Postmodernism is the current intellectual commodity for sale and it's being dogged shamelessly by cultural critics and university professors. The term 'postmodernist' is without a doubt the fashionable catchword of the year, but it is also deceptive and confusing. Given the myriad meanings associated with postmodernism, it is best to start by making a distinction between a postmodernist theory, which concerns itself with knowledge, and a postmodernist condition, which deals more generally with the malaise of contemporary culture. The distinction is especially useful since one of the faults of Kroeker and Cook's surly and muddling book is the failure to make even this relatively simple idea clear.

Critics of contemporary mass culture often speak plaintively of a postmodern condition. One does not need a great deal of insight to deduce that the increasing power and pervasiveness of the mass media is capable of absorbing all political opposition as well as destroying unique cultural diversities. Whether we like it or not, the values of a consumer society permeate all of our cognitive abilities. Not only have we been seduced by our media images but, according to Jean Baudrillard, we have become fascinated with the media's references to human creations as an endless mirroring process. Ours has become the information culture of the simulation, the simulated world of signs, in which the real has been replaced by the image and images which refer to it.

According to postmodernist theory, we are imprisoned in the totalitarian 'scene'. Power in contemporary society lies in knowledge and language. So it comes as no surprise that the chief task of a postmodernist is to undermine the authority of signs and to expose the system of power which legitimizes certain cultural representations while prohibiting and disavowing others. The aim is to scrutinize a wide range of privileged discourses in order to reveal a new identity which transcends the boundaries of dominant power relations. The 'perspective' of a camera angle, the 'discipline' of literary study, the 'reading' of a work. The most powerful weapons in the arsenal of postmodernist critique and art are the transformative tropes of parody, irony, excess, the deconstruction of culture and 'populism', and numerous other strategies of disconsolation which by their very reflexive nature force an evaluation rather than the passive consumption of communication codes.

The Postmodern Scene draws generously from the ideas and strategies outlined above. It is a book which tries to say something, however opacity and confusingly, about the deployment of power within postmodern culture. And accordingly, the work of the New French Thought theorists, as well as that of McLuhan and the Critical Theorists, is used to discuss both the history of contemporary culture, and its reality effect (the flow of "dead" signifiers with which culture maintains its fictional image). The book is a collection of different articles, some of them written by Arthur Kroeker and David Cook. Not surprisingly, many of these pieces were first published in the Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory, of which Kroeker is the editor. Taken as a whole the book lacks organization and coherence. What we have instead is some thing akin to literary manges, a series of disorderly, in places incoherent and at times also daunting, examinations of the circles in the mirror of postmodern culture.

If the fragmentation technique of The Postmodern Scene owes something to Dada and McLuhan, the mood of the book comes from The Day of the Locust: despairing and snappishly bleak. In the opening section, "Sunshine Reports," the authors make a number of proclamations about the postmodern condition. The essential idea, I think, is that a society of overproduction and excess such as ours inevitably generates an "excremental" culture, a term which is never adequately defined but which is perhaps ultimately self-explanatory. Postmodern culture is excremental in the sense that it is constantly involved in an endless process of cancellation, liquidation and reversal of meaning. Quality becomes quantity. The distinction between art and life is obliterated. Art loses its critical edge and its ability to comment on life, while ordinary life becomes an aestheticized scene, a tableau vivant in the service of consumer capitalism. Postmodern culture also privileges those tropes through which we can operate as exchange values, such as desire, seduction, and sexuality. These are the chief values of a consumer society and, predictably, they are regulated as socially exchanged commodities which participate in the pure representation of economic power. Yet underpinning these values one can also detect the resonance of catastrophe, destruction, and nihilism. Perhaps the contemporary critic Neil Postman, in more accessible language, best described the consummation of living in an excremental culture when he stated that we are "amusing ourselves to death."

From the jeremiad of "Sunshine Reports" we move to a section called "Sig Cramer," which deals first with a brief and curious examination of the Italian surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico, followed by an even stranger and longer chapter on St. Augustine. De Chirico's work and especially one of his more popular paintings, Landscape Painter, challenges the privileged distinction made by representational art between the sign and the referent. Realism fraudulently claimed that any external representation must be reproduced numinously. De Chirico's painting defies the referential finality of signs. While the country landscape is accurately
trapped on canvas, the painter who apparently created the scene is a geometrical mannequin. By refusing to impose a conventional order on experience, de Chirico denies the reality principle of culture in its "referential illusion."

The argument quickly turns bizarre with the excursion on St. Augustine, whom Arthur Kroeker calls the "Colossus of modern experience" and the "first postmodernist theorist," as he was one of the first thinkers to carry out a metaphysical critique of representation. Much is made in this and subsequent chapters of the importance of Canadian philosopher Charles Norris Cochrane, who is credited as having understood what is at stake with the theme of power. This chapter is more interesting for what Kroeker has to say about Cochrane than for what he has to say about Augustine. Those who are interested in Augustine should either read Cochrane, or better still, Kenneth Burke, who manages to say decisively fewer, and with much less clarity.

At this point it may be necessary to quote at length from The Postmodern Scene in order to demonstrate not only the incoherent style that characterizes the book but also the convoluted discourse which is at times weal-y impossible to decipher:

"Baudrillard's insight into the 'semantic cancellation' at work in the simulacrum echoes Augustine's earlier, philosophical reduction of the sign system of the trinity (father/memory as signifier; son/intelligence as signified; and father/son as the perspectival closure of the trinity) to a "sound which is made by the language." Baudrillard's 'semiological reduction' is nothing more than Augustine's insight that, in the mirror of the sign, signifier and signified circle back towards one another, fragmented and (simulated images) in a common tuval."

This quote serves as a very good example of the type of rhetorical strategy which is at work throughout the text: the bringing together of two unrelated thoughts and traditions with the sensation, but not the sense, of their connection. In collapsing together Baudrillard and Augustine we have a simultaneity which is at once fantastical and acceler-
tion of thought. But what are the authors saying with their "Eckkletter" ideas? I think that central to Kroeker's and Cook's argument is the notion of the "cancellation of the real" and the social construction of a "dead sign" which posmodern culture increasingly and effectively achieves. A dead sign can be described as a signifier cut off from any historical referent. Thus imbricated with the signifier implodes; it collapses into itself becoming a tautology. One can, for instance, walk into a shopping mall and find a simulated street scene with quaint shop facades, old-fashioned lamp posts and telephone booths, and some paved streets. The scene is obviously rigged to impose on us a sensation that we are walking in a real city street, yet the signs that create the scene refer to their own surface gloss. In the shopping mall example, ordinary perception and reality come amiss and are skillfully managed as a symbolic organization. What the authors would call "relational power": the imperious and artificial social world in which all reality is liquidated.

The optical illusions that postmodern culture creates oscillate between the culture and which registers and the inner eye which compels. A good figure for reflecting on this condition can be found, according to Arthur Kroeker, in Rene Magritte's painting "False Mirror," which shows an empty iris surrounded by the reflection of clouds. Magritte's eye represents "the temporality of the world as a pure sign system" (p.35). Indeed, the next two sections of the book ("Slicing Signifiers" and "Possibilism and The Death of the 'Social'") are in more detail the dynamics of power in postmodernist society. Here the work of Foucault, Nietzsche, Barthes, and Baudrillard, interestingly enough, Talcott Parson is used to stress the point that power is postmodern culture asserts itself as an endless process of symbolization.

In the concluding section, "Ultramodernism," the authors' attention shifts to our new fascinante, excess and catastrophe as a way of life. Francesco Vezzoli's photographs, and Alex Colville's paintings are deemed by Kroeker and Cook in many ways to exemplify the mood of impending disaster which is our lot. Like Alex Colville, Edward Hopper is an artist of hyperrealism. Hopper always tries to surprise the viewer in the position of voyeur. His paintings are full of windows ("summer soul") that give the viewer a glimpse into the outside world of a receding nature and an advancing urban sprawl. Hopper's paintings find continuities in the current work of the young neo-express Eric Fischel. Once again, the viewer is voyeur, sats on a privileged position as we are brought to the psychological edge of the postmodern condition. This is the parodic culture which feeds on scenes of excess and disaster, as evident in Fischel's depiction of desire without any apparent relation, seduction without love, and fatherly love bordering on incest. This is, as it is said in the case of the postmodern condition: the unsettled discourse of a culture which has reached a new confrontation with nihilism.

This book, for all its rhetorical and material richness, offers a serious analysis of the abyss of modern subjectivity and culture. There are indeed several chapters which merit a close reading. Also, the author's reliance on the strikingly creative work of Georges Bataille provides the book with much of its provocative edge and some of its best metaphors. But throughout it all one must remember that we are dealing with a mode of thought which is detached neither in the institutional nor the historical nature of social science, and develop their daily interactions with the "liquidation of the real," based on a taut theory of language that is so all-embracing as to be virtually meaningless as an analytical construct. All social life involves some form of influence, molding, direction or compulsion, but the reduction of social relationships to the issue of language and power renders it almost impossible to make the distinction: intellectual, moral, and material. It is necessary for any serious evaluation of change in society, or to hope for future society. It is no wonder then that The Possiblism Essay is an essay of any political content and lacks any sense of direction. The book holds out no hope, only fashionable nihilistic grief. It also displays a certain glacial stillness in place of considered judgement.

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Two anthologies have recently appeared, generated out of an American conference, and a combined American and British Seminar, on the study of mass and popular culture. They are both uneven collections, yet Studies in Entertainment has a project which holds the essays together. The collection attempts to undo the strict division between high culture and mass culture imposed by the theorists and critics within the Frankfurt school. High Theory/Low Culture, on the other hand, has little guidance in its overall intention. This looseness in thought characterizes the majority of essays within the Collection, leaving the reader wondering whether the contributors had stayed longer at the conference table to thrash out what it is they wanted to say.

The essays within Studies in Entertainment were first presented as a conference in 1985 held by the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Its editor, Maria Modleski, is an associate professor of Film and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and is author of Loving with a Vengeance. Mass Producers for Women. What birds the essays together in this collection is not only the topic of Mass Culture, but also, as Modleski states in her introduction to the text, it is also the "voice of the women's movement" which reverberates throughout the book.

Studies in Entertainment is divided into four sections: the traditions of mass culture criticism; television, feminist studies in entertainment; and the boundaries between art and entertainment. This final section contains three essays which exemplify the theme of the collection - to redefine the distinctions between high culture (art) and mass culture (entertainment). Specifically, contributors attempt to reassess the possibility of an "oppositional" position to mainstream entertainment, this position being traditionally held by the avant-garde. Andreas Hursmis in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," approaches the opposition of high art/ mass culture as having been created by modernism which sees as essentially misogynist, for it distinguishes mass culture as a degraded Other to its own male grand rete. He pessimistically, and simplistically, sees the dichotomy being overcome with the dissolution of modernism.

Tania Modleski begins the section with 'The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Poststructural Theory.' She looks at recent popular horror films such as 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,' 'Daum of the Dead,' and a selection of the body work of David Cronenberg, and sees these films as being just as "subversive" as any avant-garde film. She bases this assessment on the fact that the horror film contains many of the elements characterizing a postmodern work: it experiments with narrativity, and vice versa, and what little narrative it retains is aimed at the destruction of all that is bourgeois; it refuses an audience the aesthetic pleasure of identification with characters, and it defies closure (the possibility of endless sequels has much to do with this latter trait). By finding in the horror genre "oppositional" qualities established by the avant-garde, Modleski concludes that a strict binary relationship no longer exists between high art and mass culture.