamin: "Both [modernist art and mass culture] bear the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. Both are torn halves of freedom to which, however, they do not add up."³²

But the discussion cannot end here. The postmodern crisis of high modernism and its classical accounts has to be seen as a crisis both of capitalist modernization itself and of the deeply patriarchal structures that support it. The traditional dichotomy, in which mass culture appears as monolithic, engulfing, totalitarian, and on the side of regression and the feminine ("Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb," said T. S. Eliot³³) and modernism appears as progressive,

³² Letter of March 18, 1936, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1, no. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 1003.

³³ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, published with *The Idea of a Christian Society as Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), p. 142.

dynamic, and indicative of male superiority in culture, has been challenged empirically and theoretically in a variety of ways in the past twenty years or so. New versions of the history of modern culture, the nature of language, and artistic autonomy have been elaborated, and new theoretical questions have been brought to bear on mass culture and modernism; most of us would probably share the sense that the ideology of modernism, as I have sketched it here, is a thing of the past, even if it still occupies major bastions in cultural institutions such as the museum or the academy. The attacks on high modernism, waged in the name of the postmodern since the late 1950s, have left their mark on our culture, and we are still trying to figure out the gains and the losses which this shift has brought about.

VI

What then of the relationship of postmodernism to mass culture, and what of its gender inscriptions? What of postmodernism's relationship to the myth of modernization? After all, if the masculinist inscriptions in the modernist aesthetic are somehow subliminally linked to the history of modernization, with its insistence on instrumental rationality, teleological progress, fortified ego boundaries, discipline, and self-control; if, furthermore, both modernism and modernization are ever more emphatically subjected to critique in the name of the postmodern—then we must ask to what extent postmodernism offers possibilities for genuine cultural change, or to what extent the postmodern raiders of a lost past produce only simulacra, a fast-image culture that makes the latest thrust of modernization more palatable by covering up its economic and social dislocations. I think that postmodernism does both, but I will focus here only on some of the signs of promising cultural change.

A few somewhat tentative reflections will have to suffice, as the amorphous and politically volatile nature of postmodernism makes the phenomenon itself remarkably elusive, and the definition of its boundaries exceedingly difficult, if not *per se* impossible. Furthermore, one critic's postmodernism is another critic's modernism (or variant thereof), while certain vigorously new forms of contemporary culture (such as the emergence into a broader public's view of distinct minority cultures and of a wide variety of feminist work in literature and the arts) have so far rarely been discussed *as* postmodern, even though these phenomena have manifestly affected both the culture at large and the ways in which we approach the politics of the aesthetic today. In some sense it is the very existence of these phenomena which challenges the traditional belief in the necessary advances of modernism and the avant-garde. If postmodernism is to be more than just another revolt of the modern against itself, then it would certainly have to be defined in terms of this challenge to the constitutive forward thrust of avant-gardism.

I do not intend here to add yet another definition of what the postmodern *really* is, but it seems clear to me that both mass culture and women's (feminist) art are emphatically implicated in any attempt to map the specificity of contemporary culture and thus to gauge this culture's distance from high modernism. Whether one uses the term "postmodernism" or not, there cannot be any question about the fact that the position of women in contemporary culture and society, and their effect on that culture, is fundamentally different from what it used to be in the period of high modernism and the historical avant-garde. It also seems clear that the uses high art makes of certain forms of mass culture (and vice versa) have increasingly blurred the boundaries between the two; where modernism's great wall once kept the barbarians out and safeguarded the culture within, there is now only slippery ground which may prove fertile for some and treacherous for others.

At stake in this debate about the postmodern is the great divide between modern art and mass culture, which the art movements of the 1960s intentionally began to dismantle in their practical critique of the high modernist canon, and which the cultural neoconservatives are trying to re-erect today.³⁴ One of the few widely agreed upon features of postmodernism is its attempt to negotiate forms of high art with certain forms and genres of mass culture and the culture of everyday life.³⁵ I suspect that it is probably no coincidence that such merger attempts occurred more or less simultaneously with the emergence of feminism and women as major forces in the arts, and with the concomitant reevaluation of formerly devalued forms and genres of cultural expression (e.g., the decorative arts, autobiographic texts, letters, etc.). However, the original impetus to merge high art and popular culture—for example, in Pop Art in the early 1960s—did not yet have anything to do with the later feminist critique of modernism. It was, rather, indebted to the historical avant-garde art movements such as Dada, constructivism, and surrealism—which had aimed, unsuccessfully, at freeing art from its aestheticist ghetto and reintegrating art and life.³⁶ Indeed, the early American postmodernists' attempts to open up the realm of high art to the imagery of everyday life and American mass culture are in some ways reminiscent of the historical avant-garde's attempt to work in the interstices of high art and mass culture. In retrospect, it thus seems quite significant that major artists of the 1920s used precisely the then

³⁴ For a discussion of the neoconservatives' hostility toward postmodernism, see my essay "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique* 33 (Fall 1984): 552, especially 28–36.

³⁵ While critics seem to agree on this point in theory, there is a dearth of specific readings of texts or art works in which such a merger has been attempted. Much more concrete analysis has to be done to assess the results of this new constellation. There is no doubt in my mind that there are as many failures as there are successful attempts by artists, and sometimes success and failure reside side by side in the work of one artist.

³⁶ On this distinction between late nineteenth century modernism and the historical avant-garde, see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

widespread “Americanism” (associated with jazz, sports, cars, technology, movies, and photography) in order to overcome bourgeois aestheticism and its separateness from “life.” Brecht is the paradigmatic example here, and he was in turn strongly influenced by the postrevolutionary Russian avant-garde and its daydream of creating a revolutionary avant-garde culture for the masses. It seems that the European Americanism of the 1920s then returned to America in the 1960s, fueling the fight of the early postmodernists against the high-culture doctrines of Anglo-American modernism. The difference is that the historical avant-garde—even where it rejected Leninist vanguard politics as oppressive to the artist—always negotiated its political *Selbstverständnis* in relation to the revolutionary claims for a new society which would be the *sine qua non* of the new art. Between 1916—the “outbreak” of Dada in Zurich—and 1933/34—the liquidation of the historical avant-garde by German fascism and Stalinism—many major artists took the claim inherent in the avant-garde’s name very seriously: namely, to lead the whole of society toward new horizons of culture, and to create an avant-garde art for the masses. This ethos of a symbiosis between revolutionary art and revolutionary politics certainly vanished after World War II, not just because of McCarthyism, but even more because of what Stalin’s henchmen had done to the left aesthetic avant-garde of the 1920s. Yet the attempt by the American postmodernists of the 1960s to renegotiate the relationship between high art and mass culture gained its own political momentum in the context of the emerging new social movements of those years—among which feminism has perhaps had the most lasting effects on our culture, as it cuts across class, race, and gender.

In relation to gender and sexuality, though, the historical avant-garde was by and large as patriarchal, misogynist, and masculinist as the major trends of modernism. One needs only to look at the metaphors in Marinetti’s “Futurist Manifesto,” or to read Marie Luise Fleisser’s trenchant description of her relationship to Bert Brecht in a prose text entitled “Avant-garde”—in which the gullible, literarily ambitious young woman from the Bavarian province becomes a guinea pig in the machinations of the notorious metropolitan author. Or, again, one may think of how the Russian avant-garde fetishized production, machines, and science, and of how the writings and paintings of the French surrealists treated women primarily as objects of male phantasy and desire.

There is not much evidence that things were very different with the American postmodernists of the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, the avant-garde’s attack on the autonomy aesthetic, its politically motivated critique of the highness of high art, and its urge to validate other, formerly neglected or ostracized forms of cultural expression created an aesthetic climate in which the political aesthetic of feminism could thrive and develop its critique of patriarchal gazing and penmanship. The aesthetic transgressions of the happenings, actions, and performances of the 1960s were clearly inspired by Dada, Informel, and action painting, and with

few exceptions—the work of Valie Export, Charlotte Moorman and Carolee Schneemann—these forms did not transport feminist sensibilities or experiences. But it seems historically significant that women artists increasingly used these forms in order to give voice to their experiences.³⁷ The road from the avant-garde's experiments to contemporary women's art seems to have been shorter, less tortuous, and ultimately more productive than the less frequently traveled road from high modernism. Looking at the contemporary art scene, one may well want to ask the hypothetical question whether performance and "body art" would have remained so dominant during the 1970s had it not been for the vitality of feminism in the arts and the ways in which women artists articulated experiences of the body and of performance in gender-specific terms. I only mention the work of Yvonne Rainer and Laurie Anderson. Similarly, in literature the reemergence of the concern with perception and identification, with sensual experience and subjectivity in relation to gender and sexuality would hardly have gained the foreground in aesthetic debates (against even the powerful poststructuralist argument about the death of the subject and the Derridean expropriation of the feminine), had it not been for the social and political presence of a women's movement, and women's insistence that male notions of perception and subjectivity (or the lack thereof) did not really apply to them. Thus the turn toward a "new subjectivity" in the German prose of the 1970s was initiated not just by Peter Schneider's *Lenz* (1973), as is so often claimed, but even more so by Karin Struck's *Klassenliebe* (also 1973) and, in retrospect, by Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* (1971).

However one answers the question of the extent to which women's art and literature have affected the course of postmodernism, it seems clear that feminism's radical questioning of patriarchal structures in society and in the various discourses of art, literature, science, and philosophy must be one of the measures by which we gauge the specificity of contemporary culture, as well as its distance from modernism and its mystique of mass culture as feminine. Mass culture and the masses as feminine threat—such notions belong to another age, Jean Baudrillard's recent ascription of femininity to the masses notwithstanding. Of course, Baudrillard gives the old dichotomy a new twist by applauding the femininity of the masses rather than denigrating it; but his move may be no more than yet another Nietzschean simulacrum.³⁸ After the feminist critique of the multilayered sexism in television, Hollywood, advertising, rock 'n' roll, etc., the lure of the old rhetoric simply does not work any longer. The claim that the threats (or, for that matter, the benefits) of mass culture are somehow "feminine" has finally lost its

³⁷ Cf. Gisind Nabakowski, Helke Sander, and Peter Gorsen, *Frauen in der Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), especially the contributions by Valie Export and Gisind Nabakowski in volume 1.

³⁸ owe this critical reference to Baudrillard to Tania Modleski's essay "Femininity as Mas(s)querade."

persuasive power. If anything, a kind of reverse statement would make more sense: certain forms of mass culture, with their obsession with gendered violence, are more of a threat to women than to men. After all, it has always been men rather than women who have had real control over the productions of mass culture.

In conclusion, then, it seems clear that the gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior had its primary historical place in the late nineteenth century, even though the underlying dichotomy did not lose its power until quite recently. It also seems evident that the decline of this pattern of thought coincides historically with the decline of modernism itself. But I would submit that it is primarily the visible and public presence of women artists in high art, as well as the emergence of new kinds of women performers and producers in mass culture, which make the old gendering device obsolete. The universalizing ascription of femininity to mass culture always depended on the very real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions. Such exclusions are, hopefully forever, a thing of the past. Thus, the old rhetoric has lost its persuasive power because the realities have changed.