

knows that insofar as he remains a novelist in the traditional sense, he is dead; since the traditional novel is dead - not dying, but dead. What was up to only a few years ago a diagnosis, a prediction (made, to be sure, almost from the moment of the invention of the novel: first form of pop literature, and therefore conscious that as compared to classic forms like epic or tragedy its lifespan was necessarily short) is now a fact. As certainly as God, i.e., the Old God, is dead, so the Novel, i.e., the Old Novel, is dead. To be sure, certain writers, still alive and productive (Saul Bellow, for instance, or John Updike, Mary McCarthy or James Baldwin), continue to write Old Novels, and certain readers, often with a sense of being quite up-to-date, continue to read them. But so do preachers continue to preach in the Old Churches, and congregations gather to hear them.

It is *not* a matter of assuming, like Marshall McLuhan, that the printed book is about to disappear, taking with it the novel - first form invented for print; only of realizing that in all of its forms - and most notably, perhaps, the novel - the printed book is being radically, functionally altered. No medium of communication ever disappears merely because a new, and more efficient one is invented. One thinks, for instance, of the lecture, presumably superannuated by the invention of moveable type, yet flourishing still after more than five centuries of obsolescence. What is demanded by functional obsolescence is learning to be less serious, more frivolous, a form of *entertainment*. Indeed, it could be argued that a medium begins to be felt as entertainment only at the point where it ceases to be a necessary or primary means of communication. [...]

[...] the truly New Novel must be anti-art as well as anti-serious. But this means, after all, that it must become more like what it was in the beginning, more what it seemed when Samuel Richardson could not be taken *quite* seriously, and what it remained in England (as opposed to France, for instance) until Henry James had justified himself as an artist against such self-declared 'entertainers' as Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson: popular, not quite reputable, a little dangerous - the one his loved and rejected cultural father, the other his sibling rival in art. [...]

This popular tradition the French may have understood once (in the days when Diderot praised Richardson extravagantly, and the Marquis de Sade emulated him in a dirtier book than the Englishman dared) but they long ago lost sight of it. And certainly the so-called '*nouveau roman*' is in its deadly earnest almost the opposite of anything truly new, which is to say, anti-art. Robbe-Grillet, for example, is still the prisoner of dying notions of the *avant-garde*; and though he is aware of half of what the new novelist must do (destroy the Old, destroy Marcel Proust), he is unaware of what he must create in its place. His kind of anti-novel is finally too arty and serious: a kind of neo-neo-classicism, as if to illustrate once more that in the end this is all the French can invent no matter how hard they try. [...]

[...] Boris Vian is in many ways a prototype of the New Novelist, though he has been dead for a decade or so and his most characteristic work belongs to the years just after the Second World War. He was, first of all, an Imaginary

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Postmodernism and the 12
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'CROSS THE BORDER - CLOSE THAT GAP:
POST-MODERNISM'

Leslie A. Fiedler

[...]

Almost all living readers and writers are aware of a fact which they have no adequate words to express, not in English certainly, nor even in American. We are living, have been living for two decades - and have become acutely conscious of the fact since 1955 - through the death throes of Modernism and the birth pangs of Post-Modernism. The kind of literature which had arrogated to itself the name Modern (with the presumption that it represented the ultimate advance in sensibility and form, that beyond it newness was not possible), and whose moment of triumph lasted from a point just before the First World War until one just after the Second World War, is *dead*, i.e., belongs to history not actuality. In the field of the novel, this means that the age of Proust, Mann, and Joyce is over; just as in verse that of T. S. Eliot, Paul Valéry, Montale and Seferis is done with.

[...]

In any case, it seems evident that writers not blessed enough to be under thirty (or thirty-five, or whatever the critical age is these days) must be reborn in order to seem relevant to the moment, and those who inhabit it most comfortably, i.e., the young. But no one has even the hope of being reborn unless he knows first that he is dead - dead, to be sure, for someone else; but a writer exists as a writer precisely for someone else. More specifically, no novelist can be reborn until he

From Leslie A. Fiedler (1975) 'Cross the Border - Close that Gap: Post-Modernism', in Marcus Cunliffe (ed.), *American Literature since 1900*. London: Sphere Books.

American (as even writers born in the United States must be these days), who found himself in total opposition to the politics of America at the very moment he was most completely immersed in its popular culture; actually writing a detective novel called 'I Will Spit On Your Grave' under the pen-name of Vernon Sullivan, but pretending that he was only its translator into French. In fact, by virtue of this peculiar brand of mythological Americanism he managed to straddle the border, if not quite close the gap between high culture and low, *belles-lettres* and pop art. On the one hand, he was the writer of pop songs and a jazz trumpeter much influenced by New Orleans style; and on the other, the author of novels in which the thinly disguised figures of such standard French intellectuals as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are satirized. But even in his fiction, which seems at first glance quite traditional or, at any rate, conventionally *avant-garde*, the characters move towards their fates through an imaginary city whose main thoroughfare is called Boulevard Louis Armstrong.

Only now, however, has Vian won the audience we all know he deserved, finding it first among the young of Paris, who know like their American counterparts that such a closing of the gap between elite and mass culture is precisely the function of the novel now – and not merely optional, as in Vian's day, but necessary. [...]

The young Americans who have succeeded Vian, on the other hand, have abandoned all concealment; and when they are most themselves, nearest to their central concerns, turn frankly to Pop forms – though not, to be sure, the detective story which has by our time become hopelessly compromised by middle-brow condescension: an affectation of Presidents and college professors. The forms of the novel which they prefer are those which seem now what the hard-boiled detective story once seemed to Vian: at the furthest possible remove from art and *avant-garde*, the greatest distance from inwardness, analysis, and pretension; and, therefore, immune to lyricism, on the one hand, or righteous social commentary, on the other. It is not compromise by the market-place they fear; on the contrary, they choose the genre most associated with exploitation by the mass media: notably, the Western, Science Fiction and Pornography.

Most congenial of all is the 'Western', precisely because it has for many decades now seemed to belong exclusively to pulp magazines, run-of-the-mill TV series and class B movies; which is to say, has been experienced almost purely as myth and entertainment rather than as 'literature' at all – and its sentimentality has, therefore, come to possess our minds so completely that it can now be mitigated without essential loss by parody, irony – and even critical analysis. In a sense, our mythological innocence has been preserved in the Western, awaiting the day when, no longer believing ourselves innocent in fact, we could decently return to claim it in fantasy. But such a return of the Western represents, of course, a rejection of laureates of the loss of innocence like Henry James and Hawthorne: those particular favourites of the Forties, who despite their real virtues turn out to have been too committed to the notion of European high art to survive as major influences in an age of Pop. And it implies as well

momentarily turning aside from our beloved Herman Melville (compromised by his New Critical admirers and the countless Ph.D. dissertations they prompted), and even from Mark Twain. To Hemingway, Twain could still seem central to a living tradition, the Father of us all, but being Folk rather than Pop in essence, he has become ever more remote from an urban, industrialized world, for which any evocation of pre-Civil War, rural American seems a kind of pastoralism which complements rather than challenges the Art Religion. Folk Art knows and accepts its place in a class-structured world which Pop blows up, whatever its avowed intentions. What remain are only the possibilities of something closer to travesty than emulation – such a grotesque neo-Huck, for instance, as the foul-mouthed D.J. in Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, who, it is wickedly suggested, may *really* be a Black joker in Harlem pretending to be the White refugee from respectability. And, quite recently, Twain's book itself has been rewritten to please and mock its exegetes in John Seelye's *Huck Finn for The Critics*, which lops off the whole silly-happy ending, the deliverance of Nigger Jim (in which Hemingway, for instance, never believed); and puts back into the tale the cussing and sex presumably excited by the least authentic part of Samuel Clemens's mind – as well as the revelation, at long last, that what Huck and Jim were smoking on the raft was not tobacco but 'hemp', which is to say, marijuana. Despite all, however, Huck seems for the moment to belong not to the childhood we all continue to live, but to the one we have left behind.

Natty Bumppo, on the other hand, dreamed originally in the suburbs of New York City and in Paris, oddly survives along with his author. Contrary to what we had long believed, it is James Fenimore Cooper who now remains alive, or rather who has been reborn, perhaps not so much as he saw himself as in the form D. H. Lawrence re-imagined him en route to America; for Cooper understood that the dream which does not fade with the building of cities, but assumes in their concrete and steel environment the compelling vividness of a waking hallucination, is the encounter of Old World men and New in the wilderness, the meeting of the transplanted European and the Red Indian. No wonder Lawrence spoke of himself as 'Kindled by Fenimore Cooper'.

The Return of the Redskin to the centre of our art and our deep imagination, as we all of us have retraced Lawrence's trip to the mythical America, is based not merely on the revival of the oldest and most authentic of American Pop forms, but also projects certain meanings of our lives in terms more metaphorical than political, which is to say, meanings valid as myth is valid rather than as history. Writers of Westerns have traditionally taken sides for or against the Indians; and unlike the authors of the movies which set the kids to cheering at the Saturday matinees of the Twenties and Thirties, the new novelists have taken a clear stand with the Red Man. In this act of mythological renegey they have not only implicitly declared themselves enemies of the Christian Humanism; but they have also rejected the act of genocide with which our nation began – and whose last reflection, perhaps, is to be found in the war in Vietnam.

It is impossible to write any Western which does not in some sense glorify violence; but the violence celebrated in the anti-White Western is guerrilla violence: the sneak attack on 'civilization' as practised first by Geronimo and Cochise and other Indian warrior chiefs, and more latterly prescribed by Ché Guevara or the spokesmen for North Vietnam. Warfare, however, is not the final vision implicit in the New Western, which is motivated on a deeper level by a nostalgia for the Tribe: a form of social organization thought of as preferable both to the tight two-generation bourgeois family, from which its authors come, and the soulless out-of-human-scale bureaucratic state, into which they are initiated via schools and universities. [...]

In any case, our best writers have been able to take up the Western again – playfully and seriously at once, quite like their ancestors who began the Revolution which made us a country by playing Indians in deadly earnest and dumping all that English tea into the salt sea that sundered them from their King. There are many writers still under forty, among them the most distinguished of their generation, who have written New Westerns which have found the hearts of the young, particularly in paperback form; since to these young readers, for reasons psychological as well as economic, the hard-cover book with its aspiration to immortality in libraries begins to look obsolete. John Barth's *The Sotweed Factor* represents the beginning of the wave which has been cresting ever since 1960; and which has carried with it not only Barth's near contemporaries like Thomas Berger (in *Little Big Man*), Ken Kesey (in both *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*), and most recently Leonard Cohen (in his extraordinarily gross and elegant *Beautiful Losers*) – but has won over older and more established writers like Norman Mailer whose newest novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, is not as its title seems to promise a book about a war in the East as much as a book about the idea of the West. Even William Burroughs, expert in drug fantasies and homosexual paranoia, keeps promising to turn to the genre; though so far he has contented himself with another popular form, another way of escaping from personal to public or popular myth, of using dreams to close rather than open a gap: Science Fiction.

Science Fiction does not seem at first glance to have as wide and universal appeal as the Western, in book form at least; though perhaps it is too soon to judge, for it is a very young genre, having found its real meaning and scope only after the Second World War, after tentative beginnings in Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, etc. At that point, two things became clear: first, that the future was upon us, that the pace of technological advance had become so swift that a distinction between present and future would get harder and harder to maintain; and second, that the end of Man, by annihilation or mutation, was a real, even an immediate possibility. But these are the two proper subjects of Science Fiction: the Present Future and the End of Man – not time travel or the penetration of outer space, except as the latter somehow symbolizes the former.

Perhaps only in quite advanced technologies which also have a tradition of self-examination and analysis, bred by Puritanism or Marxism or whatever, can Science Fiction at its most explicit, which is to say, expressed in words on the page, really flourish. In any case, only in America, England and the Soviet Union does the Science Fiction Novel or Post-Novel seem to thrive; though Science Fiction cartoon strips and comic books, as well as Science Fiction TV programmes and especially films (where the basic imagery is blissfully wed to electronic music, and words are kept to a minimum) penetrate everywhere. In England and America, at any rate, the prestige and influence of the genre are sufficient not only to allure Burroughs (in *Nova Express*), but also to provide a model for William Golding (in *Lord of the Flies*), Anthony Burgess (in *The Clockwork Orange*), and John Barth (whose second major book, *Giles Goatboy*, abandoned the Indian in favour of the Future).

Quite unlike the Western, which asserts the differences between England and America, Science Fiction reflects what still makes the two mutually distrustful communities one; as, for instance, a joint effort (an English author, an American director) like the movie, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, testifies. If there is still a common 'Anglo-Saxon' form, it is Science Fiction. Yet even here, the American case is a little different from the English; for only in the United States is there a writer of first rank whose preferred mode has been from the first Science Fiction in its unmitigated Pop form. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., did not begin by making some sort of traditional bid for literary fame and then shift to Science Fiction, but was so closely identified with that popular, not-quite-respectable form from the first, that the established critics were still ignoring him completely at a time when younger readers, attuned to the new rhythm of events by Marshall McLuhan or Buckminster Fuller, had already made underground favourites of his *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*. That Vonnegut now, after years of neglect, teaches writing in a famous American university and is hailed in lead reviews in the popular press, is a tribute not to the critics' acuity but to the persuasive powers of the young.

The revival of pornography in recent days, its moving from the periphery to the centre of the literary scene, is best understood in this context, too; for it, like the Western and Science Fiction, is a form of Pop Art – ever since Victorian times, indeed, the *essential* form of Pop Art, which is to say, the most unredeemable of all kinds of sub-literature, understood as a sort of entertainment closer to the pole of Vice than that of Art. Many of the more notable recent works of the genre have tended to conceal this fact, often because the authors themselves did not understand what they were after, and have tried to disguise their work as earnest morality (Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, for instance) or parody (Terry Southern's *Candy*). But whatever the author's conscious intent, all those writers who have helped move Porn from the underground to the foreground have in effect been working towards the liquidation of the very conception of pornography; since the end of Art on one side means the end of Porn on the other. And that end is now in sight, in the

area of films and Pop songs and poetry, but especially in that of the novel which seemed, initially at least, more congenial than other later Pop Art forms to the sort of private masturbatory reverie which is essential to pornography.

[...]

[...] Reversing the process typical of Modernism – under whose aegis an unwilling, ageing elite audience was bullied and cajoled slowly, slowly, into accepting the most vital art of its time – Post-Modernism provides an example of a young, mass audience urging certain ageing, reluctant critics onwards towards the abandonment of their former elite status in return for a freedom the prospect of which more terrifies than elates them. In fact, Post-Modernism implies the closing of the gap between critic and audience, too, if by critic one understands 'leader of taste' and by audience 'follower'. But more importantly of all, it implies the closing of the gap between artist and audience, or at any rate, between professional and amateur in the realm of art.

[...]

'THE DETECTIVE AND THE BOUNDARY: SOME NOTES ON THE POSTMODERN LITERARY IMAGINATION'

William V. Spanos

[...]

I

[...] What I wish to suggest at the outset is that, unlike the early modern imagination – indeed, in partial reaction against its refusal of historicity – the postmodern imagination, agonized as it has been by the on-going boundary situation which is contemporary history, is an existential imagination. Its anti-Aristotelianism – its refusal to fulfill causally oriented expectations, to create fictions and in extreme cases, sentences with beginnings, middles, and ends – has its source, not so much in an aesthetic as in an existential critique of the traditional Western view of man in the world, especially as it has been formulated by positivistic science and disseminated by the vested interests of the modern – technological – City. It is not, in other words, the ugliness, the busyness, the noisiness of a world organized on the principle of utility that has called forth postmodern anti-Aristotelianism, it is rather, though the two are not mutually exclusive, the anthropomorphic objectification of a world in which God is dead or has withdrawn.

[...]

According to the implications of existential philosophy, then, the problem-solution perspective of the 'straightforward' Western man of action, as Dos-toevsky's denizen of the underground calls the exponents of the Crystal Palace,

From William V. Spanos (1995) 'The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination' [1972], in Paul A. Bové (ed.), *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.