



The End of Temporality

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The End of Temporality

Fredric Jameson

After the end of history, what?¹ No further beginnings being foreseen, it can only be the end of something else. But modernism already ended some time ago and with it, presumably, time itself, as it was widely rumored that space was supposed to replace time in the general ontological scheme of things. At the very least, time had become a nonperson and people stopped writing about it. The novelists and poets gave it up under the entirely plausible assumption that it had been largely covered by Proust, Mann, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot and offered few further chances of literary advancement. The philosophers also dropped it on the grounds that although Bergson remained a dead letter, Heidegger was still publishing a posthumous volume a year on the topic. And as for the mountain of secondary literature in both disciplines, to scale it once again seemed a rather old-fashioned thing to do with your life. *Was aber war die Zeit?*

What is time? A secret—insubstantial and omnipotent. A prerequisite of the external world, a motion intermingled and fused with bodies existing and moving in space. But would there be no time, if there were no motion? No motion, if there were no time? What a question! Is time a function of space? Or vice versa? Or are the two identical? An even bigger question! Time is active, by nature it is much like a verb, it both “ripens” and “brings forth.” And what does it bring forth? Change! Now is not then, here is not there—for in both cases motion lies in between. But since we measure time by a circular motion closed in on itself, we could just as easily say that its motion and change are

1. See, for the history and analysis of the concept, Perry Anderson, “The Ends of History,” *A Zone of Engagement* (London, 1992), pp. 279–375.

rest and stagnation—for the then is constantly repeated in the now, the there in the here. . . . Hans Castorp turned these sorts of questions over and over in his own mind.²

In any case, neither phenomenology nor Thomas Mann offered promising starting points for anything calculated to fire the imagination.

What clearly did so, however, was the spatial alternative. Statistics on the volume of books on space are as alarming as the birthrate of your hereditary enemy.³ The rise of the intellectual stock of architecture accompanied the decline of *belles lettres* like a lengthening shadow; the opening of any new signature building attracted more visitors and media attention than the newly published translation of the latest unknown Nobel Prize winner. I would like to see a match between Seamus Heaney and Frank Gehry, but it is at least certain that postmodern museums have become at least as popular as the equally postmodern new sports stadia and that nobody reads Valéry's essays any more, who talked about space beautifully from a temporal point of view but in long sentences.

So the dictum that time was the dominant of the modern (or of modernism) and space of the postmodern means something thematic and empirical all at once: what we do, according to the newspapers and the Amazon statistics, and what we call what we are doing. I don't see how we can avoid identifying an epochal change here, and it affects investments (art galleries, building commissions) as much as the more ethereal things also called values. It can be seen, for example, in what has happened to what used to be called the *système des beaux arts* or the hierarchy of the aesthetic ideal. In the older (modernist) framework, the commanding heights were those of poetry or poetic language, whose "purity" and aesthetic autonomy set an example for the other arts and inspired Clement Greenberg's paradigmatic theorization of painting.

The "system" of the postmodern (which claims not to have one) is uncoded and harder to detect, but I suspect it culminates in the experience of the space of the city itself—the renovated and gentrified posturban city, the new crowds and masses of the new streets—as well as from a music that

2. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain: A Novel*, trans. John E. Woods (New York, 1995), p. 339.

3. Some five thousand volumes in the last three years, according to Worldcat (internet).

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has been spatialized by way of its performance frameworks as well as of its delivery systems, the various boomboxes and Walkmans that inflect the consumption of musical sound into a production and an appropriation of sonorous space as such. As for the image, its function as the omnipresent raw material of our cultural ecosystem would require an examination of the promotion of photography—henceforth called postmodern photography—from a poor relation of easel painting into a major art form in this new system of things.

But such descriptions are clearly predicated on the operative dualism, the alleged historical existence, of the two alternatives. The moderns were obsessed with the secret of time, the postmoderns with that of space, the “secret” being no doubt what André Malraux called the Absolute. We can observe a curious slippage in such investigations, even when philosophy gets its hands on them. They begin by thinking they want to know what time is and end up trying more modestly to describe it by way of what Whitman called “language experiments” in the various media. So we have “renderings” of time from Gertrude Stein to Husserl, from Mahler to Le Corbusier (who thought of his static structures as so many “trajectories”). We cannot say that any of these attempts is less misguided than the more obvious failures of analytic cubism or Siegfried Giedeon’s “relativity aesthetic.”⁴ Maybe all we do need to say is contained in Derrida’s laconic epitaph on the Aristotelian philosophy of temporality: “In a sense, it is always too late to talk about time.”⁵

Can we do any better with space? The stakes are evidently different; time governs the realm of interiority, in which both subjectivity and logic, the private and the epistemological, self-consciousness and desire, are to be found. Space, as the realm of exteriority, includes cities and globalization, but also other people and nature. It is not so clear that language always falls under the aegis of time (we busily name the objects of the spatial realm, for example), while as for sight the inner light and literal as well as figurative reflection are well-known categories of introspection. Indeed, why separate the two at all? Did not Kant teach us that space and time are both a priori conditions of our experience or perception, neither one to be gazed at with the naked eye and quite inseparable from each other? And did not Bakhtin wisely recombine them in his notion of the chronotope, recommending a historical account of each specific space-time continuum as it jelled or crystallized? But it is not so easy to be moderate or sensible in the force field of

4. Siegfried Giedeon, *Space, Time, and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 850.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, 1972), p. 47 (“D’une certaine manière, il est toujours trop tard pour poser la question du temps”).

modernism, where Time and Space are at war in a Homeric combat. Indeed, each one, as Hegel said about something else, desires the death of the other. You have only to look again at those pages in which the bard of Davos goes to the movies:

They even took Karen Karstedt to the Bioscope Theater in Platz one afternoon, because that was something she truly enjoyed. Being used to only the purest air, they felt ill at ease in the bad air that weighed heavily in their lungs and clouded their minds in a murky fog, while up ahead on the screen life flickered before their smarting eyes—all sorts of life, chopped up in hurried, diverting scraps that leapt into fidgety action, lingered, and twitched out of sight in alarm, to the accompaniment of trivial music, which offered present rhythms to match vanishing phantoms from the past and which despite limited means ran the gamut of solemnity, pomposity, passion, savagery, and cooing sensuality.

. . . The actors who had been cast in the play they had just seen had long since been scattered to the winds; they had watched only phantoms, whose deeds had been reduced to a million photographs brought into focus for the briefest of moments so that, as often as one liked, they could then be given back to the element of time as a series of blinking flashes. Once the illusion was over, there was something repulsive about the crowd's nerveless silence. Hands lay impotent before the void. People rubbed their eyes, stared straight ahead, felt embarrassed by the brightness and demanded the return of the dark, so that they could again watch things, whose time had passed, come to pass again, tricked out with music and transplanted into new time.⁶

Under these circumstances, the best we can do in the way of synthesis is to alert ourselves to the deformation of space when observed from the standpoint of time, of time when observed from the standpoint of space. The great structuralist formula itself—the distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic—may be offered as an illustration of the second deformation and is always accompanied by a label that warns us not to confuse the diachronic with time and history nor to imagine that the synchronic is static or the mere present, warnings most often as timely as they are ineffective.

Even if such a shift from a temporal to a spatial dominant be acknowledged, however, it would seem momentous enough to demand further ex-

6. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, pp. 310–11. See also Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. André Robinet (Paris, 1991), p. 753.

planation; the causal or historical hypotheses are here neither evident nor plausible. Why should the great age of Western imperialism, for example—beginning with the conference of Berlin in 1885, it is more or less contemporaneous with the flourishing of what we call modern art—be any less spatially impressionable than that of globalization today? By much the same token, why should the stressed and harried followers of today's stock market listings be any less temporally sensitive than the residents of the first great industrial cities?

I want to suggest an account in terms of something like existential uneven development; it fleshes out the proposition that modernism is to be grasped as a culture of incomplete modernization and links that situation to the proposition about modernism's temporal dominant. The argument was suggested by Arno Mayer's *Persistence of the Old Regime*, which documents a counterintuitive lag in the modernization of Europe, where, even at the turn of the last century and the putative heyday of high modernism, only a minute percentage of the social and physical space of the West could be considered either fully modern in technology or production or substantially bourgeois in its class culture.⁷ These twin developments were not completed in most European countries until the end of World War II.

It is an astonishing revision, which demands the correction of many of our historical stereotypes; in the matter that concerns us here, it will therefore be in the area of an only partially industrialized and defeudalized social order that we have to explain the emergence of the various modernisms. I want to conjecture that the protagonists of those aesthetic and philosophical revolutions were people who still lived in two distinct worlds simultaneously; born in those agricultural villages we still sometimes characterize as medieval or premodern, they developed their vocations in the new urban agglomerations with their radically distinct and "modern" spaces and temporalities. The sensitivity to deep time in the moderns then registers this comparatist perception of the two socioeconomic temporalities, which the first modernists had to negotiate in their own lived experience. By the same token, when the premodern vanishes, when the peasantry shrinks to a picturesque remnant, when suburbs replace the villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogeneous over all space, then the very sense of an alternate temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without even knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to inscribe in their writing.

It is an explanation, however, which does not yet include the macroec-

7. See Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).

onomic level of the world system and its temporalities. Imperialism and colonization must evidently have their functional relationship to the uneven development of town and country in the metropolis itself, without imposing any particularly obvious priority of time over space. And as for globalization, it was precisely on the strength of some new spatial dominant and some new experience of spatiality that its structural distinction from an older imperialism had been argued in the first place.

But one of the fundamental determinants of that new experience can be found in the way imperialism masks and conceals the nature of its system, a structural camouflage to which the “communicational rationality” of globalization no longer has to resort (its opacities are of a different type altogether). For one thing, the imperial powers of the older system do not want to know about their colonies or about the violence and exploitation on which their own prosperity is founded, nor do they wish to be forced into any recognition of the multitudinous others hidden away beneath the language and stereotypes, the subhuman categories, of colonial racism.⁸ “Not so very long ago,” remarked Jean-Paul Sartre in a famous phrase, “the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives.”⁹ Later on, I will argue that the momentous event of decolonization, the “transformation” of these natives into men, is a fundamental determinant of postmodernity; the gendered term also reminds us that this story could also be told in terms of the other half of the human race and of the liberation and tendential recognition of women in this same period.

As far as modernism is concerned, however, the epistemological separation of colony from metropolis, the systematic occultation of the colony from metropolis, the systematic occultation of the colonial labor on which imperial prosperity is based,¹⁰ results in a situation in which (again using a Hegelian formula) the truth of metropolitan experience is not visible in the daily life of the metropolis itself; it lies outside the immediate space of Europe, in the colonies. The existential realia of the metropolis are thus severed from the cognitive map that would alone lend them coherence and reestablish relationships of meaning and of its production. The new daily life is

8. I use the word *recognition* in the strong Hegelian sense of the famous Master-Slave dialectic or as what Sartre would call the recognition of another freedom. See for a recent discussion Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, 1995).

9. Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1968), p. 7.

10. The breakthrough argument for an inclusion of colonial labor as an essential, and not merely incidental, component of capitalism’s “primitive accumulation” is of course that of Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (New York, 1968).

thereby rendered at best enigmatic and at its most extreme absurd (in the philosophical sense), while abstract knowledge of the colonial situation and its worldwide economic structure necessarily remains abstract and specialized; the colonial laborers and producers have no direct experience of the “advanced” world for which their exploitation is responsible. Modernism can be positioned as a reproduction of the abstractions to which metropolitan phenomena have been reduced at the same time that it seeks to recomplete those afterimages in a formal way and to restore (but also purely formally) something of the life and vitality, the meanings, of which they have been deprived.

If something like this faithfully characterizes the situation of modernism and the incomplete modernization that it expresses, then it becomes clearer how that situation changes when we pass from imperialism to present-day globalization. What could not be mapped cognitively in the world of modernism now slowly brightens into the very circuits of the new transnational cybernetic. Instant information transfers suddenly suppress the space that held the colony apart from the metropolis in the modern period. Meanwhile, the economic interdependence of the world system today means that wherever one may find oneself on the globe, the position can henceforth always be coordinated with its other spaces. This kind of epistemological transparency no doubt goes hand in hand with standardization and has often been characterized as the Americanization of the world (if not its Disneyfication). The attribution is not misleadingly incorrect but omits the way in which the new system also transmits oppositional tendencies and their messages, such as the ecological movement; paradoxically, like the anti-globalization movement itself, these are political developments predicated on the damage done by globalization at the same time that they are themselves enabled by it.

At any rate, this new transparency of the postmodern world system (which resorts to new techniques of distortion by way of a suppression of history and even, as we shall see, of time and temporality itself) now also explains the shift from the abstract and initiatory forms of modernism to what look like more popular and representational kinds of art and writing (and music) in postmodernity, a shift often and widely considered to be a return to realism and figuration. But I think that postmodernism is not really figurative in any meaningful realist sense or at least that it is now a realism of the image rather than of the object and has more to do with the transformation of the figure into a logo than with the conquest of new “realistic” and representational languages. It is thus a realism of image or spectacle society, if you will, and a symptom of the very system it represents in the first place.

Yet these forms are clearly more popular and democratic (or demotic), more accessible, than the older hermetic “high modernisms,” and this is perfectly consistent with the thesis of an immense expansion of culture and of cultural literacy and the cultural realm itself in the postmodern period. The place of culture and its consumption is radically different in the new global dispensation than it was in the modernist period, and one can register a different kind of transnational flow of imagery and music, as well as of information, along the networks of a new world system.

So far, however, we have not yet set in place the mediations that are capable of linking up these two levels of the individual subjectivities (of the artists as well as of the dwellers in the everyday) and of the larger macro systems as those move from an old-fashioned colonial administration of vast territories by means of armies and bureaucracies (essentially by the Europeans and to a lesser extent by the United States and Japan) to some new organization of power and exploitation in the form of transnational corporations and banks and by way of capital investment. Each of these descriptive levels contains its own structural contradictions, but there are other tensions and dissonances that emerge only when we seek to relate the two. This is the sense in which the dialectic of the local and the global has seemed to displace traditional oppositions between the public and the private, if not (in the era of the “death of the subject”) those most ancient and classical ones of all, between the particular and the universal, if not indeed between the subject and the object itself.

Such mediations are presentational techniques fully as much as they are empirical facts; they furnish the tropes for innumerable postmodern histories or newer historical narratives and are to be found in abundance in the varied investigations of what is called cultural studies. We might, for example, have dramatized the waning of concepts and representations of production by way of the displacement of old-fashioned industrial labor by the newer cybernetic kind, a convulsive shift in our cognitive mapping of reality that tends to deprive people of their sense of making or producing that reality, to confront them with the fact of preexisting circuits without agency, and to condemn them to a world of sheer passive reception. To insist on the mediation of the labor process is thus to dispel the banal and apolitical conception of a service economy but also to insist on the epistemological and cultural consequences of this shift, consequences insufficiently foregrounded by the current language of some opposition between “Fordism” and a newly “flexible” capitalism.

For myself, I have long felt that one of the most effective mediations to be constructed between the cultures of postmodernity and the infrastructure of late capitalist globalization was to be found in the peculiar phenom-

enon of finance capital, as that has been revived and transformed in present-day society where for most people it seems to loom larger than production itself, at least on their television screens.¹¹ Finance capital suggests a new type of abstraction, in which on the one hand money is sublimated into sheer number, and on the other hand a new kind of value emerges, which seems to have little enough to do with the old-fashioned value of firms and factories or of their products and their marketability. The recent business failures like Enron seem to suggest that the value of a given stock cannot long be separated from the profitability of the firm it is supposed to “represent” or express, but I think they demonstrate the opposite, that under the conditions of finance capital stock value has a decidedly semiautonomous status with respect to its nominal company and that, in any case, postmodern “profitability” is a new category, dependent on all kinds of conditions unrelated to the product itself, such as the downsizing of employees at the demand of banks and investment institutions and the draining of the company’s assets (sometimes fatally) in order to inflate dividends.

This new kind of abstraction can be correlated with postmodernism in art along the lines suggested above, namely, that the formal abstractions of the modernist period—which corresponded to the dialectic of value of an older monopoly stage of capitalism—are to be radically distinguished from the less palpable abstractions of the image or the logo, which operate with something of the autonomy of the values of present-day finance capital. It is a distinction between an object and its expression and an object whose expression has in fact virtually become another object in its own right.

Most significant for us in the present context, however, is the impact of the new value abstractions on everyday life and lived experience, and this is a modification best articulated in terms of temporality (rather than image theory). For the dynamics of the stock market need to be disentangled from the older cyclical rhythms of capitalism generally: boom and bust, accumulation of inventory, liquidation, and so forth, a process with which everyone is familiar and that imprints a kind of generational rhythm on individual life. This process, which also creates the impression of a political alternation between Left and Right, between dynamism and conservatism or reaction, is of course to be sharply distinguished from the far longer cycles of the so-called Kondratiev waves, fifty- or sixty-year periods that are as it were the systole and diastole of the system’s fundamental contradiction (and that are, by virtue of their very dimensions, less apparent to those bio-

11. I take my understanding of contemporary finance capital from the pathbreaking discussion in Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London, 1994). See also Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (New York, 1998), pp. 138–43.

logical individuals we also are). From both these temporal cycles, then, is to be distinguished the newer process of the consumption of investment as such, the anxious daily consultation of the listings, deliberations with or without your broker, selling off, taking a gamble on something as yet untested (one imagines a Whitmanesque list opening up, expansive, celebratory, reveling in the ideology of democratic “participation”). The narrowing and the urgency of the time frame need to be underscored here and the way in which a novel and more universal microtemporality accompanies and as it were condenses the rhythms of quarterly “profit taking” (and is itself intensified in periods of crisis and uncertainty). The futures of the stock market—whether in the literal and traditional sense of investments in crops and other seasonal goods not yet in existence or in the more figurative sense of derivatives and speculations on the company reports and the exchange listings—these “futures” come to be deeply intertwined with the way we live our own individual and collective futures generally, in a period in which careers are no longer stable and layoffs a seemingly inevitable hazard of professional and managerial as well as proletarian levels of society.

By the same token, the new rhythms are transmitted to cultural production in the form of the narratives we consume and the stories we tell ourselves, about our history fully as much as about our individual experience. It is scarcely surprising that the historical past has diminished accordingly; to be sure, the recent past is always the most distant in the mind’s eye of the historical observer, but deficiencies in the high school history books are scarcely enough to account for the alarming rate at which a somewhat more remote past is in the process of being evacuated—the media’s “exhaustion” of its raw material of events and information is not alien to the process. Any modification of the past, no matter how minute, will then inevitably determine a reorganization of the future, but the keenest observers of the immediate postwar period (in the moment of what may now be called late modernism)¹² can scarcely have anticipated that wholesale liquidation of futurity of which the revival of Hegel’s “end of history” was only an intellectual symptom. Confusion about the future of capitalism—compounded by a confidence in technological progress beclouded by intermittent certainties of catastrophe and disaster—is at least as old as the late nineteenth century, but few periods have proved as incapable of framing immediate alternatives for themselves, let alone of imagining those great utopias that have occasionally broken on the status quo like a sunburst. Yet

12. As defined in Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York, 2002), which develops at greater length many of the themes of the present essay.

a little thought suggests that it is scarcely fair to expect long-term projections or the deep breath of great collective projects from minds trained in the well-nigh synchronic habits of zero-sum calculation and of keeping an eye on profits.

Such propositions seem to imply or posit a fundamental gap or dialectical leap between older and newer forms of communication. Leaving aside the question of technological determinism, there is still an argument to be made about the radical distinction between informational conduits from the telephone back to the semaphore or the smoke signal, whose infrastructure can be found as deep as the astonishing reaches of the Neolithic trade routes and the cybernetic technologies of the present, whose novelties and innovations play a basic causal role in any definition of the postmodern (on any social level). I do think it is possible to devise a phenomenological description of the communicational act that registers such differences and their structure. On the telephone people can no doubt give tips on future developments and place tentative orders, but these messages must still co-exist with the body of paper itself—the bills of exchange or lading, the weight of documents, the very bundles of paper money itself, as the last makes its cumbersome way laboriously around the world. Speculation on such bills is another matter; it is no longer a question of buying things but rather of juggling whole labor forces. One can electronically substitute one entire national working class for another, halfway around the globe, wiping out industry after industry in the home country and dissipating accumulated months of value-producing labor overnight. By the same token, the very bills themselves can quickly be reduced to worthless scraps by trading against the currency in question and reducing its former value to the approximate zero of undesirability on the world's currency markets. But this is something new and it again documents the wholesale replacement of the old subject-object relationship, the logic of reference, with a new one, which might better be called the semiotic or, indeed, the logic of the signifier.

I put it this way to underscore another fundamental symptom of the process, which is the projection out of the new media of a whole new set of ideologies appropriate to their dynamics, namely, the new communicational and linguistic or semiotic philosophies that have in the twentieth century seemed to consign several thousand years of traditional philosophical history to obsolescence on the grounds that it left out the centrality of language. This is probably not the right way to handle the matter of truth and error in philosophy, but for the moment it is sufficient to shake ourselves into a certain (truly philosophical) wonderment at the extraordinary proliferation of theories of communication, which (no doubt, like everything else, from Nietzsche on) have come to dominate official thinking today, not

merely in philosophy, but also in sociology, in political philosophy, and perhaps even in biology and evolution, with their notions of DNA as a code and of the virus as a messenger.

At least, indeed, from the first stirrings of the notion of intersubjectivity in the 1920s all the way to Habermas and the full-blown structuralisms,¹³ what I will call the ideology of communication has come to blanket the field and to discredit any philosophical representations that fail to acknowledge the primacy and uniqueness of language, the speech act, or the communicational exchange. Yet any linguistic philosophy ought to be in an excellent position to grasp the purely representational (dare one even say aesthetic) nature of philosophy and its systems and propositions and minimally to conclude that they cannot exactly be correct or incorrect. One would not want to deny its moment of truth to the communicational philosophies either, provided it is understood that they have discovered those truths as the latter were in the process of historical development and emergence. Communicationality has emerged as the central fact of world society in the course of a historical process, the very one to which we have been referring here, namely, the transfiguration of capitalism into its third, late or postmodern stage. What one must say is not that ideologies of communication are somehow true in the absolute (or by virtue of “human nature,” as the speaking animal) but rather that they have become true historically to the degree to which contemporary capitalism is increasingly organized on a communicational basis.

But to position language at the center of things is also to foreground temporality, for whether one comes at it from the sentence or the speech act, from presence or the coeval, from comprehension or the transmission of signs and signals, temporality is not merely presupposed but becomes the ultimate object or ground of analysis. What I have here been calling space therefore risks becoming a misnomer. Always and everywhere we have rather to do with something that happens to time; or perhaps, as space is mute and time loquacious, we are able to make an approach to spatiality only by way of what it does to time.

Predictably, the “end of temporality” is one of those things, and we need to begin the inventory of its forms. I read into the record, for example, the reaction of an astute listener to an earlier version of these speculations: “In

13. The telltale slogan of “intersubjectivity” (invented by the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz) is the giveaway clue to the humanist character of these ideologies. My critique of them is not particularly inspired by any defensive preemption of language-based critiques of Marxism, for the Habermassians demonstrated long ago that class struggle was itself a communicational structure; see Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1971), p. 283.

Japan,” she said, “the cellphone has abolished the schedule and the time of day. We don’t make appointments any more, we simply call people whenever we wake up.” Older habits of clock time are thereby eclipsed, the “signifier” of the single day called into question; some new nonchronological and nontemporal pattern of immediacies comes into being. We might have also mentioned the streamlining of television news whereby, apparently for the benefit of a new youth public, current events are provided throughout the program in a “crawl” that summarizes the latest current events, so precious time need not be wasted in waiting for the coverage in question. Impatience is probably not the right word for this promotion and transfiguration of the synchronic (any more than *entertainment* has much explanatory value when dealing with the appeal of mass culture). But the phenomenon does redirect us to the existential level of the matter, which in contemporary theory takes the form of the study of the quotidian or of everyday life.

During the structuralist period, the existential, the realm of so-called lived experience (*expérience vécue*), was deliberately displaced and marginalized, if not discredited altogether, as an essentially “humanist” inquiry, whose organizing categories, from “alienation” to “experience” itself, were philosophically flawed and complicitous with the various ideologies of the subject, the ego, and consciousness. Structuralism has come and gone; this particular debate has dried up altogether (along with the very denunciation of humanism itself, which could still come in handy from time to time) without having produced much in the way of conceptual results, as though in the meantime experience itself (or what used to be meant by it in reality) had also evaporated.

Yet Althusser had one suggestive thing to say about time, which may be retained as a productive starting point (whatever consequences it was meant to have in his own arguments). This is the proposition that each mode of production generates its own unique and specific temporality;¹⁴ the premise no doubt posits the primacy of labor time, implying that the temporality of a given type of production has a more general influence on the way time is conceptualized and lived in the rest of the society. It is a proposition we are probably generally inclined to take for granted when it comes to the difference between an agricultural society and an industrial one, but the principle here invites us to subtler differentiations for a whole range of distinct modes of production and, in particular, to construct mediations be-

14. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1970), p. 99. It is important to add that for Althusser a mode of production has no single temporality but rather a system of distinct and interlocking times.

tween the labor process generally and the more specific “structures of feeling” (to use Raymond Williams’s inspired formula) that can be detected at work in cultural expressions and everyday life.

The Althusserian suggestion is, to be sure, dangerous to the very degree to which it promotes a lapse into that very historicism he was concerned to denounce, some Spenglerian conflation of the various levels of a given historical period, in which a specific form of temporality becomes the hallmark of everything from architecture to statecraft, from mathematics to artistic style. Rather than a period style, therefore, it seems more desirable to stage the “end of temporality” as a situation faced by postmodernity in general and to which its artists and subjects are obliged to respond in a variety of ways. This situation has been characterized as a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place.

We can grasp this development more dramatically by thinking our way back to an age in which it was still possible to conceive of an individual (or existential) life as a biographical destiny. Destiny is to be sure something you can only perceive from the outside of a life, whence the idea, classically formulated by Mallarmé, that existence only becomes a life or destiny when it is ended or completed: “Tel qu’en Lui-même enfin l’éternité le change,” as the poet put it in his evocation of a particularly blighted destiny.¹⁵ Yet it is doubtful whether antiquity itself registered this radical transformation from the being-for-itself to the being-for-other-people (to use Sartrean terminology), from personal consciousness to the alienation of destiny. The Greeks seem to have felt death more as a dialectical passage from quantity to quality:

Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending,
And none can be happy until that day when he carries
His happiness down to the grave in peace.¹⁶

And perhaps the Christian insistence on the determining effect of the final moment (as in Dante) reflected something of the same sense of the belated unification of life and fate or destiny.

But save for extraordinary moments of violence and irony—such as the great political assassinations beloved of the media—my own feeling is that we do not live life in this classical fashion any longer. Whether it was ever

15. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe,” *Poésies*, ed. Lloyd James Austin (Paris, 1989), p. 99.

16. Sophocles, *King Oedipus*, in *The Theban Plays*, trans. E. F. Watling (New York, 1986), p. 68.

authentic to see one's self as shaped by fate, whether Athenian tragedies that coordinate a blinding present of time with a revelation of destiny are to be taken as signs of a relationship to Being we ought to envy, modern existentialism has certainly taught a very different lesson; its insistence on our temporal imprisonment in the present discredits ideas of destiny or fate and renders the ancient view of biography alien to us. Perhaps we have come to associate the classical perspective with the violence and brevity of life in the ancient city-state, or perhaps our own attitudes on the subject are conditioned by the modern American concealment and sanitization of death. At any rate, this shift in conceptions of destiny and existence seems sufficient to qualify modern existentialism—the sense of a unique subjectivity and a unique existence in the present—as one plausible beginning for what we will characterize as the reduction to the present in postmodernity.

But the function of this existential reduction was still a relatively positive and progressive one in the modern period, and the account of existentialism in terms of death is to that degree a misleading one, despite Heidegger's (and Nazism's) formation in the carnage of World War I and Sartre's relationship to the German occupation of France in World War II. What the innumerable holocausts of this period deconceal (to use an existential neologism) is not so much death and human finitude as rather the multiplicity of other people; it is the spectacle of that multiplicity of lives that is then starkly revealed by the horrors of the trenches or the mass executions and not some metaphysical condition to be brooded over by priests and philosophers or impressionable adolescents.

This is why we must link the positive political content of modern existentialism with demography rather than with modern warfare and must identify its fundamental moment of truth not so much in the slaughter of the world wars as in the movement of decolonization that followed them and that suddenly released an explosion of otherness unparalleled in human history. Here too no doubt the first experience of the masses of the industrial big cities offered a foreshadowing of this world-historical turning, yet those masses (a nation within the nation, as Disraeli famously called them) were still contained and concealed behind reassuring categories of caste and class, just as the subsequent incorporation of foreign colonies can be made acceptable in the mind of the colonizers by a variety of categories of race and biological inferiority. It is the explosive fact of decolonization that now sweeps these comfortable categories away and confronts me with an immense multitude of others, which I am called upon to recognize as equals or as freedoms.¹⁷ But in our present context the point to be made has to do

17. See note 8, above.

with the impact of this recognition on the experience of the bourgeois self, for it is the proliferation of all these innumerable others that renders vain and inconsequential my own experience of some essence I might be, some unique life or destiny that I might claim as a privilege (or indeed as a form of spiritual or existential private property). The stripping away of that form of temporality—the security of the ego or the unique personal self—is comparable to the stripping away of universals in a nominalist age; it leaves me alone with my unique present, with a present of time that is anonymous and no longer belongs to any identifiable biographical self or private destiny. It is surely this demographic plebeianization of my subjectivity that is the achievement of existentialism and that is prolonged into the poststructuralist campaign against the so-called centered subject,¹⁸ a progressive direction as long as the reduction to the present is conceived in this essentially political way and not translated back into interesting new forms of subjectivity as such.

But this is precisely what happens in the postmodern period, where the reformulation of depersonalization in terms of time (along with the failure of the worldwide revolutionary movements) leads to renewed privatization. I want to illustrate this process by way of two unrelated philosophical positions that both in one way or another posit a reduction to the present of which they are symptoms fully as much as theories. The first is the notion of “ideal schizophrenia” developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus*, the other, less well known, is that of the aesthetic of suddenness (*Plötzlichkeit*) proposed and elaborated by the distinguished German critic Karl Heinz Bohrer (editor of the *Merkur* and a conservative polemicist of rare quality).

The presentation of the ideal schizophrenic as the “true hero of desire” by Deleuze and Guattari is argued largely on the strength of the perpetual present attributed to this “conceptual personage” (although Guattari was a psychiatrist, the ideal schizophrenic in question here is not the clinical patient or psychotic sufferer but rather a sublimated composite of the latter’s traits, which are in any case perpetual possibilities for any form of human reality). This absolute present is then a new kind of freedom, a disengagement from the shackles of the past (the family and, in particular, Freud’s conception of the Oedipus complex) as well as from those of the future (the routine of the labor process under capitalism). The schizophrenic is here opposed to the ego-fortress of the paranoid, the source of all fascisms and authoritarianisms, and thus becomes a political ideal as well

18. It is the central theme of Deleuze’s philosophy (and is presupposed, perhaps in a slightly different way, by Jean-François Lyotard’s work). Both acknowledge the priority of Sartre’s early *Transcendence of the Ego*.

as an ethical one. Deleuze tells us that he abandoned this notion of ideal schizophrenia in the face of the tragedies and devastation of the drug culture in the 1970s;¹⁹ he replaced it by a more interestingly collective concept, the nomadic horde or guerilla band, which is of relevance here only if you diagnose anarchism as a kind of political or collective reduction to the present.

As for Deleuzian schizophrenia, however, the diagnosis is an ambiguous one and turns on the difficulty of distinguishing a critique from a projection. Insofar as the freedom from time is just that reduction to the present we have been examining, what looks like a critique of our social order and the conceptualization of an alternative to it (in the *Anti-Oedipus*) turns out in reality to be the replication of one of its most fundamental tendencies. The Deleuzian notion of schizophrenia is therefore certainly a prophetic one but it is prophetic of tendencies latent within capitalism itself and not the stirrings of a radically different order capable of replacing it. Indeed, it is questionable whether Deleuze was ever interested in theorizing any alternative social order as such.²⁰

Besides the nomadic horde, I believe that another concept in the toolkit of late Deleuze can be seen as a variation on the ideal schizophrenic, and that is the enormously influential—and also relatively incomprehensible—theme of virtuality, which has been saluted as the first original philosophical conceptualization of the computer and cyberspace. This is as it were a different way of making the present self-sufficient and autonomous and independent in quite a different fashion from those dimensions of past and future from which the earlier concept also wanted to escape. But here the formative reference is to Bergson and not to the clinic; we will return to the consequences of this shift in registers in a moment.

Turning now to Bohrer, whose work is quite independent of the French poststructuralist context and is inspired both by German Romanticism (and classical German philosophy) as well as by the still suspect writer on whom he wrote his first book (Ernst Jünger), his conception of “suddenness” is an openly temporal one and posits a theory of the specificity of the aesthetic on the basis of its “sudden” independence from past and future and of the emergence of a new temporal form beyond history. It is an argument clearly indebted to Nietzsche but just as significantly to Adorno, in whose tradition Bohrer also paradoxically stands. The concrete analyses and readings are of the greatest interest,²¹ but two other points need to be made

19. In the posthumous television interviews, *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*.

20. But see, on the “anarchist” tendencies of the Deleuze/Guattari books, Jameson, “Marxism and Dualism in Deleuze,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 96 (Summer 1997): 393–416.

21. See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York, 1994) as well as *Das absolute Praesenz* (Frankfurt, 1994) and *Die Aesthetik des Schreckens* (Munich, 1983), on Jünger.

about this position that very explicitly proposes a reduction of the aesthetic to the sheerest present of time (it is not always clear whether Bohrer means thereby to characterize the aesthetic in a general way or to limit his theory to the more specifically modernist experience of art).

The first point to be made is the (equally explicit) identification of “suddenness” or the aesthetic instant with violence as such and in particular with what we may call the aesthetic violence of Ernst Jünger. We may leave ideological judgments out of the discussion; we may even agree that this view of the aesthetic tends to translate violence into a specific form of temporality (under which a variety of nonviolent phenomena may also be ranged) rather than to translate the aesthetic itself into violence after the fashion, say, of the sacrificial violence of Bataille. Still, the association of violence and an aesthetic reduction to the present will prove to be significant, as I will show in a moment.

The other remark to be made about this aesthetics, explicitly directed against history and the political historicism of writers like Walter Benjamin, is simply this: even the possibility of stepping, for an “instant,” outside of history is a possibility that is itself profoundly historical and has its properly historical preconditions.

But about both Deleuze and Bohrer in their very different ways, it is now necessary to observe the following: whenever one attempts to escape a situatedness in the past and the future or in other words to escape our being-in-time as such, the temporal present offers a rather flimsy support and a doubtful or fragile autonomy. It thus inevitably comes to be thickened and solidified, complemented, by a rather more metaphysical backing or content, which is none other than the idea of eternity itself. Indeed, if one traces Deleuzian virtuality back to its source in Bergson and in the strangest of all modern idealistic texts, *Matter and Memory*, one finds this temporal doubling of the present explicitly identified as eternity, as what is out of time altogether. In Bohrer’s case the reduction to the present becomes rather the Nietzschean one and finds its justification in the eternity of the famous eternal return. But in both these instances, getting out of time always overshoots the mark and ends up in a nontemporality I doubt we can accept today.

It is only fair to add that this position also comes in as it were a materialist version, promoted by certain contemporary feminisms and with a decidedly radical or progressive character. For the reduction to the present, from this perspective, is also a reduction to something else, something rather more material than eternity as such. Indeed, it seems clear enough that when you have nothing left but your temporal present, it follows that you also have nothing left but your own body. The reduction to the present can thus also be formulated in terms of a reduction to the body as a present of time.

This move explains the proliferation of theories of the body nowadays and the valorization of the body and its experience as the only authentic form of materialism. But a materialism based on the individual body (and encountered again in contemporary research on the brain and the philosophy of mind and on drugs and psychosis) is to be identified as a mechanical materialism descended from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rather than a historical and social materialism of the type that emerged from Marx and from a properly historical (nineteenth-century) worldview. I hope it will not be misleading for me therefore to criticize this materialist emphasis on the body today as being fully as ideological as the timid spiritualisms I have already mentioned in connection with eternity. The confusion stems from the fact that ideologies of the body are for the most part politically progressive ones, and we can readily appreciate the kinds of realities they are concerned to denounce, beginning with torture and rape and running the gamut of all the forms of bodily suffering and abuse to which the present age has quite properly become sensitive. To criticize such a politics then places one in the same paradoxical situation occupied by a critique of the ideology of human rights, a position people assume to mean that you are somehow against human rights, whereas it is the concept of human rights as a political category and a political strategy that is thereby under discussion.

The problem with the body as a positive slogan is that the body itself, as a unified entity, is an Imaginary concept (in Lacan's sense); it is what Deleuze calls a "body without organs," an empty totality that organizes the world without participating in it. We experience the body through our experience of the world and of other people, so that it is perhaps a misnomer to speak of the body at all as a substantive with a definite article, unless we have in mind the bodies of others, rather than our own phenomenological referent. It is hard to see how theories of gender could support such a one body reference, which would seem rather to have its ideological kinship and prolongation in current trauma theory.

Yet it is less the correctness or incorrectness of such theories that we are concerned with here; indeed, I have already suggested that these are not the right categories with which to judge any intellectual position today, which must rather be evaluated in terms of the worldly experience it organizes and reflects as well as the ideological function it serves. In the case of the reduction to the present and to the body alike, it is more important to underscore the ways in which all these theories replicate the deeper tendency of the socioeconomic order itself, which is a nominalistic one and seeks, in its uniquely historical "death of the subject," to reduce the historical dimensions of existential experience as such. This is a diagnosis, however, that must not ground its political program in archaic forms or encourage nos-

talgia about the value of an older bourgeois “centered subject” to which we can never return.

But the general argument for this historical tendency of late capitalism needs to be completed by the juxtaposition of these philosophical and ideological symptoms with properly cultural ones, and it seems inevitable to make a first approach to the latter by way of mass culture and in particular in the form of current action films. One can indeed argue that such films have very recently indeed become a genre in their own right, with a canon one can find recapitulated on television every week of the year in replays of their most successful specimens—*Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Cliffhanger*, *Terminator*, and so on—their relative antiquity not seeming to bode well for the future and development of this new genre. Indeed, this very devolution of a newly emergent genre is part of the story I will want to tell here, for it suggests the effects of an internal contradiction, which may or may not prove fatal. The alternate characterization of such films as violence pornography may simply be another expression of their form problem, which demands that they minimally evade the absolutely episodic nature of sexual pornography, whose intermittent closures are allowed to be a good deal more final.

Yet this internal contradiction also makes for considerable difficulty in the choice of a representative illustration. What was to be demonstrated, as a consequence of the reduction to the present and to the body, was in other words the tension between the construction of a plot (overall intrigue, narrative suspense) and the demand for a succession of explosive and self-sufficient present moments of violence. The discussion of Bohrer, indeed, had the merit of showing that there is a privileged relationship between violence as content and the closure or provisional autonomy of a temporal form. The demonstration would now have to show how the succession of such moments gradually crowds out the development of narrative time and reduces plot to the merest pretext or thread on which to string a series of explosions (much like a trailer or preview, as I’ve suggested elsewhere). But this means, for all practical purposes, that the better a given film suits our purposes here in the context of the present argument, the worse it has to be (it being understood that I have also excluded established genres, such as the horror film, which have their own distinctive histories and whose generic structure has evolved specifically to respond to analogous form problems).

Fortunately, however, it cannot be denied that even in the realm of action films (especially in the realm of action films?) some are better than others, and few prove my point as effectively as Jon de Bont’s 1994 *Speed*, about which I will try to show that, contrary to expectation, its title does not des-

ignite temporality or velocity, nor change in time, nor even repetition any longer, but rather the absence of temporality altogether. It is a film in what I hope to be excused for calling three movements, organized around elevators, a city bus, and a subway respectively, but most of us probably only remember the bus ride, which occupies roughly half the movie and whose initial premise—that there are buses in Los Angeles in the first place—will offer an inaugural paradox. But the motif of the bus is crucial to the enterprise, for clearly enough any solution to this particular form problem demands that the formal requirement for nonstop action effects somehow be locked into place. On the level of something approaching a zero degree of plot, this requirement is ingeniously secured by the mechanism of the bomb, which is activated as soon as the bus goes over fifty miles an hour and programmed to detonate if it should slacken to something under that speed thereafter. The speed-control mechanism is thus itself already an allegory of the new form, which must never slow down at its own generic peril.

I should add that the rest of the plot, organized around the madman and his motivations, is rather to be considered a narrative compensation and what the Russian Formalists called “motivation of the device” than any genuine narrative material. Indeed, I take it as axiomatic that whenever mass culture resorts to maniacs—whether these be serial killers or “terrorists” of various kinds—it is by definition plugging its own gaps and holes with material that can by definition not really be “motivated” because it is—equally by definition and in advance—labeled as the nonrational and the incomprehensible. One has to go back to Robert Musil’s Moosbrugger, the serial killer of *The Man without Qualities*, to find a madman we are expected somehow to “understand,” while as for terrorists, as soon as we do understand their motivation, they become political activists and can no longer be used as self-explanatory plot devices in mass culture.

Yet behind the narrative device of the bomb’s mechanism there lies an even more fundamental formal principle of such films, and that is something like a unity of place or, at least, a confinement within a closed space of some kind. The defining framework can be a high-rise building, an airport, an airplane, a train, an elevator, or, as here, a city bus. It can even approximate a whole city (as in *Earthquake*) or indeed the earth itself as the meteor approaches. But the closure is formally essential in order to render escape impossible and to ensure the absolute saturation of the violence in question, like the walls within which a proper explosion can best be realized. Something peculiar then follows from this requirement; the closure now becomes allegorical of the human body itself and reduction to the vehicle of closure in these films represents the reduction to the body that is a

fundamental dimension of the end of temporality or the reduction to the present.

But why bring allegory into the process at all? It is necessary in order to conceal the phenomenological limits of film as such, whose attempts at some literal “reduction to the body”—the close-ups in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, for example, or even the corpses in Sokurov—take us in an utterly different direction, while remaining equally unrealizable. Film can only furnish kinetic images, but what is really at stake here is not the limits of film as a medium but rather those of phenomenology, which promised the existential body a corporeal plenitude on which it could not deliver.²² Not only is such immediacy impossible philosophically (the work of both Hegel and Derrida constitute exhaustive if quite different demonstrations of the impossibility of such immediate experience), but we must also affirm that phenomenological plenitude is itself impossible on any level, let alone those of the body and of the present of time. So it is that the appeal to a reduction to those things is constantly undermined by fragmentation, and by a fragmentation bound to function allegorically insofar as it remains intent on telling us that each of its body parts is really the whole after all, just as it wants us to believe that its successive instants in time are really, each of them, “time’s livid final flame.”

But now the project of reduction fans out into a host of separate allegorical messages. The bus has momentum but, as has already been said, that is not really time or temporality; on the contrary, it is the representation of temporality, threatened at every moment with some ultimate present of the bomb blast that can never take place. It has a driver; those are the eyes and the visuality of this dangerous journey. It even has fingers, the fingers of the specialist, engaged in that most delicate of all procedures, defusing the bomb. These scattered allegorical senses are enough to show that we will never reach the goal of this formal tendency, the reduction to the ultimate present of the body.

Yet until now we have examined the allegorical body, as it were, the object of this narrative process; what about the mind or its subject pole? Here also, seeking immediacy and the eclipse of the temporal mind in physical terror, we only find a host of mediations. No one is quite so intent on engineering plans and their execution than the driver and her policeman assistant, but the allegorical clue is to be found elsewhere, in the epistemology of the process, for the madman watches all this television by way of the even more fragmented and totalizing cameras on the news media helicopters circling overhead, and at the end we discover that he has had his own projected

22. I refer here to Merleau-Ponty.

vision improbably built into the bus in the shape of a secret closed circuit camera. All the communication, meanwhile, and the negotiations are carried on by cellphone, that seeming apotheosis of synchronous immediacy than which few technologies are more reliant on mediations of all kinds. The subject is therefore as bereft of plenitude as the object; the mind/body problem remains intact; immediacy is no more available on the side of perception than on that of corporeality. It would seem that the film has successfully managed to outwit its own form problem, thereby fortunately evading the only ultimate reduction to the body remaining to the medium, namely, the explosion of the movie theater itself. But why are the subway tracks unfinished; why is the freeway itself uncompleted in one crucial area of fifty feet? Are we to understand from this that space, like temporality, can also come to an end?

At any rate, it would seem that I have deconstructed my own argument, and far from demonstrating the end of temporality I have been able only to show the impossibility of such a demonstration. To be sure, the aesthetic virtue of any form problem, and in particular one so acutely limiting as this one, is to allow the exercise of ingenuity and even artfulness in its unexpected resolution and under the constraints of narrow and even impossible limits. But I suspect that the conclusion to be drawn lies elsewhere, for if, in this illustration, “the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes,”²³ what that shows is not that there is no last instance, but rather that, like the drive in psychoanalysis, it is ultimately never representable as such.

And this is the conclusion I should like to reach here; we have been throughout evoking a historical tendency, but a tendency is by definition never fully reached or it would already have folded back into actuality itself. Let’s follow the psychoanalytic model even further; the tendency also summons up complex patterns of resistance, such that what we are forced to observe in the form of its symptoms are precisely those patterns and not the unknowable tendency itself. This is what we are obliged to posit here: the historical tendency of late capitalism—what we have called the reduction to the present and the reduction to the body—is in any case unrealizable; human beings cannot revert to the immediacy of the animal kingdom (assuming indeed the animals themselves enjoy such phenomenological immediacy). There is a resistance to this pressure, which I hesitate to call natural for political as well as philosophical reasons, for the identification of such a tendency and the organization of resistance to it are not matters to be entrusted to any confidence in humanist reflexes.

23. Althusser’s famous inversion of Engels’s even more famous dictum (Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” *For Marx*, trans. Brewster [London, 1969], p. 113).

But one might also conclude on a rather different note, which has to do with moralizing judgments. To speak, as I have done in passing, of violence pornography, is to use language that is not only conventionally moralizing but also conjures up the political positions of people with whom most of us would probably not wish to find ourselves identified. What was to have been proven was the very opposite of the moralizing culture critique, namely, that these cultural tendencies and symptoms are not ethical matters at all but rather the reflex of our social system and its economic structure. Violence pornography, in other words, grasped from the perspective outlined here as a reduction to the present and to the body, is not to be seen as a form of immorality at all but rather as a structural effect of the temporality of our socioeconomic system or, in other words, of postmodernity as such, of late capitalism. It is the system that generates a specific temporality and that then expresses that temporality through the cultural forms and symptoms in question. Moralizing is not a very effective way of dealing with those symptoms, nor indeed with the end of temporality itself.