

## TOWARDS A POSTMODERN FEMINISM?

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These days virtually the whole intellectual world agrees on the extraordinary importance that has to be attached to the postmodern and feminist movements in all kinds of fields-philosophy, sociology and literary criticism. However, there is definitely no unanimous agreement, but rather a state of fierce argument, on the ways in which the two are related and similar. The modernist/postmodernist debate was the first to arise, since early feminist criticism totally rejected any kinship with postmodern movements, and felt more closely linked to certain modernist values. Today, however, the situation is not so clear. Although there are still feminine thinkers who believe that the feminist movement should have no place in the modernist/postmodernist contention (Bunch 44-56), many representative figures in feminist criticism have come to accept postulates typical of postmodern philosophy, and there are even those who unreservedly defend such postulates. While this debate is a burning issue in the United States, it is still in its infancy in Spain, which is why we believe that a detailed analysis is vitally relevant at this stage.

The most important common ground shared by feminism and postmodernism, and where critics most appear to agree, is the rejection by both movements of the *status quo*, of dominant systems and in general of the epistemology of the Enlightenment and the anthropocentric definition of the concept of knowledge, logocentrism and what Rorty has called «foundational thought». Postmodernism represents a crisis of cultural authority (Owens 57-82) or, as Ann Kaplan says, a cultural rift in the sense of Foucault's «épistème» or Kuhn's «paradigms»: it is quite simply the reflection of an age. This is a fact of which one must always be aware, even though this does not necessarily mean that we must agree; for as Andreas Huyssen says, what will no longer do is either to eulogize or to ridicule postmodernism *en bloc*. The postmodern must be salvaged from its champions and from its detractors. The only certainty we have with regard to postmodernism is that it exists (though nobody seems to know exactly what it is) and that it has provoked many violent arguments, particularly in its birthplace, the United States. This is reason enough to make it the object of serious study. While in general the feminist movement's ideas are very clear (they know where they come from,

where they are going, who their representatives are, and so on), it is practically impossible to define postmodernism, since we are not faced with a homogeneous movement; it *is* possible, however, to distinguish a series of main characteristics. The most important task in this sense is to make sure that these characteristics or principles apply to all cultural fields, which in turn means that it is not acceptable to approach postmodernism from the sole angle, for instance, of the novel, but rather that we must be able to show that all the characteristics of the postmodern novel are also to be found in architecture, painting, music, photography or the cinema. It is this interdisciplinarity which gives purpose, or «coherence», to the postmodern age. The postmodern art-form is «playful, self-ironizing, and even schizoid... it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock» (Eagleton 1987). Against the modernist belief in absolute truths, rationality and linear progress, postmodernism «is based on a plurality of spaces and temporalities. It is a network of heterogeneous *intermedia*, not a homogeneous epoch or movement, and much less a unique life or artistic style» (Fehér and Heller 9); its priorities are fragmentation, indetermination, polymorphic correlations» (Foucault), the belief that universal history cannot exist, and mistrust of any totalizing discourse. As Eagleton says, we are now in the process of awakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the postmodern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself. Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.

Those who have studied postmodernism cannot yet agree, perhaps because of a lack of historical perspective, on whether postmodernism is (a) a mere style—whose predecessors would include Nietzsche and even Saint Augustine (!) according to Cook and Kroker (1986, 1987); (b) a label for a certain period of history, in which case the only argument lies in delimiting the period (the late fifties and early sixties in poetry, the seventies in painting and architecture, but what about Duchamp and Pollock?); (c) a revolution (anarchist, perhaps?) against enlightened reason or the Establishment, which has enabled us to hear the voices of silence (gay, female, black...); (d) a mere show of couldn't-care-less, of «anything goes», which in turn reveals the decadence of our society and its lack of values; or (e) the art of an inflationary era (Charles Newman) or the manifestation which best reflects the «logic of late capitalism» (Fredric Jameson).

Whichever may be the case, it is obvious that postmodernism represents a cultural break with modernism (itself a movement which, in its day, was a true revolution and which today has become the Establishment), though it is still not absolutely clear whether postmodernism is or is not a continuation of modernism characterized by a change of attitudes, or whether it will also end up being the *status quo*. In this respect it is useful to bear in mind that there are several kinds

of postmodernism. Foster (1988), for instance, distinguishes between a postmodernism of «resistance», which attempts to deconstruct modernism because it considers it to be the *status quo*, and a postmodernism of «reaction», which is a return to «the verities of tradition».

The postmodern text is never governed by pre-established principles or rules because, as Foucault has said, analyzing a discourse means covering up and bringing out contradictions; revealing the inherent interplay; showing how to express these contradictions, how to embrace them or give them a temporal appearance. This contradiction is already implicit in the prefix «post-,» which refers to the paradoxical dependence on, or independence of, what has gone before in time. This is why lists like Hassan's, which oppose modernism and postmodernism on a basis of binary contrasts, ignore the paradoxical identity and the constant shifting typical of postmodernism: its plurality, its openness, and its contradictory nature. Thus, in literature and in art in general, «high art» is mixed with popular culture to such an extent that works such as *The Name of the Rose* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have become best-sellers and have at the same time been the object of the most sophisticated intellectual analysis. The aim is not any kind of dialectic in the Marxist sense, nor is it a totalitarian coherent unification, but rather to question, to set forth a series of problems, to achieve a new intellectual energy which in turn could always be subverted. Therefore, academic intellectual discussion is not excluded (as the anarchists would have wished, for instance), but we must be aware that our own discourse is paradoxically involved in what we are trying to subvert. Intellectual academic discourse is thus turned into a process of continually changing flow which can never reach universal or absolute truths.

With all this in mind, we should not be surprised that feminism has for a long time rejected the idea of joining forces with postmodernism or at least of accepting some of its principles. Among those that believe such a union to be possible, we should single out Ann Kaplan, who distinguishes between a «utopian» postmodernism, which in her view is on the same wavelength as Jacques Derrida's post-structuralism, and a «commercial» postmodernism, more akin to the work of Jean Baudrillard and Kroker and Cook, more related to consumer capitalism and the new technologies. Utopian postmodernism is particularly important from our standpoint because it specifically brings together a series of critical approximations (feminism, deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis) until recently considered incompatible: these movements «have brought about a significant cultural break we could call postmodern»:

A 'utopian' postmodernism involves a movement of culture and texts beyond oppressive binary categories and could not be imagined without the work of, among others, Bakhtin, Derrida, Lacan, Cixous, Kristeva, and Roland Barthes. This sort of postmodernism has been central to some strands of feminism in its envisioning of texts that radically decenter the subject, its insistence on a series of different spectator positionalities, and its focus where texts are not hierarchically ordered (Kaplan 3).

An intermediate position could be that of Linda Hutcheon (1988), who prefers not to identify the two movements directly with each other:

I would not want to equate the feminist with the postmodern for two reasons. First, this would obscure the many different kinds of feminism that exist, ranging from liberal humanist to radical poststructuralist. But even more important, to co-opt the feminist project into the unresolved and contradictory postmodern one would be to simplify and undo the important political agenda of feminism. I have tried to retain the tension between discrete independence from and influence upon postmodernism in my discussion of not only feminism but also black, Asian, native, ethnic, gay, and other important (oppositional) minoritarian perspectives» (Hutcheon xii).

However, it is important to point out that later on she admits that the irony and parody used in feminist texts to subvert the patriarchal universe are typically postmodern:

It has been (American) black and (general) feminist theory and practice that have been particularly important in this postmodernist refocusing on historicity. Works like Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Man*, and Garyl Jone's *Corregidora*... have also linked racial and/or gender difference to questions of discourse and of authority and power that are at the heart of the postmodernist enterprise in general and, in particular, of both black theory and feminism. All are theoretical discourses that have their roots in a reflection on actual praxis and continue to derive their critical force from their conjunction with that social and aesthetic practice... Certainly women's and Afro-American artists' use of parody to challenge the male tradition from within, to use irony to implicate and yet to critique is distinctly paradoxical and postmodernist (16).

It is, therefore, the idea of parody which, according to Hutcheon, defines postmodernism and which, in turn, relates it to feminism. This paradoxical and dialogical attitude finds a practical application in the new philosophy (Vattimo's «pensiero debole»), in pragmatism (the philosophy of Rorty), in literary criticism (Derrida's «between», which he takes from Mallarmé), in literature (Handke's «threshold» theory) and in Rosalind Krauss's «paraliterary space», which she defines (in «Post-structuralism and the 'Paraliterary'», *October* 13: 36-40) as the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; it is not the space of unity, coherence or resolution that we think of as constituting a work of art: these concepts have proved that one of the essential resources of postmodernism is parody, because it incorporates what it actually defies. Thus, in Hutcheon's view, postmodernism is a movement characterized by the use and abuse, construction and deconstruction, creation and subversion of those very concepts which it confronts. Furthermore, she believes that it is precisely this characteristic of contradiction and paradox, the capacity for duplicity and dialogue, which makes it a political movement: the main aim of postmodernism is to dismantle some of the outstanding features of life, to make it clear that there are a number of entities which we call «natural» and which are, in fact, «cultural»; that is to say, edifices founded upon social conventions.

Susan Hekman, who does not hesitate to define herself as a postmodern feminist, states that there are several reasons why certain sectors of the feminist movement do not accept postmodernism and vice versa: in the first place, as

Hutcheon also points out, because there are many kinds of feminism and postmodernism. Both movements have evolved, and now differ in many ways from what they were in the sixties, and today we can even speak of different feminisms. On the one hand, feminism is intimately linked to postmodernism for the reasons we have already seen, but on the other hand, it is also an ally of modernism, both historically and theoretically: «The eighteenth-and nineteenth-century roots of the feminist movement lie in liberal humanism, a movement that is one of the primary objects of the postmodernist challenge. Although Marxist/socialist feminism is an independent movement that rejects liberal feminism, it, too, has modernist roots. From both of these directions feminism inherits a legacy that is thoroughly modernist, a legacy rooted in the emancipatory impulse of liberal-humanism and Marxism. This legacy, furthermore, is not just an irrelevant historical fact. Modernist values are very much a part of contemporary feminist positions», in spite of the fact that this alliance with modernism «can only result in a perpetuation of the Enlightenment/modernist epistemology that inevitably places women in an inferior position» (Hekman 2).

In this respect, there are feminists (Eisenstein 1981) who believe that some aspects of modernism may be accepted (for instance, the emancipating elements of liberalism and Marxism) and that others (like sexism) should be «forgotten»; a position which, as Hekman quite rightly indicates, is analogous with that adopted by Habermas on the modernist/postmodernist question and which has provoked fierce discussions (Finn 145-173).

And yet there are other reasons for disagreement. First, we have those reasons that we might call epistemological: not all feminist critics agree on the dissolution of the dualism typical of the Enlightenment. Thus, the more radical feminists believe that these polarities should be maintained, but, evidently, in inverse order: valuing the feminine more highly than the masculine, intuition more highly than reason, etc., since they are convinced that the creation of a feminine epistemology is essential, simply because a masculine one has been dominant for so long. The concept of «subject», for instance, is accepted: some feminists protest that it is highly suspicious that just at the moment when women are beginning to emerge as subjects, post-structuralist masculine philosophy (Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, etc.) should wish to do away with the category. They therefore emphasize the need to attain a feminine subjectivity, and try to reconceptualize the traditional Cartesian subject, to reach a standpoint somewhere between that Cartesian subject and the «death of man» which is a feature of postmodernism.

On the other hand, postmodernist feminists believe that it would be a mistake if the subject-category were accepted again, if typically masculine categories are used (and therefore implicitly accepted) and if the dichotomy which has led to such degradation of women is not directly attacked. They therefore agree with Derrida when he insists that his criticism of logocentrism is equivalent to an attack on phallogocentrism, since in his opinion the «I» in Western society is always of a phallic character. In *La Carte Postale*, for instance, Derrida states that the first direct consequence of the Law is the construction of the subject, and that if we say that women are subjects we imprison them in the logic of what he calls «phallogocentrism»:

This is the risk. The effect of the Law is to build the structure of the subject, and as soon as you say, «well, the woman is a subject and this subject deserves equal rights», and so on —then you are caught in the logic of phallogocentrism and you have rebuilt the empire of the Law. So it seems that women's studies can't go very far if it does not deconstruct the philosophical framework of this situation, starting with the notion of the subject, of ego, of consciousness, soul and body, and so on (Derrida 193).

Derrida therefore accepts neither the feminist nor the sexist creed: it is not a question of establishing the superiority of men or women, but of «resituating» the subject: «Of all the names that Derrida has given to originary undecidability, woman possesses this special quality—she can occupy both positions in the subject/object oscillation, be cathected as both something that *différance*, writing, the *paragon*, the supplement and the like. Other names of undecidability *cannot*, without special pleading. Derrida's arrival at the name of woman seems to be a slow assumption of the consequences of the critique of humanism as logocentrism» (Spivak 23).

Other feminist thinkers have taken as the starting point for their criticism of the subject/object dualism the ideas expressed by Foucault (Gallop, Lydon, Benhabib). Irigaray, for instance, makes it clear in her *Speculum* that any epistemology based on the subject is inherently phallogocentric. She therefore rejects the dualism typical of the Enlightenment and prefers a plural, anti-hierarchical epistemology. Then again, the «feminine Imaginary» defined by Cixous excludes the transcendental subject. Kristeva also attempts to demolish the Cartesian subject, which is in her opinion phallogocentric. In her *Revolution of Poetic Language*, she states that the subject is not an already-existing entity, but a process. The subject is the product of discourse. Her attitude is that it is preferable not to return to the traditional prejudices whereby one category is given priority over another, but rather to make philosophy what Richard Rorty calls «the conversation of humanity».

The feminists' second criticism is that postmodernism has no political programme because it has given up believing in ideologies just as it no longer believes in values (of any kind), in linear discourse, in a single definite truth, but talks of simulacrum and the end of social interaction, and thus, some critics like Jameson argue, reinforces the *status quo*. This means that, according to this critique, postmodern society is deeply rooted in a mass culture incapable of concentrating on its own present. And this is in fact one of the most severe accusations against consumer capitalism, a symptom which Marxist critics find alarming and pathological in a society which cannot bring itself to face up to time and History. But Jameson's criticism (shared by Terry Eagleton) that postmodernism is out of touch with time and History, that it is a society incapable of concentrating on its own present, is not, to my mind, pertinent. Quite the opposite: as Paolo Portoguesi states, «Postmodern theses spring from the present human condition». The main criticism of postmodernism voiced by some feminists is, then, that this movement repeats and reproduces (and even reinforces) the logic of late capitalism. It is still to be seen, they say, whether it is capable of converting itself into a resistance

movement, rebellious and subversive. The answer is obvious if we look at the works of certain feminine thinkers (Irigaray 1977, Fuss 1989) and artists like Nancy Spero, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman (and the New Museum artists in general) or the novels of Kathy Acker, just to mention a few. They are works which are concerned not so much with the representation of politics as with the politics of representation, in the words of Victor Burgin. They aim to produce a certain anxiety in the spectator, and as Levine herself once commented to Paul Taylor in an interview, this anxiety is indeed the overriding theme of all their work. It is the anxiety of influence, or, as Harold Bloom would have it, the artist as an evil angel rebelling against the great masters of History, against the father-figure.

And then again, we could say, in agreement with Fehér, that the political programme of postmodernism is simply a reflection of the society in which the movement operates: we should be worried by the anxieties caused by living in a postmodern society, not by the idea of defining them or of defining postmodernism itself. In these circumstances, the first political anxiety produced, in Fehér's view, by present-day postmodernism is the very fact that we are not living the present, but a *post-* an *afterwards*, in which there is no past but no future either, since all the known predetermined horizons have vanished, leaving an ontological pluralism which itself has given rise to a political attitude that is not neo-conservative, as Habermas would have liked, but a postmodernism that is «politically minimalist, and also a destroyer of redemptive politics (very similar to its other principal tendency, the demystification of art). Behind the postmodernist destruction of redemptive politics lies a simple but convincing message: Our world... is highly problematic... it must be shown to be defective every single day. But if it is destroyed beyond a certain limit, the detotalization may give rise to a new totalization: complete loss of liberty or definitive destruction. Neither of the two outcomes would be postmodern: they would be antimodern» (Fehér and Heller 23). While in the modernist political world structure reigned supreme over function, these authors believe that in the postmodern world the opposite applies. This preeminence of function gives rise to a «gradual weakening, possibly the total disappearance of a political attitude based exclusively on class interests and class perceptions», although this statement «is not affirmation of social harmony (which does not exist) in present-day society. It is, rather, a comment on the nature of its internal conflicts». The confrontations that occur between the state and class organizations are a feature, according to Heller and Fehér, of present-day politics, but alongside this main tendency «there also arise both on the left and on the right, unmistakable postmodern political trends, based on function and function-orientated in a dual sense. In the first place, they indicate a strengthening or the elimination, as the case may be, of a single function of Modernism. These are the movements which overwhelmingly appear as actions in single-problem contexts and which are the epitome of postmodernist-functionalist politics. Secondly, there are more generalized attempts, both from the left and from the right, to restructure the network of functions pertaining to a particular society» (151). Fehér and Heller put forward as paradigmatic examples of these postmodern-functionalist trends Thatcher's «popular capitalism» project (on the right) and the events of May 1968

(on the left). In short, what is unacceptable to radical feminists in postmodern politics is the fact that it is no longer a redemptive concept, and that it excludes all Messianic attempts to do more than simply question the larger narrative of the modern world, all attempts at absolute transcendence, and, in the end, all utopian ideals. On the other hand, some feminist thinkers accept the postmodern political attitude because they know that it has its positive side: it is an attitude which is capable of absorbing elements from an extraordinarily wide range of cultures, a necessary capacity at this moment in history when «the whole substance of politics? is collapsing. We have reached a point at which nobody takes power nor wants it, not because of any historical or personality weakness, but because the secret has been lost and nobody wants to take up the challenge. This is so true that it is sufficient to imprison power within itself to bring about its death» (Baudrillard 80). In the present-day world the politician is a figure of ridicule» (Kundera 132).

The third problem would seem to lie in the fact that postmodernism does not believe in the concept of «essence», while feminist critics like to talk in some cases —obviously not in all of them (Camps 1190)— about what is «essentially feminine». A characteristically feminine nature is an idea supported both by anti-feminists (like McMillan or Schlafly), who consider women to be less rational, more emotional, etc., than men, and by radical feminists (like Daly and Griffin), who believe that it is now time to promote those typically feminine traits (curiously, the same ones that the antifeminists defend), which the men of the Enlightenment considered inferior. However, by maintaining the traditional dichotomies, these radical movements unintentionally strengthen the very epistemology that they are trying to overthrow (this is the criticism expressed by feminists like Lloyd or Star, for instance). In this respect, one of the most effective critiques, and one which takes language as its starting-point, is that of the French feminists, in particular Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, who reject the traditional dualities and the search for universal truth. The first of these is an interesting case in connection with the concept of essentialism with which we are concerned here. There can be no doubt that Cixous attempts to overthrow the language of masculine rationalism, but she makes no attempt to replace it with another duality; she offers instead pluralism and heterogeneity. Yet Cixous has also been labelled essentialist (by Toril Moi, for example) because of the connection she has established through her concept of «feminine writing» between writing and the body: «I have a woman in my heart», she wrote in 1980. Hekman, on the other hand, argues that Cixous' «feminine writing» is in no way essentialist for several reasons: first, because it is merely a style of writing which could be used equally well by women or by men: secondly, because writing, like language, is a way of achieving social change: the linguistic revolution is the best road to social revolution (Foucault and Kristeva have very similar views, believing that the new linguistic order will bring about a new political order). And thirdly, because in Cixous' opinion the body is not a biological gift but a cultural definition. One might almost say that the position taken up by Cixous in some of her articles is decidedly post-structuralist. Ambiguity and playing with language are a characteristic of her writing (a characteristic which, inci-



dentally, has drawn quite a lot of critical fire): «I don't know if that is what I want... and I no longer know very well what life I am living, how much I live or when I come to an end... I am so on the brink... The truth of reality is that 'reality' is an illusion that carries the most deceptive name in the world...I shall never pretend that I can tell the truth about a real person...I don't believe myself» (Cixous 1984, 9-13). Like Irigaray, Cixous is convinced that essence, if it exists, is never unitary, isomorphic or solid, but that it is governed, in the words of Irigaray, by «an economy of fluids». Irigaray's «woman-talk» or Cixous' «feminine writing» create a new syntax which attempts to defy all categorization and all dualism; according to Irigaray, this new syntax should contain neither subject nor object, should not give priority to uniqueness, and should not admit the presence of proper nouns. It should, instead, allow itself to be drawn along by concepts like proximity, dissolution of identity and of ownership or of any kind of appropriation:

Turn everything upside down... Insist also and deliberately upon those *blanks* in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion and which, by their silent plasticity, ensure cohesion, the articulation, and the coherent expansion of established forms. Reinscribe them, hither and thither, as *divergences*, otherwise and elsewhere than they are expected, in *ellipses* and *eclipses* that deconstruct the logical grid of the reader-writer, drive him out of his mind, trouble his vision to the point of incurable diplopia at least. *Overthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting off the current, breaking the circuit, switching the connections (Irigaray 1985, 142; see also Burke, Faure and Sayers).

Fuss may therefore well be right when she says, with reference to Irigaray, that essentialism is not «a trap she falls into but rather a key strategy she puts into play, not a dangerous oversight but rather a lever of displacement» (77). This is why Irigaray answers the question «Are you a woman?» in a manner which is, to say the least, ambiguous: «'I' am not 'I', I *am not*, I *am not one*. As for *woman*, try and find out...»

From all the foregoing we may deduce that unanimous agreement on the possibility of uniting postmodernism and feminism has not yet been reached. Such unanimity may indeed never be attained, since all depends so much on the attitude one adopts towards such controversial concepts as *subject*, *intuition*, *emotion*, *History*, *politics*, *gender*, *class*, and so on. In the end we may find a greater richness in that plurality of visions of reality for, as Kristeva has said, all fixed, unmovable, identity, is a fiction, an illusion, a phantom through which, however, we may be able to attain a certain stability and the possibility of change (Kristeva 20): «A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic: as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. It she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break the 'truth' with laughter» (Cixous 1981, 258).

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