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Abstract

The paper examines critical terminology used with reference to postmodernist aesthetics, e.g. terms such as technological sublime or self-referentiality, through the prism of its relation to the question of technicity. Following the theoretical approaches proposed by Jacques Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000) and by Bernard Stiegler in *Technics and Time* (1994) the paper argues that the postmodern visions of mobile textuality, active authorship, and democratic readership are related to particular modes of understanding technicity and its related notions of action and activity as established and consolidated by the transformative effect of the Technological Revolution of late 19th century and its 20th century aftermath.

As the epoch of American postmodernist aesthetics recedes into history, it seems worthwhile to re-evaluate its discursive formations in their socio-economic context. By the socio-economic context, I mean not so much the immediate context of the second-half of the 20th century, but a broader frame of reference of what Jacques Rancière calls the representative and aesthetic regimes of modernity, whose emergence coincided with the transformative era of the Second Industrial Revolution, also known as the Technological Revolution (*The Politics of Aesthetics*). It is the broader perspective of the relation between technology and aesthetic and representative modes that allows us to understand the formation of a particular constellation of concepts such as e.g. pastiche, collage, intertextuality, metafiction, active readership, which constitute the critical discourse on postmodern aesthetics.

The question this article attempts to address is therefore: how has the constellation of specific terms and ideas in postmodern lexicon establish postmodernism as a distinct mode of intelligibility, a mode of intelligibility made possible by a specific distribution and historical redistribution of the modes of human perception and activity? The underlying assumption of the argument is that what legitimizes postmodern aesthetics as a distinct mode of intelligibility is what Rancière
calls a historically specific regime of human experience, a restrictive and historically conditioned set of possibilities of feeling, thinking, and acting. In the 20th century, the age of world wars and rapid technological progress, those possibilities have been structured by our relation to technology, thus altering the ways of perceptions and aesthetic mediation of reality. It seems worthwhile therefore to examine the postmodern critical lexicon from the perspective of its relationship to technology, to restage the issue of technicity and the problems it raises at the core of the postmodernist project.

Why technicity? Because one of the first things that stand out in the way in which the concepts in the postmodern lexicon are arranged, is that they are grouped and clustered most generally along the lines of their relation to three meanings of technics: 1) as technique characteristic to a specific medium, which is a meaning used in terms such as self-referentiality or collage; 2) as a machine which often features as a dominant motif in postmodern representations of electronic circuits and virtual realities; and finally 3) as a Foucauldian dispositif, the ideological and repressive apparatus of power. Among postmodern writers and critics, the spectrum of attitudes towards technicity is broad and ranges between the extremes of admiration and fearful rejection, between technophilia and technophobia, often within the same work. The binary opposition of technophilia and technophobia creates a lot of confusion – a writer, a visual artist, and a critic can be at the same time a technophobe and a technophile depending on how we define “ techno.” For example, Thomas Pynchon is a technophile when it comes to his preoccupation with cybernetics which “helps him to evoke the sublime,” but he is a technophobe in his suspicion towards power cartels. His technophilic critic Joseph Tabbi, the author of Postmodern Sublime and Cognitive Fictions recognizes Pynchon’s interest in technology, but reads this engagement as cognitive realism, i.e. the “new mimeticism” of human cognition processes: “In the sublime moments when Pynchon manages to break out of the closed loop of endless self-referentiality, he forges new realism of cognitive processes” (Tabbi 45). Another postmodern writer, David Foster Wallace is skeptical towards modern technologies, particularly those of television and the way in which it colonizes human mind and infects creativity, to the point of making television the main theme of his writing. However, his technophile critics like Katherine Hayles portray him as the ultimate posthumanist scriptor (Hayles 676). Finally, while the tech-loving hackers in cyberpunk plots of William Gibson or Neal Stephenson openly hate the economy’s control mechanisms, critics like Andrew Ross interpret this anti-apparatus-ness as covertly complacent with market-economy (Ross). What is the underlying logic of those contradictions?

In Technics and Time, Bernard Stiegler argues that the notion of technics has been problematic in the philosophical and aesthetic tradition for centuries, since the beginnings of Western philosophy. Stiegler posits that the first can be traced to Aristotle’s distinction between beings formed by nature, which had within
themselves a beginning of movement and rest, and man-made objects, which did not have the source of their own production within themselves. Between living animate beings, humans, and their inanimate tools. According to Stiegler, this separation and the subsequent privileging of the animate human over the inanimate technical was achieved at the cost of misrecognizing the technical origin of humanity. As he puts it, the human subject is a technical being, whose life is “epiphylogenetic,” i.e. it evolves according to the logic of prosthetic supplementation (Stiegler 142). In other words, human life is recorded and sustained not only through genes but also by technical means like handwriting, pictures, or print which prove essential to its status quo. Stiegler explains the epistemological disorientation within the concept of technics by pointing to its relation to the notion of time and temporality. Inherent in the Greek idea of technics are two “figures of temporalization” (two ways of conceptualizing time): prometheia and epimetheia, which stem from the names of two Titan gods, Prometheus and Epimetheus (Stiegler 184–185). The idea of temporality associated with Prometheus, the thoughtful god of technical foresight, the inventor of prosthetics, is one that associates technics with innovation and establishes in Western thought the plot of anticipation as technophilia. At the same time, there is the plot of Epimetheus, the forgetful brother, who is faulted for his brother’s and all humans’ suffering due to his lack of foresight. He is the epitome of foresight’s evil twin — hindsight. Epimetheia thus figures the temporal structure of forgetfulness underpinned with what we might call “retrospective technophobia” (Stiegler 184). It is a reflexivity post factum, based on experience. Epimetheia is the knowledge that arises from the accumulation of experience through the mediation of past faults — it is a painfully gained suspicion towards “apparatus-ness.” The two plots inaugurate the paradigm of thinking about time in linear terms of before and after, of anticipation and retrospection. However, even though both prometheia and epimetheia establish in the Western tradition the complex bond between instrumentality, time, and mortality, however, it is the Promethean part of the plot that dominates Western attitude towards technology while the Epimethean origin of the latter tends to be repressed. This, according to Stiegler is precisely the source of complicated relationship we maintain with technology, a relationship in which love for technology and fear of technology intertwine. Stiegler’s Technics and Time offers an extensive analysis of how the repressed Epimethean error comes back and manifests itself, for example, in Platonic stigmatization of writing as a utensil, in Heidegger’s conflation of technicity and inauthenticity, which stems, on the one hand, from a misrecognition of the fact that “technics, far from being merely in time, constitutes time,” and on the other hand, from a consequent erroneous rendition of Dasein’s temporality, its self-orientation vis a vis its past and its future (Stiegler 27).

The plot persists even after the Aristotelian distinction between organic animated and inorganic inanimate beings loses validity, in the era of technical moder-
nity, with the invention of inorganic animate apparatuses. Technological revolution produces the steam engine, powering machines that move as-if on their own. At this historical moment, technics which has always appeared to be in the service of humanity, which is supposed to be a mere extension of humanity’s will, becomes autonomous from the instance it empowers and, as a result, it does disservice to humanity, that is insofar as humanity communicates, makes decisions, and assumes individual form. This paradox was captured by Karl Marx who wrote: “technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from these relations” (Marx 493 n. 4). Technical evolution organizes the space and time of our ways of working, consuming leisure, and thinking, and it also controls the class and status relations within society as well as cultural and political wars and revolutions.

If one looks at the history of modernity, the list of philosophers and critics whose ideas are built upon this paradoxical, mutual inherence of technophobia and technophilia is very long. From Rousseau for whom technical evolution means destruction of human’s natural nobility to Foucault’s double edged notion of power as pouvoir and puissance, Roland Barthes’s thanatological discourse on photography in Camera Lucida established upon the binarism of studium and punctum and their inherent temporalities, or Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto.” Indeed, as David Wills points out in Dorsality: Thinking back Through Technology and Politics, the most powerful 20th century models of subject formation by means of some self-effacing instrument of misrecognition such as, e.g. Lacanian register of the Imaginary which involves the motif of the mirror, or Althusser’s concept of interpellation as based on the dispositif of hailing individuals into becoming Subjects-of-ideology are vivid instances of how the paradoxes of Epimethean plot return in the form of philosophical suspiciousness towards “apparatus-ness” (Wills).

Stiegler’s argument about how the complicated libidinal economies of thinking about technicity transpire in the discourse of philosophy offers a useful interpretative framework for exploring the contradictory attitudes towards technicity in the realm of aesthetics. If the temporal dynamics of our life today relies on its entanglement with animated products of technics, then every narrative that tries to describe way of being, thinking, and feeling will restage the mutuality and permeability of the ideas of technics and time. This is especially true for contemporary modes of living and creating in technologically advanced world where the binarism of animateness/inanimateness is less and less difficult to define. Indeed, it seems that it is not so much the idea of technics as such that creates the confusion of technophobic and technophilic attitudes and aesthetic modes, but rather the idea of animation, the life-like mobility of the technical instrument. This draws our attention to a specific understanding of time that seems to have developed
alongside technological evolution. This specific understanding is that time is per-
ceivable along the lines of the distinction between animation/activity/movement
on the one side, and inanimateness/lack of movement/passivity on the other. It is
the precisely the opposition between movement and stasis that organizes the way
we perceive time. That this paradigmatic opposition between activity and passiv-
ity (albeit present since antiquity) was radically redefined by the technological
revolution of the 19th century finds its repercussions in the aesthetic regimes ac-
companying different stages of this revolution: in romanticism, realism, modern-
ism, and postmodernism.

Romantic response to the technological revolution took the form of the pasto-
ral. As Raymond Williams observes, pastoralism in romantic painting and litera-
ture is a gesture of repressing and retouching the mechanical character of modern
life. But the romantic pastoral subject does not simply reject technological influ-
ence. Rather, he/she confronts it in the mode of the sublime experience, which
is, if you remember Kant’s definition of the sublime, a recognition of the limits
of one’s own cognitive horizon. In the sublime experience, the mind registers the
overwhelming surplus of the world moving around it – this is called “dynamic
sublime” – and admits its inferiority to this surplus which it cannot usurp into its
cognitive horizon (“mathematical sublime”) (Kant). In his argument from Rheto-
ric of Temporality, Paul de Man has identified this paradox of the romantic subject
who partakes of the moving greatness only through a momentary arrestment of
its own mobility (Man). Viewed through the prism of its relation to technicity, the
romantic idea of the sublime appears to be a conceptual figuration of certain type
of passivity of the mind which nevertheless entails an activity of some higher
order. When Whitman leans and loaves at his ease in Song of Myself, he’s getting
more of a “real experience” from it than if he were busy mowing the grass with a
scythe.

In the aesthetics of realism, the answer to the technological origin of tempo-
rality is not lamented. The decorous mimetism, its meandering “searches for the
lost time” or “portraits” of the present social moment texturize the peculiar kind
of mechanical movement inaugurated by technological revolution by autopsying
the fragmentation of the social organism and of the lifetime of its members. Real-
ism frames momentary freezes of time, it selects and arranges them, selects and
concatenates them, and like film which gives the appearance of continuity to a
series of images, it naturalizes fragmentation. The realist re-invention of the novel
with its emphasis on continuity of action offers a refuge from the discontinuity
of daily life and is of crucial importance. It serves to defend the special position
of the work of literature in the life of the moderns. How strategic this position is
becomes evident in modernism.

Modernism, historically the first aesthetic trend entirely reliant on the tech-
nological and economic changes, distances itself from those changes with fierce
avant-garde language that denounces past artistic tradition, embraces innovative-
ness, and declares autonomy of art from life. But the declaration such as Ezra Pound’s famous claim that artists are the antennae of the race contest rather than validate those claims. Modernist artists are products of the technological advancement as well as beneficiaries of the social distinction it threatens to destroy between the forces of production whose shallow lives are tied to the schedule of technical advancement, and, on the other hand, the consumers of their labour who can do something else with their time, the makers and consumers of high art. To preserve this distinction, the status of artistic activity needs to be refashioned in order to strengthen the strategic, autonomous status of the work of art, the work of literature. This need is satisfied by the appropriation of the revolutionary rhetoric of movement and change into the realm of aesthetics and the apparent fascination with mechanical movement. This is where modernism stages a total destabilization within the opposition between activity and passivity, and so also within the very perception of time. Life-altering, vitality-bringing action/movement is abstracted from real life activity, and displaced into the realm of artistic activity. The mobility of the regular activities of real life, e.g. life on the street, in a metro station, on the war front, is passivized and devoid of significance by the shackles of technological advancement. In the famous images such as Malevitch’s revolving knife-grinder or Navidson’s approaching ship is encapsulated not so much the movement of those life-improving devices, but rather, the artist’s creative agility experienced in temporality separate from that of everyday life. Modernist philosophical ideas, such as Bergson’s *elan vital* (a galloping creative life-force) and *intuition* (mobile thinking), seem to confirm the transposition of the idea of machinic movement from the modern machine to the human subject.

The transposition of the idea of technically empowered movement from the machine to the human subject that starts to be thinkable in modernism becomes the main theme in the discourse of the postmodern. Postmodern art, literature and criticism are all preoccupied with the concept of movement, action and the way they write about it captures the mechanism of the aforementioned transposition of movement. Given the historical context of postmodernist aesthetics, namely, the political protests of the Civil Rights movement and anti-war protests, the preoccupation with mobility and action seems to be perfectly in tune with the democratic dynamics of liberation politics. In fact, the majority of critics agree that the democratic differential is the only distinguishing criterion between the aesthetic modes of modernism and postmodernism, especially in the case of the classical postmodernism of the 60s and 70s. But are the ideas of movement on the aesthetic plane and of movement on the political plane really so harmonious? If modernism abstracted movement from the sphere of ordinary life, then this very idea of movement, movement as such seems to create a rather false and superficial link between political liberation and aesthetic emancipation. There is no actual correspondence between the postmodern theme of movement and political action and the entire illusion of correspondence rests on a specific understanding of
movement. One way to illustrate this point is to look at the kind of postmodern texts which engage the dialectic of the aesthetic and the political, namely, the so-called postmodern manifestos.

One of the first expressions of the postmodern habit of thought comes in Harold Rosenberg’s 1962 *Tradition of the New*. In his famous tribute to Action Painting, Harold Rosenberg writes: “at a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter as an arena in which to *act*. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to *do* something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image will be the result of this encounter [my emphasis]” (Rosenberg 2005, 25). In other words, Jackson Pollock’s drip painting texturizes the activity of his hand and thus also the activity of his mind in the process of painting. The painter, Rosenberg writes “lives through the instrumentality of his materials,” thus creating a new mode of representation without mediation, a mode of abolishing the classical distinction between art and life (1982, 19). Thus, as Jerome Klinkowitz observes, “what is created is the artist’s self, and the emphasis on action above order means the self can be remade at will” (7).

Notably, Harold Rosenberg links this new referentiality – what we usually call “self-referentiality” – with the idea of democracy. He asks: “What could be more immediate and more democratic?” Rosenberg’s answer is: action painting is a performance in which viewers participate in action through “concentration, relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting” (Rosenberg 2005). Apparently, the abolition of the classical distinction between art and life is somewhat limited. It is available only to the person of the action artist, while his audience’s capacity to act is suspended. In political terms, it is not exactly pro-democratic to suggest to people that they relax their will and wait passively. Despite its egalitarian claims, Rosenberg’s concatenation of activity, affirmation of instrumental prosthecity, the idea of a capacity “to re-make oneself at will” and the idea of democracy, does not democratically abolish the division between those who can act and those who have to watch and wait. The sphere of the artist is still a privileged one.

But if one amplifies the historical context of the Vietnam War, in which the discourse on action painting originated, one might add that Rosenberg’s definition of activity as the performance of the artist’s mind, as self-referentiality, is very peculiar from the perspective of what action feels like in the historical reality of the 60s. The year when *Tradition of the New* is published, 1962, is the year, (the second year in a row) when the U.S. triple they troop levels on the Vietnam front. The discourse of Rosenberg that defines action as “an inspired act of doing nothing, nothing other than self-affirmation of the artist” abstracts the logic of action-taking from the real conditions of people’s existence, where action has little to do with self-affirmation, and wilful performativity, but rather with mechanical subservience to the system. The strange definition of action assigns it to the artistic sphere of those who enjoy more freedom from the hands of the power apparatus.
The relation between the idea of freedom and technics features prominently in one of the founding texts of postmodernism, “Against Interpretation” by Susan Sontag. In her 1966 protest against interpretations that privilege content over the form of the works of art, Sontag, similarly to Rosenberg, mobilizes the opposition between movement and stasis, activity and passivity. The existing modes of interpretation are “stifling” “rudimentary, uninspired and stagnant” to the point of offending “real art” which tries to “liberate” itself from their constraints: “The most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation. [...] Interpretation is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, and stifling. It makes art manageable, conformable” (Sontag 10–11). Translation: thinking about what things mean is totally bourgeois, it is not active interaction with artistic medium. If we pursue interpretative schema, we prove we are just cogs in the “elaborate” machine of the “system” which is not the same as being active. Real activity is “to see more, to hear more, to feel more” – to activate your sensorium and thus uncover “art’s liberating value” (Sontag 11). In an almost exact paraphrase of Whitman’s “I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass” Sontag proposes a curious idea of being active which, however motionless in its structure (one just liberates one’s senses and emote with form, with words, brushstrokes, and colours), nevertheless entails energy and intensity of feeling. Motionlessness is so to speak an activity of a higher order. As Rancière argues in Aisthesis, the idea of leisure, rest, passivity being actually an activity of a different order is inherent in the romantic logic of the sublime, which in turn goes down to the classical Platonic distinction between two social groups: the group of people called “action men,” who are born for higher purposes and enjoy plenty of free time, and the group of people called the “mechanical men” whose existence is organized by the schedule of mechanical labor and who lack free time in which they could do noble things (Rancière, Aisthesis). From this angle, Sontag’s argument can be summarized as follows: art is in danger, because the hermeneutic models have made it too accessible; it is accessible to everyone who learns the technique of interpreting. One must therefore “defend” it, so that only those chosen few who have the right means, i.e. who have a lot of free time, can retain access to it. In a 2001 interview she would add: “I’m actually against interpretation, because I’m against facile transposition and the making of cheap equivalences.” Inherent in Sontag’s division into active passivity of interpretation and active activity of the senses are two conceptions of technicity: interpretative techniques are inferior, mechanical, run-of-the-mill, while the instrumentarium of the senses, the sensorium, is entirely superior, human, not-mechanical. How can this self-contradictory idea that passivity encapsulates true vitality be at all thinkable? The answer might be traced to one of the founding text of romantic aesthetics, namely, Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man. One proposition
that Schiller makes is that art is a way of becoming a better human being. How is it capable of this moral miracle? Because it ignites in us an impulsion called “play drive” (Spieltrieb). The play drive is a kind of instinct/impulsion which reconciles two other impulsions within human nature: the rational, responsible side of human nature that desires stagnation called Formtrieb and its opposite, the ever restless irrational life-drive called Sinntrieb. Schiller says the play drive arrests the ever moving compass of Formtrieb’s essential passivity and Sinnestrieb’s essential restlessness:

The sensuous impulsion requires that there should be change, that time should have contents; the formal impulsion requires that time should be suppressed, that there should be no change. Consequently, the impulsion in which both of the others act in concert—the instinct of play—would have as its object to suppress time in time to conciliate the state of transition or becoming with the absolute being, change with identity […] the instinct of play, which unites the double action of the two other instincts, will content the mind at once morally and physically. (Schiller “Letter XIV”)

Not only does the play drive, through art, set your mind at peace and give pleasure, but it also arrests time in time. It suspends the temporality of everyday experience in a temporality of a different kind, as in an experience of watching a performance in theatre, when one is transported to a somehow different surplus time, while one’s regular life waits outside the door. Schillerian idea that art allows a surplus temporality is also inextricably linked with the post-romantic, or modernist notion of the autonomous status of art as the realm of excess, of overabundance of experience in the frozen basin of time.

Apparently then, the relationship between art and technology is structured upon the ethical regime, to use Rancière’s term, that regulates the ways we think about freedom and autonomy in temporal terms as functions of having free time. If in the history of postmodernism, Rosenberg and Sontag figure as those responsible for creating the postmodern climate of thought, similar ideas are also expressed in literary manifestos. Here too, one may observe regularities with regard to how postmodern writers picture animation and movement. The first of those, published in 1964 by Donald Barthelme under the title “After Joyce” spells it out very clearly. Barthelme begins by quoting Kenneth Burke and his claim that artists turn their backs on community when they pursue their “otherworldly” projects, and thinks that Burke is entirely incorrect (Barthelme and Herzinger 4). However, rather than explaining “the sticky question” of artists’ social involvement, he goes on to assert that “real” question is: what is the status of a literary object? In Barthelme’s words, it is an autonomous object of the world, “which is there, like a rock or a refrigerator” and into which readers “bump” (Barthelme and Herzinger 4). “The reader reconstitutes the work by his active participation, by approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roar-
ing within,” BUT “it is characteristic of the object that it does not declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant naïveté: “It is a lifetime project [...] the book remains always there” (4). No doubt this description is slightly more egalitarian than the ideas of Rosenberg and Sontag; it renders the reader as an “active participant” of the aesthetic experience. But the reader’s temporality quickly turns out to be always outlived by that of the literary object. How is the durability/permanence of the literary object achieved, according to Barthelme? It is made possible by the effort of the artist: “he proceeds like a man weaving a blanket of what might be found in a hardware store. The strangeness of his project is an essential part of it, almost its point. The fabric falls apart, certainly, but when it hangs together we are privileged to encounter a world made new” (Barthelme and Herzinger 5).

Barthelme’s writer is a busy alchemist and we are his privileged audience. This brings to mind the memorable scene in Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* where Oedipa Maas reminisces about seeing a painting of Remedios Varo entitled “Embroidering the Mantle of the World” which figures an alchemist on top of a tower, creating golden threads out of which a number of “frail girls” weave the tapestry which forms the world of the painting. Oedipa stands in front of the painting and cries, but “having no apparatus except her gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic,” she doesn’t know what to do, although she will later waste all her life energy on searching for an answer (Pynchon 21). The only person who has “the apparatus” to understand this blanket weaved out of various things is the alchemist, the writer.

Barthelme says it is the artist’s technical skill that makes the literary object a work of art, and no amount of tapping and shaking by the reader can equal this capacity. And when he discusses modes of releasing this skill, he delves further into the language of technicity. According to Barthelme, there are two modes of weaving literary blankets: that of aggression and that of play. The mode of aggression he illustrates with William Burroughs’s cut-up method. It is “a ticking bomb” in the hands of the reader who is “wounded and mutilated” by it. It is a weapon which threatens to destroy the reader’s sense of integrity. It is like fire given to the humans in the Promethean plot. The second technique employed by writers is that of play. Here, Barthelme’s example is Beckett and the procedure is that of reductionism, of throwing things like plot, social fact, character away and retaining “as the irreducible minimum a search for the meanings to be gleaned from all possible combinations of all words in all languages” (Barthelme and Herzinger 7). It’s like Epimetheus’s scattering of divine gifts away and facing the unexpected finale. (A-THROWING). Clearly, if we try to make sense of the military metaphor of the bomb and the Schillerian mechanism of the play drive, then it appears than just as Barthelme moves freely between different registers of the technical, his artist, a busy master of technical skill can borrow from the popular technologies of film, audio cassettes, posters, TV programs as well as the higher kind of techniques like self-referentiality, and linguistic freplay. The artist’s freedom confirms the
privileged status of the book, which Barthelme so openly glorifies as that which withstands all time.

In a much less poetic way, John Barth in “Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) openly speaks in defense of the privileged place of art and the artist. Voicing Son-tag’s elitist concerns, he states his preference for “art that not many people can do, the kind that requires expertise and artistry, that is worth doing” (Barth 65–66). While less poetic than Barthelme, Barth is definitely very precise about how the specific temporality of the book is engineered. What is most notable about his argument is that he explains how art should be done via a strangely self-contradictory reference to technological evolution: “I sympathize with a remark that to be technically up-to-date is the least important attribute of a writer – though I would add that this least important attribute may be nevertheless essential” (Barth 66).

So least or most important? When Barth distinguishes between the three groups of non-technically up-to-date artists, technically up-to-date non-artists, and technically up-to-date artists, the logic of his argument becomes clear. The technically old-fashioned artists are writers creating traditional realist fiction. To the second category of technically up-to-date non-artists there belong all pop, performance artists, as well as all those who stick together bubble gum wrappers and call it art. But there is finally the category of technically up-to-date artists, exemplified by Jorge Louis Borges. Borges is called technically up-to-date not because there is any technology in his stories, but because his sole preoccupation is the medium of the book. Borges’s metafictional books about books about books are, for Barth, *Perpetuum Mobiles*, machines producing perpetual motion without end. The artist who creates them, creates permanent movement of language that freed from the human agency can go on and on and on, on its own. One might add here that poststructuralist theory and Derridean deconstruction, terms like freeplay of meaning, floating signifiers etc. is a version of the idea. Books embody perpetual movement.

Barth’s and Barthelme’s contemporary, William Gass in another postmodern manifesto “The Medium of Fiction” puts it as follows:

> in the hollow of a jaw, the ear, upon the page, concepts now begin to move: they appear, accelerate, they race, they hesitate a moment, slow, turn, break, join, modify. Truly (that is to say technically), narration is that part of the art of fiction concerned with the coming on and passing of words – not the familiar arrangement of words in dry strings like so many shriveled worms, but their formal direction and rapidity. (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy 2490)

Postmodern books embody permanent movement. Strange thing to say in the time of the emergence of electronic media, video installations, and elaborate cybernetic systems. The book seems to be the only medium among those that does not move on its own. The print marks just sit there on the page.
All in all, therefore, the idea of free movement, the self-perpetuating movement does not seem to correspond on a one-to-one basis to the idea of the democratization on the level of social hierarchies, because the movement within a literary work is a symptom of its emancipation from the social level to the level of a surplus temporal realm of the book. But the fact that that the literary work has no contact with life and reality as we know it, does not mean it cannot change our perception of this reality. The assertion of self-perpetuating movement does not confirm the literary medium but rather transforms the very idea of a medium, from something organically linked to the human to something released from the grip of the human. To explain this point let me come back for a moment to the literary manifestos.

“Innovative Fiction/Innovative Criteria” is an essay written several years after “Literature of Exhaustion” and “The Medium of Fiction” by the now mostly forgotten Ronald Sukenick. Like his contemporaries, Sukenick centers his essay on the bizarre conception of a moving novel. He writes:

the American novel until the end of the sixties was so static that we have not yet fully understood how parochial and narrow the accepted literary norm for fiction had become. Properly speaking, there is no such thing as “innovative fiction.” The novel is innovation. Fiction is the most fluid and changing of literary forms. (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy 2488)

What is the reason for this special status of the book? Sukenick’s answer is only implicit. He says despite fiction’s great power there is a decline in its popularity because film has taken its readers away:

people no longer believe in the novel as a medium that gets at the truth of their lives. The form of fiction that comes down to us through Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Hemingway is no longer adequate to capture our experience. Either the novel will change, or it will die. (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy 2489)

So the novel is fluidity, but it has to emphasize it for people to like it: “it must make maximum expressive use of all elements of the printed page, including the relation of print to blank page.” The new criteria are: “not plot, but ongoing incident; not characterization, but consciousness struggling with circumstance; not social realism, but a sense of situation; and so on” (Sukenick 2488). In other words, in order to change, the novel has to resemble the moving images.

It has to live, Sukenick says, because unlike film, it “rescues the truth of our experience” as it “transmits feeling, energy, excitement” (2488, 2487). In other words, the medium of print is closer to the human mind than that of film because it is “substantial” rather than “superficial” (2487). The moving text is distinguished from the moving image by the quality of the temporality it produces rather than its mere quantity.
Let us not be misled by the apparent reciprocity between the discourse of the postmodernists and the avant-garde gestures of the modernists. What sounds like a modernist manner of self-defense is not a simple extension of the avant-garde demands for the autonomy of the artistic sphere. Postmodernism is a distinct mode of intelligibility, so its fixation on the idea of movement, whether figured as self-referentiality, metafiction, intertextuality or play is not simply the affirmation and rehabilitation of the medium of the book as opposed to the cybernetic systems, personal computers, mixed-media arts, and easy mechanized entertainment of its time. The fetishizing of inorganic animation of the book occasions a paradigmatic shift in the ways in which we think about the very idea of medium and mediation. The previously untouched principle of the medium as a prosthetic extension of the human is transformed, thus making it possible to think of the medium as a self-perpetuating entity. This change finds reflection not just in fiction or literary manifestos, of course, but also in postmodern theory, such as Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Massage*, Lyotard’s embracement of the loss of the referent, to name just a few. It is generally accepted that this ideological reform is tied to the changes brought by the post WW2 electronic revolution, the science of cybernetics with its interest in artificial intelligence, the global dissemination of capitalism. But, although the cybernetic concept of the feedback loop and autopoietic system are related to the change within the concept of mediation, the relation between the postmodern fetish – movement – and the feedback loop of the human-computer interface is as direct as the majority of critics assert. The fact that cybernetics, the study of information networks appears after WW2 does not explain why everything is in constant motion (i.e. nothing is anchored, pinned down) in postmodern books. It seems therefore that postmodern fascination with self-perpetuation is symptomatic of a delayed internalization by the literary medium of the great shift of technological revolution. The animated mechanicity of the earlier epoch is finally restaged in the artistic field, through the postmodern fascination with the bare medium of print. Postmodern literature does not explain anything about the world, but it claims to offer an encounter with the essential achievement of technological revolution – with what appears to be the self-perpetuating movement.

Except that, as the 2\textsuperscript{nd} law of thermodynamics tells us, at least for the moment, the construction of *Perpetuum Mobile* is an impossibility. There always needs to be some alchemist or Maxwell’s demon to monitor the process, there needs to be a controlling agency that sanctions the surplus of energy and its distribution and there needs to be some source of energy supply, otherwise the moving machine will reach absolute zero and die. Thomas Pynchon’s choice of entropy, the measure of energy dispersal, as the central motif of his writing seems to hit the right spot in the postmodern treatment of the categories of a) movement and b) total arrestment of activity. If we look at the literary trends in the later phases
of postmodernism such as for example the cyberpunk fiction of the 80s, or the post-postmodernism of the 90s, it becomes clear that the idea of disembodied motion established in the early days of postmodern aesthetics breeds an obsession with technicity but at the same time creates complications with regard to the issues of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to movement. In a way, the emergence of the problematics of the body in art and philosophy in the last decades of the 20th century might be read as an aftermath of the postmodern affair with the idea of movement.

References


