

Postmodernism

Henry Glassie
Indiana University

John Dorst always thinks and writes with admirable clarity and purpose. I like him and was pleased with his essay. Asked to respond to it quickly, I would say that he has represented my position fairly and that I agree with him. My response, then, is not a defense against an attack. John's paper is not an attack, and that is a good thing for me because he surely knows more about postmodernism than I do. I feel no need for defense. My works contain consistent evidence of my agreement with him. Before postmodernism had been articulated, I wrote in my contribution to *Folklore and Folklife* that the culture of commerce in its production, say, of automobiles and offices buildings is not the antagonist of folk art but its embodiment in new forms. Ten years later I affectionately treated Ellen Cutler's kitchen decor in *Ballymenone* as—to use John's terms—a vernacularization of the commodity, an argument I extended through Charles Jencks' formulation of the postmodern experience in *The Spirit of Folk Art*. I am currently at work on a book on Turkish carpets precisely because the Oriental rug has been for centuries a part of commercial enterprise and it excites me and challenges my assumptions to find folk art flourishing in the international capitalist entanglement in which you and I are actors. That is, I am not called out of my project into agreement with John. I agree with him naturally.

If I have no disagreement with John Dorst, perhaps he and I have a disagreement with someone else, so let me rehearse the argument that brought forth his essay on the chance that a useful debate might ensue. I crafted my presidential address as a performance for the moment with no plans to reconstruct it into a piece of writing. Carved to the bone, my point was that folklore, the discipline, the topic, is part of the modern world. I described three concepts of the modern, arguing that each calls the folklorist to a particular historical, critical responsibility. If by "modern" we mean all that exists in our times, in these days, then folklore's task is to prevent

us from closing our notion of reality down around our own predicament; folklore must struggle to keep the view global, reminding us, say, that more than a billion of the world's people live today in peasant communities. If by "modern" we mean a particular historical culture that has risen through enclosure, industrialization, urbanization, and secularization, then folklore's task is describing how people shape lives for themselves within these particular conditions. (At this point I believe John Dorst and I come close in one mission we set for the discipline we share.) If by "modern" we mean a particular artistic and intellectual movement called modern, a movement that shaped itself in opposition to the second concept of the modern, then folklore's task is to recognize that it is part of that movement, charged with the special task of documenting its participants unconfused by bias of culture, class, race, or gender. In the context of this call to responsibility, I said it would be wise to jettison the foppish term "postmodern" and get on with our work.

Why some people chose to applaud at that point I do not know, but I do know why I said it. Postmodernism, as I understand its virtues, amounts to a recentering within modernism. Read the manifestos of the great moderns—my examples were Kandinsky and Yeats, exact contemporaries, founders of modernism in different media, and the authors of programmatic prose—and you will find them concerned with both the universal and the particular. They would be followed by artists (consider only James Joyce) who kept that duality alive. But there were others (consider the key case of architecture) who simplified modernism into its universal dimension and against them the particular had to rebel, so we have in our own science the shift from structure to emergence, from form to performance.

Postmodernism, if it can be identified with architecture after Kahn, painting after Reinhardt, anthropology after Lévi-Strauss, is not post-modern but a backward shift within modernism. My objection to the concept comes only when the shift takes us back so far that it lands us again in end-of-the-century decadence. My objection to the term is constant because it reflects an ignorance of history convenient to false claims to originality through which intellectual progress is converted into a series of fashions that serve, like all fashions, to divide people who should be working together, to obscure through surficial detail deep patterns of continuity, to prevent, in short, cooperation and productive change.

Fashion is no friend to thought. Old ideas are not wrong because they are old—plenty of life remains in the historic-geographic method, not to mention structuralism—nor are new ideas good by virtue of

newness. If performance, say, is merely a reaction to the theories that preceded it, then it too will pass, and it should, and soon. But that is not how I see it. Performance is not the negation of form but its entailment. It does not replace structuralist thinking, it enfolds it, expanding to recreate the interdependent duality of structure and emergence, enacted in art by the likes of Joyce and Kandinsky, articulated in existentialism, the modernist philosophy. (To put it a little bluntly, the concepts fashionable now in scholarship amount to belated readings into new realms of the implications of existentialism.)

If it must be new and there is nothing new in substance, then novelty will abide in style. Manufacturers sucker us with packaging. Postmodern architects thrill to ornament, postmodern writers stew in words. Words, I expect, the language of postmodernism, its tricky diction and circuitous prolixity, prompted the applause in Philadelphia. It is natural perhaps that writers struck with writing about a few great books about which everything of true moment has already been said (and which say it better themselves anyway) would become excited by a new jargon with which to earn their salaries, and natural perhaps, if sad, that anthropologists battling for the crown of Lévi-Strauss and needing to rationalize their unwillingness to go to the field would join in the verbal gyre through which criticism descends into cynicism, self-complaint permutes into self-fascination, political responsibilities evaporate into elitist abstractions, interest in the world is replaced by interest in the academical, and righteous action, numbed by paradox, stops. Folklorists with their honorable old habit of keeping up with anthropology can profit by listening, chastening themselves to do their work with finer awareness, but we need not follow into the slough of despond. Where they are going is where we are. Believe me, ethnography is not beyond doing.

Now, I would prefer other words, words that did not threaten to divide us from the world and locate us in a new historical realm with mere words as our commodities, but I accept what John Dorst has to say. It was against postmodernism as fashion that I inveighed briefly, and with him I believe folklore has the tools, if not the will, to study and illuminate that part of our existence that can be characterized as "advanced consumer capitalism," for there as everywhere folklore, being essential to humanity, abounds.

In Philadelphia, after I called for an elimination of the term because it obscured history and reduced progress to fashion, I asked, "How can you have postmodern if you have not had modern?" I was thinking of our snobbishness. As soon as people struggle to achieve the modern, we change the rules and say, "Fine, but now we are

postmodern. You exist still in the past, beyond the pale of reality." I was thinking of how the term implies either that we have accomplished the modern program or abandoned it as erroneous. Insofar as it was simplified into a universality that was but a Western cultural projection, it was wrong. But rectified, readjusted, it is not a new thing.

The modern is only a historical phase. Someday, God willing, it will pass. The modern masters who invented the age we inhabit, whose capital we continue to spend, called for unity. So long as ethnocentrism, colonialism, racism, classism, and sexism live in the world, we must preserve our commitment to the modern, which is dedication to their destruction. To declare a new age is to imply we have solved the old problems and discovered lovely new ones. The old ones are enough for me.