

## THE DANGERS OF POSTMODERNITY – A PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSE

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### *Introduction*

In this paper, I shall identify some key dangers presented by patterns of existence in the postmodern life-world. I will also indicate the basis of an adequate – that is to say, *refoundational* philosophical response to them. (A response of this kind is one which links cognition to constants bound up with the nature of human embodiment, but which allows that these constants are activated in contrasting ways under different historical conditions.)

### *Part One*

David Harvey has noted that in the postmodern era economic modes of production have shifted away from the rigidly determined practices of the post-war period. Of the postmodern economy, Harvey notes

‘It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products and patterns of consumption. It is characterised by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organisational innovations’.<sup>1</sup>

These radical innovations likewise engender a more globally integrated market. The ambiguities of this have been usefully summarised by Philip Cooke as follows:

‘One of the most important changes in setting has been the emergence in the late modern period of an increasingly integrated global economy,

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 147.

dominated by the most advanced forms of capitalist production and exchange. This development could be thought to run counter to the ... trend towards decentralisation. Yet it is not, because the global system has no centre. It is a decentred space of flows rather than a clearly hierarchical structured space of production'.<sup>2</sup>

This global but de-centred integration opens up a fascinating possibility – namely for the macro-social dimension of the civilizing process to facilitate greater integration without the use of coercive force. And again, this potential is also complemented by the globalizing effects of innovation in the field of medical and information technologies. The existence of satellite television and the Internet, for example, enable social developments and interactions to be communicated to even the most remote parts of the world. The 'global village' metaphor is in this respect an apt one. We now live in an epoch where consciousness of humanity and its vicissitudes *as a species*, is an idea which can be presented with sensory vividness rather than in merely abstract ideal terms. The self-regulation intrinsic to the civilizing process can accordingly be informed by a more intense universal orientation than has been possible before.

There is, of course, no guarantee that this universalised self-consciousness will be able to consolidate itself. On the one hand the possibility of developing the appropriate kinds of correlated international institutions and administrative structures is a formidably difficult one; and, on the other hand, any globalizing dynamic will tend to occur alongside vehement – even violent – assertions of local identity (as is the case, for example, in the tragic late twentieth century conflicts in the Balkans). This being said, however, there is no intrinsic reason why these difficulties should not find some cumulatively satisfactory resolution. It is, as the popular idiom has it, 'all to play for'.

Given these possibilities, and other undoubted advances made in relation to the other positive criteria of the civilizing process, it may seem that we are on the threshold of some golden age. However, if taken to an extreme, this can result in a negative factor *vis a vis* the civilizing process, namely *symbolic arrest* wherein communities and individuals are locked into transactions with symbols at the expense of and as a substitute for more basic life processes. Indeed, in the contemporary world there are of poststructuralist persuasion those who would deny that we can meaningfully talk of such processes independently of their symbolic modes of articulation.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Cooke, *Back to the Future: Modernity, Postmodernity and Locality* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 141.

Before considering this let us look at the broad form of specifically postmodern symbolic arrest in more detail.

In its widest manifestations this takes the form of consumerism. Such a phenomenon has been a strong feature in the world socio-economic structure since the 1950's (and, indeed before that in the USA). It is a form of social mentality which seeks gratification through the purchase of items and where this gratification derives as much if not more from the packaging and 'lifestyle' connotations of an item, than its practical utility. Consumerism – as opposed to the production and exchange of goods *per se* – is driven by the advertising industry and concomitant productive patterns of in-built obsolescence i.e. artefacts made in such a way as to be used and disposed of quickly, so that the consumer is driven towards the purchase of new ones. In this form of society social kudos pertains primarily not towards achievement in the specialised symbolic practices, but rather to the variety of brand labelled goods which the individual has the financial resources to buy.

Consumerism is intricately bonded to a second factor in postmodern symbolic arrest, namely the global expansion of mass-media and information technology. Whatever universalising potential this may have, it comes at a great cultural price. In this respect, Neil Postman has observed that:

'We are now a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not the printed word. To be sure there are still readers and there are many books published, but the uses of print and reading are not the same as they once were; not even in schools, the last institutions where print was thought to be invincible ... Print is now merely a residual epistemology, and it will remain so, aided to some extent by the computer, and newspapers and magazines that are made to look like television screens'.<sup>3</sup>

Postman makes an extremely damning analysis of the effects of television throughout all aspects of contemporary social existence, By its nature, television is a medium where compositional and editorial factors are to the fore. No matter how documentary its intent, the television programme is primarily constructed from different camera shots, and edited tape sequences. This in itself makes the medium unsuited to the presentation of temporally sustained rational exposition and argument. Material of this kind has to be compressed into more editorially amenable units.

Television's internal destructiveness *vis a vis* the foregoing has been

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<sup>3</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 28.

dramatically compounded by the colonising power of one of its particular usages – in commercial advertising. Postman observes that:

‘The move away from the use of propositions in commercial advertising began at the end of the nineteenth century. But it was not until the 1950’s that the television commercial made linguistic discourse obsolete as the basis for product decisions. By substituting images for claims, the pictorial commercial made emotional appeals, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decisions. The distance between rationality and advertising is now so wide that it is difficult to remember that there once existed a connection between them’.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed Postman continues:

‘the television commercial is not all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products. Images of movie stars and famous athletes, of scenic lakes and macho fishing trips, of elegant dinners ... – these tell us nothing about the products being sold. But they tell everything about the fears, fancies and dreams of those who might buy them. What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer’.<sup>5</sup>

Now these observations, of course, illuminate the link between television and the symbolically arrested consumer sensibility noted earlier. However, Postman also emphasises a much more far-reaching point namely that the television commercial and related entertainment idioms have colonised the presentation of news, current affairs, and politics. Not what is reported but how it is reported becomes the focus of meaning – its style, its ‘cleverness’ of presentation, and, in the case of politics and politicians, ‘image’ and ‘sound bite’. Additionally (although Postman does not dwell on it much) more trivial pursuits such as sport are presented as if they were of the greatest existential import. The means to this are a sustained build-up to the sporting event through frenzied advertising in the weeks preceding it and then endless interviews and expert opinions etc. etc. just before, and during the actual occurrence of the event. In the world of postmodern symbolic arrest, life and death, world events, and the world of sport assume equal entertainment value.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

*Part Two*

It is also notable how symbolic arrest has permeated the world of public services and utilities and even educational institutions. Within them develop what might be called a 'management culture' wherein services and processes are 'repackaged' and 'products' are promoted as if the relationships involved were purely commercial ones. The dimension of symbolic arrest here focuses on the way in which management culture seeks to promote 'efficiency' but does so only by interpreting it on the basis of models of social interaction and outcomes derived from cybernetics and the advertising industry. What results is not a more functionally efficient institution or service but rather one which is seen to *display* a well organised management structure. In effect, the symbolic relations and internal dynamics of bureaucracy become ends in themselves.

Another zone of postmodern symbolic arrest which is worth considering is in the visual arts. Here there is some affinity with the management culture just discussed. In 1964, for example, Tom Wolfe's book *The Painted Word*<sup>6</sup> put a light-hearted case for interpreting much twentieth-century modernist art as dependent for its intelligibility upon accompanying bodies of theoretical discourse. Wolfe's reading is, in fact, not true of this art *per se*, but it is true of much conceptually-based 'art' practice since the 1960's. Elsewhere<sup>7</sup> I have argued that 'meaning' in such works is largely determined by contemporary curatorial interests – the art object exists only as a vehicle for *talk* about art and its modes of social significance or otherwise. Its *raison d'être* is as a symbolic display not of art, but of those conditions and institutions under which it is constituted by persons whose proper business is its management, criticism, or historical interpretation.

The phenomenon of symbolic arrest has also characterised dominant contemporary strategies in the other specialised symbolic practices, most notably philosophy, literary theory and the social sciences. At the heart of this is a group of theoretical approaches known collectively as poststructuralism. Figures such as Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault and (to some extent) Baudrillard,<sup>8</sup> emphasise that knowledge only occurs as an articulation within a *field* of signifying relations, and that this renders meaning, truth, and subjectivity, much more unstable and fluid notions than has hitherto been

<sup>6</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> In my 'Against Curatorial Imperialism: Merleau-Ponty and the Fundamental Historicity of Art', in the *Blackwell Companion to Art Theory* ed. P. Smith and C. Wilde, Blackwells (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For a critique of Baudrillard's position see Chapter 9 of my *The Language of Twentieth Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

supposed. This attitude has become a general characteristic of much contemporary thought. In fact, Hans Bertens has suggested that something like it informs most recent attempts to comprehend the general nature of postmodernity. In his words:

'If there is a common denominator to all ... postmodernisms, it is that of a crisis of representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense. No matter whether they are aesthetic, epistemological, oral, or political in nature, the representations that we used to rely on can no longer be taken for granted'.<sup>9</sup>

The most radical form of this scepticism is found in Derrida's philosophy. Derrida's basic position has been excellently summarised by Wolfgang Iser as follows:

'Derrida proved that meaning is always due to the inscription in media, and that mediality does not first ensue subsequently and externally but is constitutive for meaning at the outset, that it has *productive* significance for processes of meaning. Meaning is not, as the metaphysical tradition had thought, 'tarnished' or faked through the materiality of the medium; rather without this connection there would be no meaning at all. The pure sign-free meaning which the tradition had dreamt of was a phantom. Today this is – thanks to media experience – the state of reflection in philosophy'.<sup>10</sup>

Iser's point in the last sentence here is an important one. The diverse modes of representation made possible by recent innovations in media and information technology are themselves an exemplification of Derrida's sign-based epistemology. They reveal the ways in which different media are constitutive of our ways of experiencing the world. Hence Iser's general conclusion that:

'today's philosophy considers complete worlds – be it the everyday world, the physical world, or a literary world – to be constructions and, to this extent, at least in part to be artefacts. Artistic or fictional feats, inhere in all worlds, starting with the fundamental schemata of perception, via modes of symbolisation, through to the forms of evaluation of objects. And it cannot be said that any of these procedures and criteria could be straightforwardly derived from a reality-in-itself. – All worlds are basically artificial worlds.'<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Welsch's leap from the fact that signs necessarily mediate our experience of reality, to the conclusion that they are constitutive of it in a radical sense, is what I shall call *epistemological nihilism*. Such a viewpoint does not deny that there is a realm of being beyond signification, but it does deny that this realm can provide the conceptual foundations for distinguishing between forms of knowledge, or for the objective superiority of one conceptual frame over another.

Epistemological nihilism is, I would suggest, the inevitable outcome of all the varieties of poststructuralism. Indeed, the familiar idea of reality as a 'social construct' propagated in much social science and 'discourse theory' is itself a crude form of epistemological nihilism. I would argue further that such nihilisms exemplify postmodern symbolic arrest in its most dense and strangulating form. Reality is seen in the most basic terms, as an effect of varieties of symbolic artifice. Rather than achieving self-regulation through adapting to, and articulating reality, self-consciousness is locked into the fantasy that symbolic display of one sort or another is a sufficient characterisation of the real. In a sense this involves an unrecognised regression to a mythical mode of thought, insofar as symbol and reality are taken to be fused with one another.

Now it might be argued that the problem, of symbolic arrest has been overstated here. Whatever else is the case about postmodern society, it represents a real diversification of life-choices which are open to the individual, and, in particular, it has allowed the voices of marginalised or repressed communities to not only obtain a hearing, but to become a part of a mainstream eclectic culture.

But again, whilst these are indeed positive factors, the dimension of symbolic arrest presents, nevertheless, the direst problems. The irony is that whilst the potential for great advance exists, this potential is being squandered and much worse. The squandering consists in the way that symbolic arrest actually works counter to its intended effects. In the health services, for example, the nursing profession still caters for patients, but the energies of experienced staff – which could be of *most* benefit to those who are in need of care – is diverted into useless administrative duties. These duties engender plans, flow charts, and other signifiers of efficiency, but this is efficiency only in a rhetorical sense. The figures 'cash out'. Budgets are balanced but responsibility for patient care is devolved on to the young and inexperienced. In practice, the patient loses out. The very functions which define the nursing profession are contradicted by the means of their, supposedly, more efficient realisation.

This embodies a kind of law of symbolic arrest which pervades

contemporary society. Broadly speaking, the more the term 'quality' is used as a rhetorical goal in relation to operational strategies in the public services, utilities, and education, the more the image of efficient operation is conveyed, and the less, correspondingly, are the actual benefits which accrue to the recipients. Admittedly, the systems still work but *how* they work is a pale shadow of the ways in which they *could* and *should* work.

The danger is amplified in the context of information technology. In his book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* Michael Heim judiciously observes that

'Business in America embraced computers under the magic rubric of *productivity*. Yet company reports do not seem to get better after thirty drafts. Real economic productivity in the United States actually declined over the last decade, and so has the competitiveness of the US economy. Feel productive; push more paper.'<sup>12</sup>

Of course information technology is an enormous boon in relation to all aspects of contemporary productive processes, but Heim's point is that it also engenders a futile tendency to produce information for its own sake, even in contexts where it is actually meant to promote efficiency. More generally he notes that:

'Infomania erodes our capacity for significance. With a mind-set fixed on information, our attention span shortens. We collect fragments. We become mentally poorer in overall meaning. We get into the habit of clinging to knowledge bits and lose our feel for the wisdom behind the knowledge.'<sup>13</sup>

On these terms, the new technology tends to engender an aimless and fragmented pursuit of information for its own sake. The computer-user 'surfs the Internet' in the apotheosis of what Heidegger once characterised as empty 'curiosity'. This – like the wanderings of the 'flâneur' – has its attractions, but not if carried to a point of obsessiveness. Such a point, if culturally generalised, takes us to the zone of absolute danger. Heim's book is actually illustrative of this in several respects. For example, whilst identifying the dangers of information technology obsession his response to this is to advocate a quasi-mystical oriental counter-philosophy which, in effect, amounts to a kind of exotic Californian holiday which occasionally keeps one away from the computer. In terms of reality, however, Californian holidays are, at best, of

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



limited duration. They do not amount to taking control of a situation – which is surely the response demanded here.

The real problem is that information technology (and variants – such as virtual reality) have, like the media and advertising industries, an intoxicating glamour whereby the individual focuses on and consumes the symbolic means rather than the functional ends which are involved. And like the televisual image, information technology has its own adverse epistemological effect over and above the mere diminution of attention span. Heim describes it as follows:

‘The computer absorbs our language so we can squirt symbols at lightening speeds or scan the whole range of human thought with Boolean searches. Because the computer, not the student does the translating, [a] shift takes place subtly. The computer system slides us from a fierce awareness of things to the detached world of logical distance. By encoding language as data the computer already modifies the language we use into mathematized ASCII (American Standard Code of Information Interchange). We can then operate with the certitude of Boolean formulas. The logical distance we gain offers all the allure of control and power without the pain of having to translate back and forth from our everyday approach to the things we experience.’<sup>14</sup>

On these terms, thought processes which follow the prompting of information technology have a reductive effect. The sensible particularity and complexity of the real is expressed abstractly as a logic of inclusion and exclusion *vis a vis* class membership. Reality does, of course, have this aspect, but symbolic expressions of it do no justice to such things as, for example, concrete patterns of human interaction. Applied beyond the appropriate context, the idioms of information technology function as symbolic displays which distort and conceal the realities which they are meant to articulate.

### *Part Three*

All the factors which I have described so far enmesh with one another. Postmodern existence both operates and is definable within a world wide web of symbolic arrest. And in every web there is something nasty. In this case the something nasty is uniquely, a product of the factors which constitute the web. It is a ‘creature’ of two converging aspects – one being an artificially induced mutation of self-consciousness, and the other being a something ‘other’ than human being.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

The former I shall call the *qualitative cyborg*. To work towards its understanding let us first define the cyborg as a human who has been implanted with genetically-engineered tissue or micro-chip technology. In a quantitative sense this is not problematic. Interventions of this sort can enhance the body's capacity to resist illness, disease, and can compensate for congenital deficiencies. However, let us suppose that these interventions are directed not towards resisting or preventing adverse factors in bodily existence but towards the transformation of cognitive structures.

There is a massive amount of contemporary writing which wriggles and writhes in ecstasy at this very prospect.<sup>15</sup> The idea is that if one can 'interface' with a virtual-reality cyberspace whenever one desires then this will engender a liberation from the body and a projection into a realm of freedom and realisable fantasy. William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* is frequently cited as an exemplar of what this might be like.

It is, however, important to distinguish between this essentially fantasy notion of the cyborg and the qualitative variety. All fantasy derives its potency and desirability from the matrix of physical embodiment. There can only be adventures in virtual cyberspace because of the patterns of loss and gain – the 'economy of desire' referred to in the last Chapter – which characterises the being of embodied subjectivity. No matter how immersed in virtual cyberspace one might become, what is experienced there only has meaning by virtue of its reference back to the body and its mundane interactions. Remove that, and the conditions which render fantasy meaningful are removed. The significance of desire realised in a cyber-world may appear to be other than that of normal embodied existence, but it merely extends the customary economy of desire in an unrecognised form. And the real always returns. At some point the cyborg is reluctantly summoned back to the domain of everydayness. He or she thus becomes something of a divided 'unhappy consciousness' in the Hegelian sense.

Now it might be that the cyborg may be able to strike some *modus vivendi* between the real and the virtual. But unless the nature of this relation and its components are subjected to searching critical scrutiny on the basis of an adequate epistemology, all that we have are fantasies of harmony. And one particularly foolish fantasy of this kind beckons to the cyber-addict. It is that of the total immersion scenario, where the addict chooses to be placed in a virtual-system which brings about the delusion that what they are experiencing

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, some of the essays in *Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology, and Post-Human Pragmatism*, ed. Joan Broadhurst Dixon and Eric J. Cassidy (London: Routledge, 1998).

is real. The addict is able to exist continuously in this cyber-world though also being placed in a biomechanical support system which provides for nutrition, the discharge of waste, and regular toning up of muscles and tissue. The film *The Matrix* is loosely prophetic of this.

Such a context radicalises the dimension of unhappy consciousness noted earlier. For the cybernaut's existence is now absolutely dependent on a reality which – as a deluded subject – he or she has no volitional relation to. No matter what interactive cyber relations evolve within the total immersion system, and no matter how reliable in principle the biomechanical support system is, they are absolutely dependent on contingencies. A super-virus, environmental disaster, or even the malignant flick of a switch outside the system, could destroy this cyber-world *in toto*. The individuals within the system would have no opportunity to prepare for such happenstances, neither would they be able to formulate responses to them.

The burgeoning literature of cyber-babble rarely reaches as far as these insights. Indeed, its preoccupation with cybernaut fantasies has meant that the real issue has scarcely been addressed. For the cyborgs just described do not embody a radical transformation of humanity, but rather a particularly stupid mode of self-indulgence. The cyber-augmentation of cognitive capacities involved here amounts to little more than a quantitative intensification of those patterns of desire and gratification which are defined by the condition of embodied subjectivity.

The qualitative cyborg is *very* different. This can be shown by developing a contrast. The embodied subject's remembrance of the past and its imaginative projection of experiential possibility involve the generation of imagery to satisfy linguistic descriptions. This generation is, however, at best piecemeal, fragmentary, and highly creative. Indeed, it is precisely the incompleteness of such generation which necessitates narrative as the basis of the cohesion of the self. We know that the body exists continuously through space and time, but we can only comprehend this existence as a unity (i.e. become self-conscious) insofar as the continuum is marked out in terms of mutually significant episodes and events. This narrative structure depends as much upon what we are unable to remember or project, as it does upon what we can actually realise.

Let us suppose, however, that through biomechanical implants or genetically engineered tissues, some humans are able to massively augment their powers of recall and imaginative projection. Their mental engrams now admit of virtually full rather than schematic embodiment. A being of this kind can choose to, as it were, switch-off its present input of stimuli, so as to replay past experiences or project possible ones with a sensory vividness that

approximates immediate perception. For such an agent it would seem as if these experiences were actually occurring in the present.

In order for such a cyborg to function it would need some kind of cognitive bracketing out mechanism whereby its virtual experiences were recognised as projections and not real stimuli from the present. This is necessary because if an agent could not distinguish between present, past, and mere possibility, its sense of self would be collapsed. This being said, it may be that bracketing devices of the most enormous complexity could be developed. These would enable a controlled interface between both the present and past and possible experience, which could draw simultaneously on all the senses *and* the subject's general experiential viewpoint. Hence, in recalling a past event, we would not only project what we perceived but also something of those affective states and broader attitudes which informed that particular perceptual engagement. Similarly, in projecting future or counterfactual possibilities, we would not only 'see' and 'hear' etc. a state of affairs but would also extrapolate and project an image of how we might feel in that context and how our personal worldview might differ from its present incarnation.

A biotechnical project of this kind would probably, at the outset, have a purely quantitative orientation. It would seek to merely improve or augment human cognitive mechanisms. In the long term, however, it could easily produce a *qualitative* transformation. This is because the specifically human form of finitude is here radically changed. To be able both to recreate the past and project alternative experiences with virtual exactness, is to eliminate that dimension of incompleteness and lack which necessitate narrative as the basis of unity of the self. For the qualitative cyborg, nothing is lost and nothing much is gained in the passage of life. On the one hand, its past moments can live again in the present and on the other hand, the attractions of the future are vitiated through the power to project alternative experiential possibilities at will and at any time. The emphasis in experience is, thereby, shifted away from narrative meaning towards mere continuity. Different things happen to the qualitative cyborg, but none of these things existentially outweigh any other. The past does not fade, and any future or counterfactual possibility that one cares to project can live, as it were, in advance of the future. Every experience has equality of intensity and value.

On these terms, then, mere augmentation of cognitive capacities can lead to a being whose finitude is qualitatively different from that of a human. Such a being has an immediate present, but to the degree that it can recall or project its experience is not closely bound to that immediate present. In the case of the human being, in contrast, the immediate present forms the focal point of its sense of self. As it cannot recall the past or project alternative

experiences with any completeness, it must link these selectively and evaluatively in a cumulative narrative which contextualises and makes its immediate present meaningful.

The qualitative cyborg has no need of such a narrative. Such self-consciousness as it starts with is compressed into a one dimensional vector of activity – namely a means/end rationality directed towards maximising the possibilities of its own survival. The only avenues of intrinsic value which would be relevant to it are those symbolic specialised practices which have technological or practical use. Given the appropriate interface stations one such cyborg would be able to communicate its own history *in toto* to another. There would be no problem of interpersonal communication since the very narrative factors which are the basis of personality are what the qualitative cyborg's cognitive augmentations serve to diminish. Language, empathic identification, and imagination would be mechanised in the direction of informational interface alone. The aesthetic dimension of experience would disappear entirely. Such a being would only be self-conscious in a formal sense i.e. it could identify itself as having occupied and being able to occupy spatio-temporal co-ordinates other than its immediate one, but these would not matter to it except in a quantitative sense. They would simply be units accumulated alongside others in the continuous flow of its existence.

Now a cyborg of this kind begins – in my scenario – as an implanted human whose cognitive augmentations push it unintentionally in this dehumanised direction. It is driven by animal instincts for survival and reproduction, and, given the elimination of narrative meaning, these are all that its cognitive powers can be directed towards. There would be nothing else for it. It follows, therefore, that such a being would gradually seek out and bond with others of the same kind for survival and reproductive purposes. Given the appropriate *in vitro* fertilisation and nurturing technology it is quite possible that these purposes could be realised. Humanity would have accidentally created a mutant species which would find its own creators at best incomprehensible and, at worst, of significance only insofar as they inhibited or could be put to use in the facilitation of cyborg survival. Not only would these beings be alien to the civilizing process, they could threaten its very existence.

The technological innovations which make the qualitative cyborg feasible are also of considerable concern in themselves, especially in relation to the massively accelerating growth of artificial neural networks and nanotechnology. It is possible, for example, that artificial intelligence will be created with a capacity to evolve autonomously towards levels of biological complexity. If such 'artilects' were able to engage with one another and engender their

own 'forms of life' (in the Wittgensteinian sense) then the human species would find that it had, inadvertently, created a much more powerful rival to its own dominion of the earth. The potential for violence here would almost be beyond comprehension.

Qualitative cyborgs and artefacts are not just science-fiction, they are already visible on the technological horizon. We are making them emerge from the world wide web of symbolic arrest. Unfortunately it is the cosy science-fiction mentality of cyber-babble which inhibits an adequate awareness of the dangers which the qualitative cyborg and the artefact present. Science fiction – however horrible the possibilities it projects – is a human endeavour with outcomes controlled by its creators. The possibilities which I am describing are not. In the unpleasant unglamorous real world our capacity for controlled endings has been diminished. Things *much* worse than the possibilities which I have described may happen. Unfortunately, because contemporary symbolic arrest is unable to distinguish between scientific fact and the comforts of science fiction, it regresses to a level of mythic understanding which is of a particularly childish kind. Everything *has to work out for the best*, in the end, so all that we need do in the meantime is to float through delicious cyber-space fantasies.

We are left then, with the following position. If the postmodern world continues on its present symbolically arrested course it is quite conceivable that civilization will come to an end through the advent of an era of cyber-modernity, where mechanised processes define the terms of existence, or where biomachines extinguish or enslave the human species. The alternative is for philosophy to intervene. This does not entail a rejection of technological innovation. Rather it involves a critical thinking through of historical change in relation to these enduring epistemological and aesthetic factors which are the basis of self-consciousness and the civilizing process. In this way one might hope to establish a critical philosophical standpoint which could help regulate – however minimally – the transition to what comes after postmodernism.

### *Conclusion*

I shall now consider where such a philosophy should be sought, and what its relation to postmodernity might be. In terms of the first question, we must recall the central tenet of the refoundational strategy, namely that constant elements in experience are always articulated under historically specific circumstances. This means that their philosophical comprehension will take different forms at different times. In some epochs, such and such a constant

will figure more centrally in experience than others, and philosophical discourse will reflect this accordingly. At other times, constants which hitherto only seemed of marginal importance will come to the fore in unexpected ways and become thereby much more accessible to philosophical understanding.

One of the most striking examples of this is the contemporary primacy of signification. Signification is a necessary condition of any possible experience over and above mere animal consciousness, and the ubiquity of signs in contemporary consumer culture is a heightened expression of this necessity. Indeed, the current prevalence of epistemological nihilism has a similar disclosive significance *vis-a-vis* both the structure of signification itself, and its more general ramifications. It serves, in particular, (whatever its faults) to affirm the fact that meaning is not some simple correspondence between sign and referent, but gravitates around the sign's relation to other signs in a developing *field* of signifying relations. This insight is of vital importance in comprehending the dynamic complexity of the self – but only if it is correlated with an understanding of those constant reciprocal relations which stabilise the cognitive field, and, thereby, give holistic cohesion to the self. (It is these stabilising factors, of course, which epistemological nihilism fails to negotiate.)

Given this decisive philosophical clue from postmodern culture, and the need to overcome its limitations, the question arises as to which philosophical positions should be drawn from in this task. On the basis of a re-foundational approach, one need not be tied to any single thinker or philosophical school. This is because any significant philosophical work will offer some way or other of identifying constants in experience. The thing is to select sources which also illuminate one's present situation through their particular way of articulating the more enduring factors. In the present case, this means a philosophy which can locate us in relation to the clues noted above and which can develop them on the basis of a systematic notion of reciprocal relations thus enabling the articulation of self-consciousness as *a process of realisation*.

This project could usefully draw on the Hegelian tradition, or a totally re-thought historical materialism. There is, however, an even more directly relevant method which itself cuts across some customary methodological boundaries. It can be called *transcendental hermeneutics*. The first term in this title signifies an intention to clarify those constants which are logically necessary conditions for objective knowledge and self-consciousness. The second term indicates that this will not issue in some exhaustive and fixed philosophical system, but is, rather, an on-going process of clarification, critique, and reformulation – all in all a sustained interpretative task.

What makes transcendental hermeneutics more than the sum of its two

parts, however, is the possibility of *progressive articulation*. This means that through its dialogue with tradition and its own historically specific context of experience, transcendental hermeneutics seeks to establish the truth of self-consciousness on the same basis as the civilizing process itself i.e. as a cumulative process advancing – however, erratically – to higher stages. Our criterion of ‘higher’ in this context, is the ability to identify constants and their reciprocal relations with one another, to continuously differentiate them internally and reassess the nature of the whole in the light of this. Just as importantly it involves a tracing of the implications of this process in relation to the problems of the present and in relation to the present’s implications for it.

If such an analytic momentum can be historically sustained each distinct phase of development can be, in logical terms, more consistent and more comprehensive in explanatory and methodological power than the preceding phases. Since, however one of the main effects of historical existence is the forgetting of the past, the emphasis of philosophical analysis in any one period may – for contemporary cultural reasons – focus on one group of constants and forget or neglect others which have been previously illuminated. This is why a transcendental hermeneutical approach does not seek a definitive resolution to philosophical problems. Changing historical circumstances disclose new aspects to familiar categories, as well as concealing others. Transcendental hermeneutics, accordingly, involves a constant reinterpretation of the past in relation to the present, and the acknowledgement that the only complete framework of philosophical truth is that of progressive articulation as the possibility of *a continuous open-ended process of gradual cumulative advance*.