

Revolution!/? Why? A Reply to Nicholas Handler
5 November 2007
Ryan McInerney (HBA Philosophy/English 4th Year)

It is at first interesting and even energizing to read Nicholas Handler's take on the question "What's the Matter With College?" a Rick Perlstein essay published in the *New York Times Magazine* earlier this year. Handler, a self-defined member of "The Posteverything Generation,"¹ opens the window for a conversation about the "future of culture or society" (1) that, perhaps, can only be shared by members of this future culture. That is, the fact that the new generation has now been awarded a scholarly voice encourages its members to react by speaking with confidence and with some sense of privilege. Yet while Handler is correct in his surface recitation of the terms surrounding postmodernism, he fails to grasp its full social and cultural implications. The present essay is sympathetic to Handler's point about how postmodernism – and particularly Frederic Jameson's notion of pastiche – can be applied directly to the new culture. I strongly reject, however, the notion that there can be another generational revolution, if the postmodern view is correct; I appeal to Jameson's pastiche and Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal to argue that there is only the simulation of revolution, that what we write will not be a revolution inscribed "in our own language," (2) but simply another story in rearranged characters that are dead and can never be alive.

First, let's take a look at Handler's comments about postmodernism. He rightly begins by making the typical claim that there is an immediate "problem with defining postmodernism...The difficulty is that it is so...*post*" (1, emphasis his). Jacques Derrida, a primary force in the postmodern camp (or deconstructionist, or poststructuralist; I loosely conflate these terms), would agree. Derrida uses the term "différance" to illustrate this sort of non-presence, this meaning that is not essential, a word that "denotes not only the activity of primordial difference but also the temporalizing detour of deferring."² In other words, différance is the way in which words get meaning from other words—they do not have any meaning of their own, and they have no independent existence or presence in either time or space (or metaphysically), as was thought by traditional philosophy.³ Postmodernism calls for the same sort of nihilistic definition; it is a perspective that is "parodic, detached, strange, and sometimes menacing," (Handler 1) and it rejects "a realm, the past or future presence of a realm" (Derrida 293). Or, as Jameson puts it, postmodernism is manifested "in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions."⁴

Handler cites Jameson's pastiche to illustrate the ways in which our new generation is postmodern:

For us, the posteverything generation, pastiche is the use and reuse of the old clichés of social change and moral outrage – a perfunctory rebelliousness that has culminated in the age of rapidly multiplying nonprofits and relief funds. We live our lives in masks and speak our minds in a dead language – the language of a society that expects us to agitate because that's what young people do. (2)

The pastiche is, agreeably, the trademark of the new culture, which, as Jameson points out, has relinquished the traditional sense "that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic" (16, emphasis his). Even the notion of the so-called "revolution"

¹ The title of Nicholas Handler's essay is "The Posteverything Generation," published recently in the *New York Times Magazine*. All Handler quotes are taken from the online version of the essay, listed in the works cited section below.

² Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p. 288.

³ Derrida calls this traditional belief "the ether of metaphysics," p. 289.

⁴ Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, p. 28.

has been swept up and commercialized, printed on posters, t-shirts, bracelets, jackets, and hats. Handler is right about the fact that this generation is steeped in nihilism and narcissism (2). We have certainly been contemplating ourselves in – and even measuring ourselves by – the reflective waters of the past, especially of the past century.

It is therefore confusing when Handler complains about the widespread refusal to write “an overarching narrative to our own political consciousness,” or to “define our own philosophy” (2). He appears to understand the postmodern and poststructuralist view that we only derive meaning from other things, but he still wants to save the idea of revolution, the supposed essence of new generations. He believes that there can be – and even that there is – a revolution, that there is a “what” that we can “really stand for” (1). Handler unveils the “technological revolution,” the “revolution of the Organization Kid,⁵” (2) in an attempt to fortify this generation’s claim to something, anything, a revolution of any kind. Yet, as Handler refuses to admit, all of this is simply fiction, and the revolution itself is only another dusty remnant of the “dead language” of our ancestors. His conclusion reflects the same parental nostalgia that he ostensibly resents, the old longing for a real, a normal, that is “behind our pastiche;” (2) but there is no revolution, or if there is, it is only an imitation, as I think Jameson and, it will be shown, Baudrillard would agree.

Baudrillard is famous for his talk about postmodernism with regards to simulation and the hyperreal, concepts that correlate with Jameson’s pastiche. “Simulation,” says Baudrillard, “is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”⁶ In other words, there is nothing that is represented by simulation but more simulation; it is an infinite regress of copies without archetype. And the result is that any further attempt at reality, any new model, is “nothing more than operational” (204). Similarly, Jameson makes the claim that “in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles;” this is “the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past” (18). Somehow, Handler has missed this key point that postmodernism makes about the future, namely, that it can only be a simulation of the past, a lifeless imitation of previous imitations.

The result of all this is that, whatever this generation chooses to stand for, if it stands for anything, it will not be anything concrete in the traditional sense; it will not have any reality, presence, or meaning. The revolution is – will only ever be – hyperreal, simulated. In fact, the beginnings of such a simulation can already be seen clearly, as Handler himself points out. It is the case that we, the “true postmodern generation,” who have grown up in the aftermath of so much twentieth century tumult, are not familiar, in the strictest sense, with the full significance of the cultural changes that have occurred. Instead, we are fully accustomed to “liv[ing] our lives in masks” and sporting the “Che Guevera t-shirt;” (2) but even this sort of conception is nostalgic for the real face and the real body on which these things are worn. The significance of postmodernism is that we *are* the mask and the t-shirt—we are whatever we *choose* to wear, to sing, to be.

And so, why worry? For as Nietzsche points out, “when we hear the news that ‘the old god is dead,’ ...our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation.”⁷ Or, as Derrida replies, “we must *affirm* it – in the way that Nietzsche brings affirmation into play – with a certain laughter and with a certain dance” (297). The happiness is simply that, because we find ourselves without need for a revolution, we can be sure that we have attained freedom.

⁵ A term used by Perlstein and cited by Handler.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. “From *Simulations*,” p. 203.

⁷ Nietzsche, Frederich. “The Gay Science”, in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, p. 208.