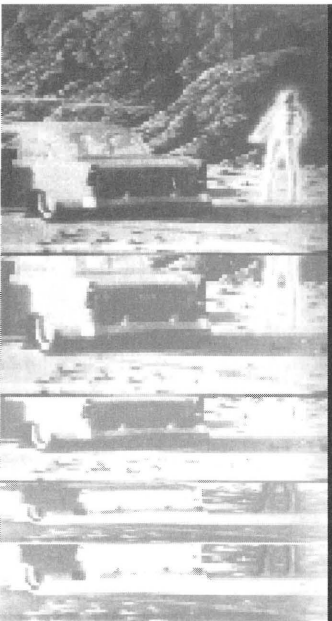


Carole Ann Klonarides is the media arts curator at the Long Beach Museum in California. She melds ideas and techniques of television and video art to make widely accessible work and to educate viewers about her media. Her work has received much recognition from Europe in festivals including Documenta in Germany. In addition to producing her own tapes, Klonarides has been curating video shows for clubs, public spaces and cable television.



Jameson's Complaint:

Video-Art and the Intertextual "Time-Wall"

Nicholas Zurbrugg

Fredric Jameson
Raymond Williams
László Moholy-Nagy
Nam June Paik
Charles Jencks
Jean Baudrillard
Roland Barthes
Luis Buñuel
John Cage
André Breton
Robbe-Grillet
Alexi Gan
Laurie Anderson
Hans Haacke
Robert Rauschenberg
Rosalind Krauss
Vito Acconci
Mona da Vinci

Peter Campus
Charlotte Moorman
Gregory Battcock
Heiner Müller
Marc Chagall
Paul Klee
Louis Aragon
Robert Wilson
William Burroughs
Stefan Brecht
Kasimir Malevich
Richard Wagner
Anders Stephanson
Renato Poggioli
Jean François Lyotard

School of Arts and Humanities
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester LE1 9BH
United Kingdom

Visible Language, 29:2
Nicholas Zurbrugg, 214-237

© *Visible Language*, 1995
Rhode Island School of Design
2 College Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

A rejoinder to
Fredric Jameson,
*Reading Without
Interpretation:
Postmodernism and
the Video Text.*

Fredric Jameson has argued that television is entirely superficial and flat; hence, it is incapable of haunting the mind by leaving afterimages or traces. Jameson calls this a “structural exclusion of memory” endemic to the medium of video.

He also has reservations about what Raymond Williams called the “total flow” of broadcast television: whereas “programming” cuts up the flow into convenient temporal segments, Jameson’s complaint is that one no longer has any “form” which can be objectivized or set apart as something particular to be remembered.

Television, in short, is too close to an ordinary mode of perception in which everything is experienced as the succession of fleeting moments. This means that television is connotative rather than denotative; impressionistic rather than objective.

Television reduces everything to a flow and in so doing effaces difference, whereas art can arrest or disrupt the ongoing temporality of moment-to-moment experience.

In critiquing Jameson, Zurbrugg argues that video art encourages self-analysis and allows for a critical examination of culture.

Video art is polemical in that it creates strategies whereby the viewer is disoriented and required to think about his or her own processes of perception and cognition.

That postmodernism offers exciting new discursive spaces is central to Zurbrugg’s outlook and contrasts with the gloomy pessimism of Jameson.

autonomous art
video installations
multimedia
performance
Travels in Hyperreality
objective literature
precession of simulacra
observable dreams
Silence
TV Bra for Living Sculpture
modernism
postmodernism
constructivism

*Art may often appear bare of ideological clarity
in the sense of a social program.*

*However, the artist is not a propagandist
but more than any other person,
a seismograph of his time and its direction,
who consciously or unconsciously
expresses its substance.*

László Moholy-Nagy

- Moholy-Nagy*
- As Moholy-Nagy suggests,¹ innovative art appears most significant as a 'seismograph' of the directions of its time. More than any other practices, video-art and its multimedia corollaries point to the new directions and substance of present times, challenging familiar cultural expectations.
- Video's fulfillment of modernism
- Benjamin*
- The general impact of video is at least twofold. First, as Walter Benjamin virtually predicted, video realizes modernism's vague aspirations toward "effects which could only be obtained by a changed technical standard."² Video *is* this changed technical standard. Second, as a specifically postmodern technology interacting and intersecting with other older genres, video precipitates an increasingly prevalent multimedia sensibility.
- Video, multimedia & postmodernism
- Arguably, the most compelling examples of distinctively *post*-modern creativity emerge within video-art and its multimedia adjuncts. Any understanding of contemporary culture would therefore seem to necessitate examination of both video's authorial taped works, its more impersonal installations and of those new modes of multimedia performance combining live and technological materials or redefining theater in terms of video's special qualities.
- Multimedia & generational break
- Eco*
- Ironically, as Umberto Eco points out in his articles on the new media, those "trained by the texts of twenty years ago" often seem quite helpless before multimedia art. By contrast, younger generations born within the welter of the new media "instinctively... know these things better than some seventy-year-old pedagogue," having "absorbed as elements of their behavior a series of elements filtered through the mass media (and coming, in some cases, from the most impenetrable areas of our century's artistic experimentation)."³
- Modern & postmodern
- Paik
Wilson
Jencks*
- At its most positive extreme, postmodern creativity exhibits identical virtues. Absorbing and internalizing the lessons of modernism's most impenetrable experimentation, and at the same time mastering the more "impenetrable" advances in late twentieth century technology, postmodern video artists such as

1. Moholy-Nagy, László. 1947. *Vision in Motion*. Chicago, Theobald, 352.

2. Benjamin, Walter. 1955. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Reprinted in Zohn, Harry, translator. 1979. *Illuminations*. Glasgow: Collins, 239.

3. Eco, Umberto. 1987. *Travels in Hyperreality*. London: Picador, 147, 149, 214-215.

Nam June Paik and postmodern multimedia artists such as Robert Wilson create the quintessentially late-twentieth century art that conservative critics such as Charles Jencks have incredulously characterized as that “strange even paradoxical thing”: an “art more modern than modern” and “more avant-garde” than the modernist avant-garde.⁴

Theories of
postmodernism

Jencks
Jameson

At its most misleading extreme, the postmodern cultural theory of critics such as Jencks and Fredric Jameson dismisses contemporary technological creativity in far more negative terms. Postmodern culture, it seems, coincides with the “deaths” of authoriality, originality, spirituality, monumentality, beauty, profundity – everything, in fact, except apocalyptic cliché. According to Jencks, for example, postmodern culture subverts the ideals of the modernist tradition in “a series of self-cancelling steps”; reduces art and music to the “all white canvas” and “absolute silence”; and transforms its public into “lobotomized mass-media illiterates.”⁵

Mass-media illiteracy

Baudrillard
Paik

Jencks’ concept of the “mass-media illiterate” has an unexpected double-edge. On the one hand, it obviously refers to those nurtured on televised kitsch, incapable of reading anything more challenging than comic-book captions. But as recent discussion of postmodern video-art suggests, the same formulation also applies to theorists nurtured on the printed page: those who vaguely sense the significance of video-art, but who find themselves incapable of deliberating upon it in anything other than derisive terminology. Jean Baudrillard, for example, hails video as “the special effect of our time,” but in the next breath rather ambiguously applauds and deplores video for its “intensity on the surface” and its “insignificance in depth.”⁶

In much the same way, Fredric Jameson emphasizes the central priority of video, and half-heartedly acknowledges that video artists such as Nam June Paik have “identified a whole range of things to do and then moved in to colonize this new space.”⁷ Thereafter, Jameson damns Paik’s work with extremely faint praise. Apparently

-
4. Jencks, Charles. 1987. *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*. London: Academy Editions, 12.
 5. Jencks, *Post-Modernism...*, 12.
 6. Baudrillard, Jean. 1986. *Amérique*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 74, author’s translation.
 7. Jameson, Fredric. 1987. interviewed by Anders Stephanson in *Flash Art*, 131, December/January, 72.

alluding approvingly to Paik's "quintessentially postmodern dispositions." Jameson adds the scathing afterthought, "only the most misguided museum visitor would look for art in the content of the video images themselves."⁸

Surely the reverse obtains. Only the most misguided or the most cynical museum visitor would suppose that Paik's work consists solely of discursive self-referentiality. The lines above typify the way in which Jameson's deliberations upon postmodern video-art, and upon postmodern culture in general, project their own conceptual confusion upon such subject matter. As I shall suggest, Jameson appears the victim of two afflictions: his tendency toward premature exasperation and his more general disadvantage as one of the many contemporary intellectuals who appear trapped behind what one might think of as the intertextual "time-wall."

These complaints become most explicit in Jameson's recent article entitled "Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text" (1987);⁹ an essay fatally informed by over-literal responses to Roland Barthes' provocative overstatements in "The Death of the Author" (1968).¹⁰ Parisian polemic has long perfected exaggeration and heuristic hyperbole into something of an artform; a tradition which culminates in Baudrillard's seductive "fictionizing."¹¹ One thinks, for example, of the impossibly inflexible imperatives of surrealists such as Luis Buñuel or André Breton. Declaring that "nothing" in his film *Un Chien andalou* "symbolizes anything," Buñuel relates that this work's scenario evolved according to strict adherence to principles determining that:¹²

When an image or idea appeared the collaborators discarded it immediately if it was derived from remembrance, or from their cultural pattern, or if, simply, it had a conscious association with another earlier idea. They accepted only those representations as valid which, though they moved them profoundly, had no possible explanation.

Reading without
Interpretation &
its sources

Barthes
Baudrillard
Buñuel
Breton

8. Jameson, Fredric. 1988. *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography*. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 18.

9. Jameson, Fredric. 1987. "Reading without Interpretation: Post-modernism and the Video-Text," in Fabb, Nigel et al, editors. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. All references to this essay appear as parenthetical page numbers in my text.

10. Barthes, Roland. 1977. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. Glasgow: Collins, 142-148. where all subsequent references to this essay appear in my text.

11. Baudrillard, Jean. 1986. "L'Amérique comme fiction," an interview with Jacques Henric and Guy Scapata. Art Press, 103, 41; my translation in *Eyeline*, 5, 24.

12. Buñuel, Luis. 1978. "Notes on the Making of Un Chien Andalou," in Mellen, Joan, editor. *The World of Luis Buñuel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 153.

As Buñuel observes, his fidelity to the articles of surrealism proved supremely impractical. Faced with the possibility that the supposedly subversive *Un Chien andalou* might become a public success, and confronted by Breton's astonishing question: "are you with the police or with us?" Buñuel "suggested that we burn the negative on the Place du Tetre in Mont-martre, something I would have done without hesitation had the group agreed to it."¹³ Jameson's pursuit of Barthes' early ideals leads to much the same kind of self-destructive logic as that born of Buñuel's dedication to surrealism's pope.

Buñuel's and Jameson's conclusions offer a pleasing asymmetry. While the former defends authorial insight and scorns cultural convention, the latter reasserts Barthes' claim that texts contain no other content than a "performative" function. According to "The Death of the Author":

The fact is... that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction'... rather, it designates exactly what linguists... call a performative... in which the enunciation has no other content... than the act by which it is uttered.(145-146)

Authorship & denial

Barthes
Wilde
Dickens

Taken to its extreme, Barthes' argument pronounces:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered, the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking), at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath. (147)

Somewhat as Wilde protested that only those with hearts of stone could resist laughing at Dickens' description of the death of Little Nell, one suspects that only the most fossilized structuralist could fail to smile before Barthes' contentious diagnosis of the "death" of the author. Jameson takes this hypothesis very seriously. Recycling it some twenty years after its initial formulation, he defines video as:

a structure or sign-flow which resists meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of themes... and which therefore systematically sets out to short-circuit traditional interpretive temptations. (219)

13. Buñuel, Luis. 1983. *My Last Sigh*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 108, 110.

Authorship &
"objective literature"

Robbe-Grillet
Barthes

One reads Jameson's account of video's exclusion of themes with considerable nostalgia. In almost identical terms, Barthes' early essay on the *nouveau roman* – "Objective Literature," of 1954 – insisted that Robbe-Grillet's novels were not composed in depth; did not protect a heart beneath their surface; and contained no thematics.¹⁴ Rather, they apparently assassinated the classical object in "a well-planned murder which cuts them off from... the poet's privileged terrain."¹⁵ It is scarcely surprising that Robbe-Grillet subsequently dissociated his work from Barthes' oversimplistic exegesis.¹⁶ Nor indeed is one startled by Barthes' shift of focus from "studium" (or anonymous, general codes), to "punctum" (or idiosyncratic, personal responses), in both his essays on photography in *Camera Lucida*, (1980)¹⁷ and such diary entries as the following observations: August 5th, 1977:¹⁸

Continuing War and Peace, I have a violent emotion, reading the death of old Prince Bolonsky, his last words of tenderness to his daughter... Literature has an effect of truth much more violent for me than that of religion.

Video versus meaning

Barthes
Robbe-Grillet

Perhaps Jameson will one day discover that video may similarly evoke truth and violent emotion. At present, nothing seems further from his mind. Having declared video to be "a sign-flow which resists meaning," Jameson makes the extraordinary suggestion: *Whatever a good, let alone a great videotext might be, it will be bad or flawed whenever... interpretation proves possible, whenever the text slackly opens up... places and areas of thematization.* (219)

Format and flow

Barthes
Williams
Baudrillard

Jameson's argument appears to generate this strange definition of video by combining Barthes' theories of intertextuality with a number of concepts and metaphors borrowed from the writings of Raymond Williams and Jean Baudrillard. His hypothesis that video becomes flawed whenever it permits thematic interpretation stems from Williams' suggestion that television evinces "a situation of total flow... streaming before us all day long without interruption." (202)

14. Barthes, Roland. 1972. "Objective Literature." Richard Howard, translator, in *Critical Essays*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 14,16.

15. Barthes, "Objective Literature..." , 16-17.

16. Robbe-Grillet dismisses Barthes' conclusions as "a simplification" of his work, in 1986, "Confessions of a Voyeur," interview with Roland Caputo in *Tension*, September/October, 10-11.

17. Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang, 22-27.

18. Barthes, Roland. 1986. "Deliberation." *The Rustle of Language*. New York: Hill and Wang, 366-367.

Applying this concept of total flow to video, Jameson argues that video-art should only exist and should only be apprehended as a vague, uninterrupted flow of superficial fragments. Accordingly, he concludes:¹⁹

Video-viewing... involves immersion in the total flow of the thing itself, preferably a kind of random succession of three or four hours of tape at regular intervals... What is quite out of the question is to look at a single 'video work' all by itself. (208)

Freedom, spirit &
postmodernism

Jameson rapidly establishes the reasons for his hostility to the acknowledgment of the single work of video-art. So far as he is concerned postmodern culture demarcates – or *ought* to demarcate – a cultural revolution or terror eliminating all traces of original creativity. Rejecting both the rhetoric and the reality of cultural innovation and refusing even to contemplate individual video-works, Jameson warns his reader:

To select – even as an 'example' – a single video text, and to discuss it in isolation, is fatally to regenerate the illusion of the masterpiece or the canonical text. (208)

Jameson's morbid fear of masterpieces coexists with his suspicion that the postmodern revolution may not have exterminated *all* traces of the modernist aesthetic. Rephrasing the warning in the lines above, Jameson cautions:²⁰

The discussion, the indispensable preliminary selection and isolation, of a single "text"... automatically transforms it back into a "work," turns the anonymous videomaker back into a named artist or "auteur," opens the way for the return of all those features of an older modernist aesthetic which it was in the revolutionary nature of the newer medium to have precisely effaced and dispelled. (209)

Mechanism &
enlivenment

Cage
Gan

There is no special reason why the new postmodern media should by its very revolutionary nature *efface* the modernist aesthetic. As John Cage remarks, "Machines... can tend toward our stupefaction or our enlivenment."²¹ To be sure, revolutionary aesthetics usually proclaim the victory of new enlivenment over past stupefaction. But in Jameson's case, revolutionary practices are taken as evidence not only of the effacement of the past, but – by deft movements

19. My italics.

20. My italics.

21. Cage, John. 1971. Letter to Paul Henry Lang, May 22, 1956. In Kostelanetz, Richard, editor. *John Cage*. London: Allen Lane, 118

of retrospective re-definition – as proof that the past never really existed save in terms of present, revolutionary arguments. Thus, whereas the Russian con-structivist, Alexi Gan, writing in 1922, entertained the distinction between modernist “industrial culture” and pre-modernist art, “indissolubly linked with theology, metaphysics and mysticism” which “arose naturally, developed naturally and disappeared naturally,”²² Jameson denies even this natural contrast. Apparently there never were, never are and never could be any positive alternatives to what Jameson identifies as mediated culture informed by the “deep underlying materiality of all things.”(199)

The hypothetical
extinction of the
spiritual

Jameson’s hypotheses pivot upon his assertion that the post–modern age coincides with the extinction of the sacred and the spiritual”(199) Dominated by Jameson’s alternative to the deep underlying spirituality of all things – the deep underlying materiality of all things – the present appears to be a time when “there are no more masterpieces, no more great books,” and “even the concept of good books has become problematical.”(208) Adding what one might think of as retrospective insult to contemporary injury, Jameson announces that culture “always *was* material.” From this it would appear to follow that older forms or genre and “older spiritual exercises and mediations... were also in their different ways media products.”(199) Viewed with Jamesonian hindsight, all cultural practices become redefined as material and as mediated products. *Everything*, it seems, is material, in its own way.

Fabricating
non-communication

Barthes
Baudrillard

At this point, Jameson equates the material with the textual. Reaffirming Roland Barthes’ argument that everything is intertextual, in its own way, he advises the reader:

Everything can now be a text... while objects that were formerly “works” can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or yet again, sheer process (henceforth called textual production or textualization).(208)

22. Gan, Alexi. “Constructivism”, in Bann, Stephen, editor. *The Tradition of Constructivism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 35-36.

Barthes, of course, argues that this sort of textualization could at least be followed and disentangled, if not deciphered.²³ Unwilling, it seems, even to credit postmodern video-art with this kind of tangible coherence, Jameson turns for inspiration to Baudrillard's apocalyptic assertion that "The Mass-media are antimediatory and... fabricate non-communication."²⁴ Reconceptualized in such rhetoric, postmodern video's noncommunication appears to evince a "logic of rotating conjunction and disjunction"(221) resisting both thematic analysis and sustained structural investigation. At best, the viewer simply perceives: "a ceaseless rotation of elements such that they change at every moment, with the result that no single element can occupy the position of 'interpretant' (or that of primary sign) for any length of time."(218)

Depersonalization of the subject

Baudrillard

Taking up another of Baudrillard's provocative phrases: his suggestion that the postmodern era witnesses "the dissolution of life into TV,"²⁵ Jameson similarly surmises that video somehow dissolves both its viewer's and its author's sense of identity and subjectivity. Adopting surprisingly subjective rhetoric in the circumstances, Jameson confides:

I have the feeling that mechanical depersonalization (or decentering the subject) goes even further in the new medium where auteurs themselves are dissolved along with the spectator. (205)

This, as one might suspect, sweeping feeling derives from extremely general meditation, rather than from selective study of specific examples of his subject matter. The weakest trends in postmodern culture – be these modes of video-art or modes of post-structuralist theory – certainly drift into vacuous "rotating conjunction and disjunction," dissolving both their author's presence and their audience's patience. It is to such "degraded"(230) material that Jameson turns his attention.

23. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 147.

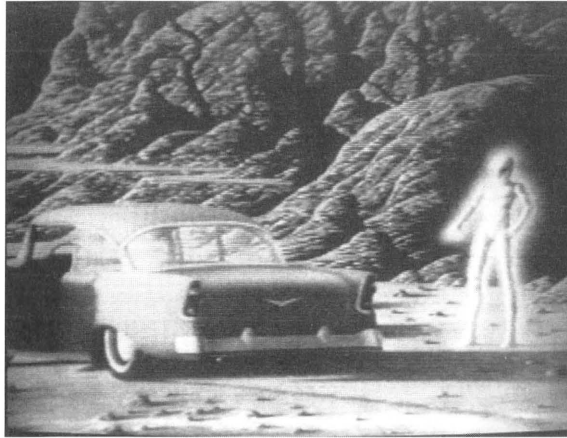
24. Baudrillard, Jean. 1987. "Requiem for the Media." Hanhardt, John G., editor. *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*. New York: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc, 129.

25. Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. "The Precession of Simulacra." Foss, Paul and Paul Patton. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(c), 55.

Selective viewing

Apart from his sporadic asides to the “unimaginable informational garbage,” polluting the “new media society,” (210) Jameson considers only one specific video composition: “a twenty-nine minute ‘work’ entitled *AlienNATION*, produced at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.” (209)

Figure 1.
Barbara Latham:
AlienNATION

The case of the
“meaningless” sample

Anderson
Latham
Marx

Likewise, he only considers one specific multimedia performance: Laurie Anderson’s *USA*, which also contains the word “alienation.” Noting that neither of these works deploy or distinguish the implications of the former’s “obliging title” with anything approximating to the analytical rigor of “Marx’s Early Manuscripts,” Jameson summarily dismisses the thematic potential of video-art and multimedia performance in yet another supremely subjective speculation, deliberating: “one has the deeper feeling that ‘texts’ like *USA* or *AlienNATION* ought not to have any ‘meaning’ at all, in that thematic sense.”

Video and authenticity

Marx

This is surely one of Jameson’s most unfortunate imperatives. One scarcely imagines that the creative logic of what he terms the “strongest and most original and most authentic” (223) video-art would replicate that of “Marx’s Early Manuscripts.” Nor indeed would one necessarily turn to Marx’s early writings for premonitions of video’s particular effects.

But one might well expect Jameson to substantiate his deeper feeling with more careful reference to video-art and multimedia performance. This is not to be. At best, he languidly delegates detailed research to the reader. Despite his earlier prohibition of this kind of specific study and self-observation. Jameson counsels: *This is something everyone is free to verify by self-observation and a little closer attention to those moments in which we briefly feel that disillusionment I have described experiencing at the thematically explicit moments in USA.*(218)

Jameson belatedly – and somewhat ineffectively – acknowledges the confusion and contradiction in his argument, when he concedes that he is the victim of “the hegemony of theorists of textuality and textualization”; a set of presuppositions that he finally criticizes as a “vicious circle” or “double bind.”(221) Despite this insight, Jameson appears compelled to acquiesce to these theories, insofar as he believes that “your entry ticket to the public sphere in which these matters are debated is an agreement, tacit or otherwise, with the basic presumptions of a general problem-field.”(221)

Rules & artistic
independence

Lyotard
Stephanson

Jean-François Lyotard rather more convincingly posits that critics and artists should think and create more independently, by “working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done.”²⁶ Initially, Jameson also determines to define video “afresh... without imported and extrapolated categories.”(201) As he remarks to Anders Stephanson, his hypotheses approximate most closely to Lyotard’s ideal when they work with allegories, inventing what one might think of as fictional systems and landmarks in order to encompass “what will have been done.”²⁷

In trying to theorize the systematic, I was using certain of these things as allegories. From this angle it makes no sense trying to look for individual trends, and individual artists are only interesting if one finds some moment where the system as a whole, or some limit of it, is being touched.

26. Lyotard, Jean-François. 1984. “*Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?*” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 81.

27. Jameson, interview with Anders Stephanson, 72.

Theory limited perception and “what will have been done”

Haacke
Rauschenberg

Jameson’s allegories display two fundamental weaknesses. First, they depend upon reductive intertextual theory. Second, they consistently neglect those crucial individual artists and trends which more clearly exemplify “what will have been done.” As Jameson admits in his essay on “Postmodernism and Utopia” (1983), his overly systematic allegories and paradigms take no account of artists such as Hans Haacke, whose work he acclaims:²⁸

as a kind of cultural production which is clearly postmodern and equally clearly political and oppositional – something that does not compute with the paradigm and does not seem to have been theoretically foreseen by it.

As becomes increasingly evident, Jameson’s accounts of postmodern video and postmodern multimedia performance leave far too much *unforeseen* – and far too much *unseen*. While Jameson modestly prefaces the following account of his responses to Rauschenberg’s work with the confession: “I don’t know how great Rauschenberg is,” his subsequent comments reveal the way in which his impatience before unfamiliar postmodern art leads him to dismiss it almost by very definition as inconsequential, sub-monumental and so on. In this respect, one might respond that Jameson *always* seems to have known that Rauschenberg’s work could never be great. For according to Jameson, *all* postmodern art resists prolonged examination and meditation, instantly becoming out of mind when out of sight. He explains:²⁹

I saw a wonderful show of his in China, a glittering set of things which offered all kinds of postmodern experiences. But when they’re over, they’re over. The textual object is not, in other words, a work of art a “masterwork” like the modernist monument was. You go into a Rauschenberg show and experience a process done in very expert and inventive ways; and when you leave, it’s over.

The logic of post-modern masterworks

Given the historical and technological character of postmodernism, it would be naive to await postmodern masterworks which were *literally* like the modernist monument.

28. Jameson, “Postmodernism and Utopia,” 16.

29. Jameson, interview with Anders Stephanson, 72.

The critic's task then, is to attempt to identify the cultural logic informing new modes of postmodern monument: an eventuality that Jameson's hypotheses discredit from the very beginning of their inquiries.

As he points out in "Postmodernism and Utopia," and in his earlier essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism", (1984) such dogmatic assumptions invariably fail at the very point at which they seem most likely to succeed, because the critic "paints himself into a corner" where his critical sensibility becomes "paralyzed... in the face of the model itself."³⁰

Mediation, extermination, & the video art process

Krauss
Paik
Acconci
Morris
Da Vinci
Cage

Throughout his essay on video-art Jameson's critical sensibility appears to be paralyzed by his assertion that postmodern culture coincides with the death of the author, the spectator and any kind of meaningful creativity. Having painted himself into a corner in which the concept of "mediated" appears to be synonymous with "exterminated," Jameson has no other option than to reiterate the tired complaint:

The autonomous work of art... along with the old subject or ego – seems to have vanished, to have been volatilized. Nowhere is this more materially demonstrable than within the "texts" of experimental video. (208)

As Rosalind Krauss reminds us, most video-art produced on tape employs "the body of the artist-practitioner" as its "central instrument."³¹ One thinks of Paik's *Self Portrait* (1970); of Vito Acconci's attempt to frustrate this process in *Face-Off* (1972); in Robert Morris' multiple self-portraits in *Exchange*. (1973)³² The more one examines such video-works, the more obvious it becomes that it is post-modern intertextual theory – not postmodern multimedia art – which conspires to short-circuit "traditional interpretive temptations." (219)

30. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Utopia," 16; and 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*, 146, 57.

31. Krauss, Rosalind. 1978. "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." Battcock, Gregory, editor. *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 45.

32. Paik's *Self Portrait*, 1970, is illustrated in Battcock, *New Artists Video...*, 122; Acconci's *Face-Off*, 1972, and Morris' *Exchange*, 1973, are illustrated in the same book.

For Mona da Vinci, video is a medium “encouraging self-analysis.”³³ Far from neutralizing authoriality and meaning, a tape such as Paik’s *Nam June Paik, Edited for TV* (1976) appears to be a highly personal contribution to explicit cultural debate. Wittily juxtaposing the image of Paik’s frowning face with the caption: “But then I thought: Actually Zen is boring too,”³⁴ this work almost certainly responds to the celebrated passage in *Silence* in which John Cage defends the teachings of Zen, observing:³⁵

In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two and so on. Eventually one discovers that it’s not boring at all but very interesting.

Dramatization & the body of the viewer

Cage
Krauss

Paik’s tape then, seems best understood as a very personal dramatization of his riposte to another specific subjectivity: John Cage. In somewhat the same way, viewers examining video installations might be said to dramatize their analysis of the cameras, monitors and mirrors making up such works, as they walk within them, modifying their understanding as they modify images of their movements. To quote Krauss again, “the central instrument” of such video installations “has usually been the body of the responding viewer.”³⁶ At the same time though, video installations also correspond more than any other kind of video-art to Jameson’s claim that the genre is primarily a self-referential practice, evoking “reproductive technology itself.” (222)

Medium & content as modes of perception

Krauss
Magritte
Campus
Battcock

Paradoxically perhaps, video installations activate and accelerate two quite different modes of perception. As Jameson postulates, they invite the impersonal analysis of their technological structure and construction. But as Krauss reminds us, this analysis is itself born of the viewer’s extremely personal experience of performing and observing successive physical gestures monitored and mediated by an installation.

33. da Vinci, Mona. 1978. “Video: The Art of Observable Dreams.” Battcock, Gregory, *New Artists Video...*, 17.

34. Paik’s *Nam June Paik, Edited for TV*, 1976, is illustrated in Battcock, Gregory, *New Video Artists...*, 22.

35. Cage, John. 1973. *Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 93.

36. Krauss, Rosalind. “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.” 45.

In this respect, the viewer's physical and cerebral participation are interlinked with unprecedented intimacy and immediacy. Contemplating a painting like Magritte's *Reproduction Prohibited (Portrait of Mr. James)* from 1937, one responds from without to an image of exterior perception: Magritte's paradoxical reiterated image of Mr. James' back, standing before and reflected within, the mirror before him.³⁷ By contrast, installations such as Peter Campus' *Shadow Projection* (1974) reveal video's capacity to place the viewer within precisely this kind of situation; in this instance, doubling evidence of self-awareness by superimposing images of both the spectator's back and the spectator's shadow.³⁸

The same kind of intensified subjectivity emerges in another variant of video-art: the multimedia performance, in which actions upon stage and actions upon screen intermingle. At its most amusing and most provocative, this quintessentially postmodern mode of performance culminates in works such as Paik's *TV Cello* and *TV Bra*. According to the artist, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969) a performance installation requiring Charlotte Moorman to play a cello connected to two screens adorning her breasts, exemplified a more "human use of technology,"³⁹ in the sense that it allows the performer to wear and to play video; a historic victory as it were for subjectivity over the electronic media. Commenting upon the way in which "the performer caused images on the screen to change" in this work's companion piece, *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes* (1971), Gregory Battcock enthusiastically observed:⁴⁰ *It was an extraordinary conception and a theoretical masterpiece, because instead of 'being on television,' the televisions were, in fact, on Charlotte Moorman.*

Video-art, subjectivity & delight

Battcock
Paik
Moorman

Battcock's rhetoric offers a refreshing alternative to Jameson's gloomy generalizations. While the lines above delightedly acclaim Paik's *TV Cello* as a masterpiece, Jameson's fidelity to anti-authorial theory leads him to dismiss the very possibility of video artists

37. Magritte, René. *Magritte's Reproduction Prohibited (Portrait of Mr. James)*, 1937, is illustrated on the front cover of Ades, Dawn. 1974. *Dada and Surrealism*. London: Thames and Hudson.

38. Campus' *Shadow Projection*, 1974 is illustrated in Battcock, *New Artists Video*... , 101.

39. Paik's *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 1969 and *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes*, 1971, are illustrated in Battcock, *New Artists Video*... , 124 and 126. Paik's comments on *TV Bra* appear in his essay (coauthored with Charlotte Moorman), "TV-Bra for Living Sculpture," in Battcock, *New Artists Video*... , 129.

40. Battcock, *New Artists Video*... , 133.

or video masterpieces. Bewildered by video's multiplicity of new forms, and incapable of making any sense of their exceptions to his rules, Jameson rather plaintively confides: "one is tempted to wonder whether any description or theory could ever encompass their variety," (203) before once again intoning his familiar litany of disbelief:⁴¹ "there are no video masterpieces, there can never be a video canon, even an auteur theory of video... becomes very problematic indeed." (208-209)

Jameson's myth: the decline of the referent

Trapped by his own theoretical prejudices within an analytical double bind asserting that all postmodern texts are superficial, sub-monumental disappointments which "all turn out to be the same in a peculiarly unhelpful way," (222) Jameson attempts to evade his unhelpful anti-authorial assumptions by recourse to the authorial fiction that he describes as "a kind of myth I have found in characterizing the nature of contemporary (postmodernist) cultural production." (222) According to this mythology, the moment of modernism witnesses the decline of the referent, or the objective world, or reality, to "a feeble existence on the horizon like a shrunken star or red dwarf." (222)

Graphing modernism's cultural decline

In the wake of this precursor, postmodern culture demands definition as an era of total crisis, when reference and reality disappear altogether. Elaborating this apocalyptic fiction, Jameson concludes: *We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers... which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type, but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage; metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts.* (223)

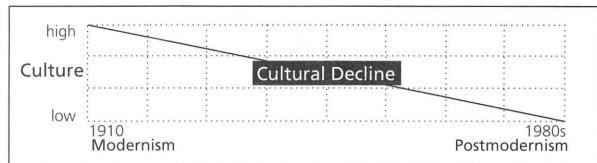
Interpreted in this way, the mediated reality of postmodernism appears to represent the deadend of modernism; its ceaselessly recycled, sub-monumental fragments, bereft of all prior value.

41. My italics.

Viewed diagrammatically, this reading of the transition from modernism to postmodernism (or the sad story of cultural decline from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties), might be represented by the falling hypotenuse of an erstwhile lofty triangle (*figure 2*).

While one may have many reservations and doubts about many aspects of postmodern creativity, it is absurd to dismiss present times as an era of post-mortem culture, devoid of authorial or aesthetic life. Such anti-authorial and anti-aesthetic speculation is still more misleading than the authorial and aesthetic mythologies which it purports to correct. Viewed more carefully, the decline of modernism – or the existential and aesthetic confusion of the thirties, forties and fifties – leads not so much to the terminal dead end of creativity, as to the painful transitional process separating modernism's demise from the rise of postmodern creativity. Briefly, the three decades from the mid-fifties to the present are best understood as a period of intense cultural rejuvenation and innovation marked by the live-ends of what one might think of as post-modern techno-culture.

Figure 2.
Postmodernism &
cultural decline



The "time-wall"

Müller

For one reason or another, Jameson and many other theorists appear incapable of looking beyond the crises of the mid-twentieth century. Or put another way, in terms of a paradox outlined by the East German writer Heiner Müller, Jameson seems to be trapped behind a "time-wall," unable either to enter or even envisage postmodernism's positive new discursive spaces. Introducing the concept of the "time-wall" with reference to the way in which this kind of obstruction may have protected Moscow in the last war, Heiner Müller comments:⁴²

42. Müller, Heiner. 1982. "The Walls of History," interview with Sylvère Lotringer. *Semiotext(e)*, 4:2, 37.

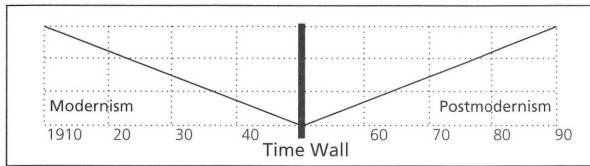
I was very impressed by the remark of a young man who was writing an essay on my work. He remembered that he never quite understood why the German Wehrmacht didn't succeed in entering Moscow during the Second World War. They just stood there. They couldn't go further. He didn't believe in geographic reasons. He didn't believe in ideological reasons. There simply was a time-wall. They were not on the same track.

Jameson's time-wall

Müller
Baudrillard

Heiner Müller's image of the time-wall proves particularly helpful. While one would not want to argue that entire nations or generations are trapped behind such barriers (as Baudrillard proposes, when suggesting that the "abyss of modernity" separates French intellectuals from America),⁴³ it would certainly seem to be the case that an overdose of intertextual dogma and of apocalyptic mythology prevents Jameson and his fellow thinkers from coming to terms with the rise of postmodernism.

Figure 3.
The 30s-50s
time-wall



Charted diagonally, the transition between modernism and the first three or four decades of postmodernism begs representation in terms of two equally monumental aesthetic eras separated by the crises and the time-wall peculiar to the decades between the mid-thirties and mid-fifties. (figure 3)

Surrealism without the
subconscious

Chagall
Klee

Trapped behind the thirties-fifties time-wall, Jameson compulsively contrasts the apparent inauthenticity of the now with the authenticity of modernism's then. Veering ever closer to self-parody, his most recent pondering upon the newer "painting" dismiss this development as:⁴⁴

Surrealism without the Unconscious... Chagall's folk iconography without Judaism or the peasants, Klee's stick drawings without Klee's peculiar personal object, schizophrenic art without schizophrenia, 'surrealism' without its manifesto or its avant-garde.

43. See Baudrillard, *Amérique*, 146. For further discussion of Baudrillard's use of this concept, see my article, "Baudrillard's Amérique and the 'Abyss of Modernity,'" in *Art and Text*, 29, 40-63.

44. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Utopia, 27-29. Jameson's conclusions elaborate the overstatements of the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva. For further discussion of Bonito Oliva's conclusions see my article "Postmodernism, Méta-phore manquée, and the Myth of the Trans-avant-garde, *Subs-Stance*, 14:3, 68-90.

After us, beyond us

Aragon
Breton
Wilson

Jameson's cultural obituaries are surely premature. As the veteran surrealist poet and novelist Louis Aragon rather unexpectedly proposes, crucial aspects of the surrealist dream appear alive and well in that most recent of postmodern practices: the multimedia performance born of what one might think of postmodernism's positive "mediatic" sensibility. Writing an open letter to André Breton about the first Paris production of Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance*, Aragon recalls:⁴⁵

I never saw anything more beautiful in the world since I was born. Never has any play come anywhere near this one... Bob Wilson's piece... which comes to us from Iowa, is not surrealism at all, however easy it is for people to call it that, but it is what we others, who fathered surrealism, what we dreamed it might become after us, beyond us.

"After us, beyond us": in four brief words, Aragon pinpoints the essential difference between positive variants of postmodernism and modernism. Postmodernism is something that is not modernism; that comes after modernism; that is radically separated from modernism; but which realizes modernism's aspirations in terms of its own subsequent technology and sensibility. As I have suggested elsewhere, American postmodern creativity appears to assimilate and legitimate modernism's innovations and discoveries, employing and extending them in a matter-of-fact, unselfconscious way, rather than announcing them as some sort of excursion into the surrealist realm of the "marvellous."⁴⁶

Surrealism without friction

Wilson
Burroughs
Freud

Not surprisingly then, Robert Wilson's multimedia performances resist definition in terms of familiar surrealist categories. What one witnesses here is not so much neutralized surrealism, or "surrealism without the unconscious," as *surrealism without friction* in an age in which its mysteries are public knowledge. As William Burroughs remarks, "the unconscious was much more unconscious in Freud's day than in ours."⁴⁷ If automatic writing and collage composition were novelties in the twenties, this is no longer the case. To quote Burroughs once again: "The basic law of association and conditioning is known to college students even in American."⁴⁸

45. Aragon, Louis. 1971. "Open Letter to André Breton, June 2." In program to Wilson's production of Heiner Müller's *Hamlet machine*. London: Almeida Theater, 1987, unpaginated.

46. See my article "Baudrillard's Amérique," and the "Abyss of Modernity," 56.

Robert Wilson's multimedia performances typify the ways in which video-art precipitates some of the most interesting postmodern creativity of the eighties. Translating video's digital editing techniques and luscious color into dazzlingly rapid or excruciatingly prolonged fusions of familiar real-time theater and multi-mediated *son et lumière*, Wilson's works for the stage offer a litmus test to the spectator's sensibility, frustrating prior expectations but also affording the delight of new, emergent conventions to those willing and able to look beyond the time-wall of habit. Not surprisingly, one's first experience of Wilson's work is very much a process of examining and defining it as self-referential "reproductive technology itself." (222) But thereafter, more positive post-Jamesonian categories come to mind.

A sign flow which generates meaning

Wilson
Brecht

The more closely one examines Wilson's work and the more time one attends a particular example of Wilson's work, the more evident it becomes that his multimedia theater is not simply a surprising "structure or sign-flow which resists meaning," (229) but rather a sign-flow which generates meaning, although not, perhaps, the kind of meaning to which one is accustomed. As Stefan Brecht reports, Wilson seems most interested to create conditions in which one senses "a non-verbal, arational communication taking place... by harmonious vibration."⁴⁹

Wilson as postmodern author

Wilson
Eco
Cage
Lukács

At times, this kind of "arational communication" emerges between the lines and the gestures of traditional theatrical performance. But at its most forceful, the impact of Wilson's imagination reaches us through the utterly postmodern state-of-the-art technology that Eco associates with "a series of elements filtered through the mass media."⁵⁰ Considered in terms of the unfashionable concept of the author, Wilson's vision might also be said to be filtered through his correspondingly postmodern state-of-the-art sensibility, born of and attuned to video's capacity to accelerate, decelerate, fragment, superimpose, juxtapose and generally transmute sound, image, color and movement with unprecedented immediacy and precision.

47. Burroughs, William S. 1986. "On Freud and the Unconscious." *The Adding Machine*. New York: Seaver Books, 89.

48. Burroughs, William S. 1964. *Nova Express*. New York: Grove, 93.

49. Brecht, Stefan. 1978. *The Theater of Vision: Robert Wilson*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 271.

Faced with such shifts in creative technology and sensibility, cultural critics tend to suspend or assert disbelief, entrusting themselves to new developments beyond the time-wall of familiar discourse, or distrusting and denouncing new unfamiliar practices. Writing to *The Village Voice* in 1966, John Cage memorably exemplified the former option, announcing: "Nowadays everything happens at once and our souls are conveniently electronic (omni-attentive)." ⁵¹ At the other extreme, Jameson argues that postmodern video-art and multimedia performance "ought not to have any 'meaning,'" (217) somewhat as Lukács claims that "modernism must deprive literature of a sense of perspective." ⁵²

Art in a changing
environment

Poggioli
Gan
Malevich

Neither modernism nor postmodernism ought to deprive art and literature of meaning and perspective. On the contrary, innovative art inaugurates new ways of representing meaning and perspective by enacting practices which only seem to neutralize reality insofar as they present alternative conventions awaiting theoretical legitimation. In Poggioli's terms, they are not so much anti-art as ante-art: something surpassing prior expectations and prior definitions and requiring equally new, unprecedented definition. ⁵³

As post-revolutionary Russian experiments demonstrate, innovative creativity does not so much extinguish old values and old debates as rekindle them in new contexts. Creating predominantly similar geometrical compositions, constructivists such as the aforementioned Alexi Gan, associated "industrial culture" with the death and disappearance of "theology, metaphysics and mysticism," whereas suprematists, such as Kasimir Malevich, entitled their work with such self-consciously metaphysical definitions as *Suprematist composition conveying the feeling of a mystic 'wave' from outer space.* ⁵⁴ History repeats itself in the eighties. While Jameson argues that postmodern culture brings about the extinction of the sacred and the spiritual, (199) Robert Wilson discusses ways of conveying the sacred and the spiritual with technological symbolism. Referring to his projected production of Wagner's *Parsifal*, Wilson speculates,

50. Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*, 213.

51. Cage, John. 1966. Letter to *The Village Voice*, January. In Kostelanez, Richard. *John Cage*.

52. Lukács, Georg. 1963. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. London: Merlin, 33.

53. Poggioli, Renato. 1968. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 137.

54. Gan, Alexi. "Constructivism," in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 36-35; Kasimir Malevich, title of painting of 1917, cited by Aaron Scharf, "Suprematism," in Richardson, Tony and Nikos Stangos. *Concepts of Modern Art*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 139. As Scharf comments, Malevich's suprematist compositions appear to aspire to "the final emancipation: a state of nirvana."

for example, that vertical beams of light might evince a more authentic religious attitude than the fake and sacrilegious detail of naturalistic acting.⁵⁵

Conclusion: old values in
new contexts

Wilson
Wagner
Barthes
Baudrillard

To discuss Wilson's art in this way is obviously to cite it as what Jameson would term a "privileged exemplar" (219) of postmodern creativity. Writing on emergent media, one necessarily gestures in the dark, attempting to identify the most significant examples of new, unfamiliar practices, in order to delineate their most varied traits. As I have suggested, Jameson's meditations upon video-art and upon multimedia performance select far too few examples and focus upon weak examples which confirm rather than challenge his over-systematic prejudices and presuppositions.

Trapped behind the time-wall of Barthesian and Baudrillardian overstatement, Jameson's writings appear to function most profitably as privileged exemplars of the dangers of reacting over-literally to such "imported and extrapolated categories." (201) To be sure, authorial essentialism and the excesses of "traditional interpretive temptations" (219) may also prove counterproductive, but they do at least have the virtue of directing critical attention toward innovative creativity, rather than prompting denial of its existence and its authenticity.

Adequate exegesis of postmodern video and multimedia performance requires the critic to look beyond intertextual essentialism and apocalyptic cliché, and to return to the rather more daunting tasks of *observing*, *analyzing*, *interpreting*, and *evaluating* the new arts of the eighties.

All the rest, one might say, culminates in peculiarly unhelpful textualization and allegory, signifying... nothing.

55. Wilson, Robert. 1980. "Robert Wilson: Current Projects." Interviewed by Laurence Shyer. 1984. *Robert Wilson the Theater of Images*. New York: Harper and Row, 113, 111.