

New Times

After the Masses

Postmodernism is all the rage. But what does it mean? **Dick Hebdige** explores its relationship with New Times and argues that it poses a fundamental challenge for the Left



Few people - whatever their political persuasion - looking at Britain in the 80s would deny that we are living in new times. The crucial question is how far are the long-term global shifts in cultural, political and economic life mapped out under the heading of new times intrinsically connected to the rise of the Right? This is not an easy one. One way of opening up this question - is to see how these same shifts have been interpreted in recent debates on postmodernism.

The wide currency of this term over the last few years in Mediaville may alienate many readers. For some it may seem that the word has become too baggy or trendy or annexed by the Right to be of use. Others will protest that they never got the hang of modernism (or its relevance for the Left) let alone postmodernism. After all, what have the design of buildings or pop videos or the fate of the novel or the current obsession with advertising, packaging and style got to do with the real political issues of the day? For others on the Left - perhaps those who are closer to the debates themselves - the resistance to the idea not just of postmodernism but more importantly of postmodernity - suggests a reaction against that sense of an ending that hangs over so much currently fashionable theorising. After riding out all those arguments about postindustrialism and the end of ideology in the 60s here we are again confronted with another version of apocalypse.

This refusal of apocalyptic thinking runs right to the core of what the contemporary Left's about. It's a matter of principle, identity and faith. If the multiple factions that make up the Left have any common identity then it

is one which is rooted in a powerful sense of modernity as a condition in which all traditional 'truths' and 'absolute' values, all 'natural' social roles and 'essential' meanings are open to challenge and to change. If the Left has any unifying faith then it is the conviction that history is neither god-given nor predetermined but is there to be actively made and remade in a process of collective struggle by men and women freed from the chains of ignorance and fear. What can a theory of postmodernism or postmodernity have to say to people whose collective identity and political will are so deeply wedded to the sense of radical possibility opened up by modern times? To talk about the temporary fusion of the heady promises of modernity and capitalism is one thing. It's to say that the vanguard of the Left has been left behind for *now*. New times demand new strategies for change. On the other hand to use a term like postmodernity is to say that the motor of history has run down, that there is no united front along which the Left can advance, that there is no authority or rationality in accordance with which it can proceed. It is, in other words, to give up the ghost.

There is a great deal more at issue here than questions of 'style'. To appreciate just how much is at stake we have, from the start, to mark out a distinction between theories of postmodernism which address a sense of crisis in the ways culture in the West is organised, produced and thought about, and those more general theories of postmodernity which directly challenge the principles of hope, critique and practice on which Left politics have always been built. We may or may not care about the role of art and design in contemporary culture but we can't

afford to ignore the larger crisis provoked by the severance - so evident throughout the world today, not just in 'Thatcher's Britain' - of the link between modernity and progress. We have to think *through* that historic crisis even if we find it easier to reject the claim that history nowadays is finished, or that it is, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, a 'toy' or a 'game'. A game what's more, that he insists the Left has lost.

The idea that 'the dream is over' is hardly a new one - it forms one of the pressures against which socialism has always sought to make itself. But at the same time one of the ways in which socialism has been renewed in the past has been by actively engaging with those forces which have set out to consign it to the 'rubbish heap of history'. If the engagement with theories of postmodernity and postmodernism is to be fruitful - dialectical rather than defensive - then it has to be acknowledged from the start that such theories pose a challenge to the Left's ambition to 'change the world' because they question the belief in rationality and progress which direct and underpin the Left's project(s). Those challenges have to be squarely faced if we are to move beyond them to understand the dynamics of new times.

Before looking at postmodernity, we have to consider the era it supposedly replaces. Marshall Berman sets out in his book *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* to provide a sketch of modern times by tracing out the connections between three terms. First *modernisation* refers to the economic, social and technological innovations associated with the rise of capitalism. Second *modernity* describes the radically-transformed character of life under capitalism most clearly visible in the great European and American cities of the 19th and early-20th centuries. Lastly, there is *modernism* - the answering wave of experimental movements in the arts linked again to the capitalist metropolitan centres. Together these radical modernist innovations, from symbolism and cubism to surrealism and stream-of-consciousness writing, set out to articulate the experience of modernity. The terms of this engagement with modern life were always critical, whether modernists were rejecting 'mass culture', negating bourgeois norms and values or seeking to align themselves with progressive social forces. In the case of the International Style of modern architecture and the Bauhaus ideals of industrial design (the so-called machine aesthetic) the ambition was to merge with the modernisation process itself in order literally to build a better world founded on rational principles (eg, 'form follows function').

But it's precisely this equation between modernity, progress and rationality that has itself been brought into question in the 'postmodern' era.

At the core of this question lies the 'legitimation crisis'. If modernity is a condition in which 'all that's solid melts into air' then all the old institutions and centres of authority - from religion to royalty - which guaranteed stability and continuity in earlier epochs and more traditional societies are prone to crisis and contestation. If ideals like truth and justice are not underwritten by divine authority then how is authority to be guaranteed? If all values are flattened out beneath exchange then how are true and lasting values to be established? One of the quests within modernity has been to find ways of resisting this tendency towards the relativisation of all values and claims to power by grounding knowledge and legitimating authority so that they are placed beyond question.

According to the French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, this 'legitimation crisis' has been solved through the invention of what he calls 'the great meta-narratives' of the modern period. By this he means all those overarching belief systems originating in the Enlightenment - from the belief in rationality, science and causality to the faith in human emancipation, progress and the class struggle. These great stories have been used over what he calls the past 'two sanguinary centuries' to legitimate everything from war, revolution, nuclear arsenals and concentration camps to social engineering, Taylorism, Fordist production models and the gulag. The collapse of faith in these meta-narratives heralds what Lyotard calls the 'post-modern condition'. None of the 'centres of authority' legitimated by these collapsed meta-narratives - including that essential 'holding operation', the modern nation-state - survives the transition into new times, at least as the latter are defined in post-modern theory.

What replaces them for the American marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, is the universal 'logic' of the market. For Jameson, the global spread of capital has meant that all such centres are either destroyed or have been made over and absorbed by the interlocking cultural and economic systems that make up 'late capitalism'. In the process the political and cultural maps of the modern period have been redrawn so that the old oppositions - science versus art, fact versus fiction, Left versus Right, high culture versus low culture, mass culture versus 'progressive' modern art and so on - no longer hold. In the post-modern world no values prove 'timeless', 'authentic' or 'oppositional' forever when absolutely everything from the price of pickled mushrooms on a Polish street corner to definitions of desirable art in the West moves with the market.

At the same time, the 'radical' nature of modernism has been called into question in two ways. First, modern art is no longer marginal or oppositional:

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the 'masterpieces' of the modern 'tradition' now fetch astronomical prices at auctions and sit comfortably within the gallery system, and university and polytechnic arts curricula; tv ads routinely use all the shock effects of modern art. Second, as part of a process of critical review, the canon of High Modernism has been brought to book for its 'Eurocentrism', its 'masculinist' stress on transgression and transformation, its downgrading of everything that doesn't fall within its definition of what's important, ie, women's art, domestic culture and reproduction, black and Third World art, 'bourgeois' and 'socialist' realism, peasant and working-class white, 'mass' culture, middlebrow and high culture, non-metropolitan culture etc. Far from being 'progressive', it's condemned for its patriarchal values, its aggressive change-the-world heroism, its colonialist plundering of 'primitive' Third World art. But you don't even need the benefit of hindsight to see that any link between modernisation, modernism and Utopia is no longer tenable. That link has been dramatically broken - and not just in capitalist societies.

The violence that can flow from the fusion of centralised power structures, Fordist production models, aggressive modernisation and a debased version of Modern Movement architectural principles is nowhere more apparent than in Romania today where the 70 year-old Ceausescu is engaged in a village-leveling exercise described by the Helsinki Federation for Human Rights as 'cultural genocide'. The destruction of minority ethnic Hungarian and Saxon cultures in Transylvania and the 'rationalisation' (ie, eradication) of the informal peasant economy on which rural Romanians depend are two of the consequences of Ceausescu's transplantation of the inhabitants of over 7,000 villages to concrete 'agro-industrial complexes', complete with huge communal kitchens and washrooms. Modernism here involves a tyrannical obliteration of difference. Nowhere is the Faustian link between a patriarchal gerontocracy and willed violence towards organically-grown 'archaic' cultural forms more clearly visible than in Ceausescu's crazy plan to wrench 'his' country into the Stalin era before he dies. As the rest of the Eastern bloc confronts the centripetal forces of *perestroika* and the public expression of formerly-suppressed ethnic-cultural divisions and nationalist demands, Ceausescu, the ailing "father", is attempting in the face of international opposition, to exert absolute mastery over the future by turning Romania into a concentration camp.

The contention within a lot of post-modernism that today there is no centre is not just a gesture of solidarity with these excluded, repressed or exterminated 'others'. It demands a review of priorities and a rethinking of terms like 'representation' and 'power'

at so fundamental a level that any description of the crisis of the Left that doesn't take it seriously just will not be productive. But the contention also has specific ramifications at both the macro and the micro levels within theories of postmodernism and postmodernity. For Jameson it indicates the end of locality altogether as the multinational character of the late late show of capitalism reduces everything to its own image. The implication here is that we'll soon be able to watch *Dallas* or eat a Big Mac in any part of the inhabited world.

At the same time, the point where we 'experience' all this and make sense of it as individuals has allegedly been made over too. The 'sovereign subject' - central to Enlightenment models of rationality, science and the individual - is itself 'de-centred' from the throne of authority. It's de-centred in theory by the *new* 'sciences' - psychoanalysis and marxism. But in the 20th century it's also de-centred *practically* in the West by the rise of mass consumption and advertising. As the 'consumption economy' has developed, so the value of commodities is seen to derive less from the laws of economic exchange governing the market or from the ability of products to satisfy primary needs as from the way they function *culturally* as *signs* within coded systems of exchange.

This provides the key for the critique of the marxist theory of value put forward by the French champion of postmodernity, Jean Baudrillard. For Baudrillard, the distinction between 'real' and 'false' needs upon which marxist economics is based collapses as consumption becomes *primarily* about individuals and groups using commodities like a language to mark out taste and status *differences* between themselves. In his later work, commodities and signs are seen to merge completely as the opposition between what things look like and what's really going on begins to dissolve in the 'hyperreality' of the media age. This process - what he calls 'implosion of the real' - supposedly displaces all models of rational critique. It is no longer possible for us to see through the appearance of, for instance, a 'free market' to the structuring 'real relations' underneath (eg, class conflict and the expropriation by capital of surplus value). Instead, signs begin increasingly to take on a life of their own referring not to a real world outside themselves but to their own 'reality' - the system that produces the signs.

It's at this point that Baudrillard grafts a global theory of postmodernity onto a global theory of cultural postmodernity to produce a scenario which is well and truly apocalyptic - 'fatal', to use Baudrillard's word. In this world of surfaces tv takes over from the real as the place where real things happen only if they're screened (real things here include profits made on the

screens of computer terminals by dealers juggling prices on the international money and commodity futures markets). In such a thoroughly *imaged* universe - the world of Reagan-Gorbachev photocalls, Thatcher visits to Gdansk and HRH's *Vision Of Britain* - 'politics' becomes largely an adjunct of PR and showbiz even when the etiquette is breached (eg, the attack on a newscaster on air by lesbian activists to publicise opposition to Clause 28). Rational critique and the will to change the world are replaced by what he calls the 'ecstasy of communication' - a state characterised by 'banal seduction' and 'mindless fascination' where any kind of judgement - not just artistic but moral and political - becomes impossible.

Clearly a great deal more is at stake in the apocalypse laid out by Baudrillard than a shift in the mode of production. But it's also clear that he offers a kind of picture of *some* of the changes that make up new times.

However much we want to resist the chilly extremism of this kind of analysis, it's clear that the 'information revolution' has implications far beyond the extension of financial services and the further diminution of our civil rights. The sheer volume and variety of information may conceal the fact that the shifts are qualitative as well as quantitative. One result of the print boom for instance, associated with desktop publishing, Wapping and the end of hot-metal trade unionism, is that more and more publications compete for advertising revenue tied to increasingly fragmented and specialised markets. Manic competition at the bottom end of the tabloid market has led editors to abandon the distinction between entertainment and information, as tv soap gossip crowds out 'hard news' on the front pages. Although the tendency isn't new, in recent years it's been intensified to the point where hype creates its own 'reality' so that some of the dailies now carry the 'Aliens From Outer Space' stories pioneered in the notorious *Sunday Sport*.

What sense would an orthodox left analysis make of this decline of standards? It would probably begin by mentioning the circulation war, perhaps citing American precedents. It might go on to condemn the 'Aliens Turned My Son Into An Olive' style of story as degraded entertainment, even as part of the ideology of authoritarian populism in which all 'aliens' (eg, gay men, the loony Left, black youths, the IRA, acid house fans etc.) are defined as a threat to the 'family of the nation', as part of the unassimilable enemy within.

But such analyses would be inadequate insofar as they remain tied to an outmoded 'economy of truth'. They fail to acknowledge how far the ground has shifted. For what is also at stake in such

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mutations of the codes of journalism is the whole 'information order' upon which meaningful debates over issues of this kind rely. The survival of the public realm - a forum of debate where conflicting interests and ideologies struggle to define reality - in turn depends upon the public's ability to discriminate *in the last analysis* between what is true and what isn't. If the generalised scepticism towards mainstream media reportage moves beyond issues of 'fact' and interpretation - (what happened when, where and why and what does it mean?) - to question the line between truth and lies itself then the whole 'economy of truth' collapses.

The idea of a verifiable information order, however precarious and shifting, however subject to negotiation and contestation by competing ideologies, does not survive the transition to this version of new times. After all, it's not as if anybody is really being asked to believe in aliens. Instead they are being invited to relinquish the right to believe in the verifiability of public truths *per se*. Such a stretching of the codes of journalistic licence beyond the limits established in the early days of the mass-circulation press may free the readers from any obligation to believe in the bourgeois myth of disinterested truth by offering itself as a kind of joke in which the reader is invited to participate (the 'joke' is how low can we go?), but its potential dangers are also pretty clear: today aliens from Mars kidnap joggers, yesterday Auschwitz didn't happen, tomorrow who cares what happens? Here the so-called 'depthlessness' of the post-modern era extends beyond the integration of signs and commodities into saleable 'styles' and 'packages', beyond the tendency of the media to feed more and more greedily off each other, to affect the function and status of information itself. It may be that the Left will have to dig deep to find strategies capable of coping with the apparent 'depthlessness' of new times versions of the 'public realm'.

It is easy to see why postmodernism has been characterised as an intellectual gloss for Thatcherism - an invitation issued by people who should know better to give up, lie back and enjoy. Yet in some of their founding premises and points of focus, theories of postmodernism don't offer a *description* of the dominant economic and cultural trends so very different from the territory mapped out on these pages as new times, though the analysis differs at a fundamental level. Some versions of postmodernism are patently fatalistic, even potentially fascistic, but the diverse currents and tendencies that theories of the 'post' have sought to bind into and define have *no intrinsic political belonging in themselves*. On the one hand, in those circles where the politics of race and sexuality are taken seriously, critical postmodernism is

identified with diversity and difference, a politics of contestation and change. On the other, in Baudrillard's 'obscene' universe, postmodernity is associated with the annihilation of difference in the media age: the end of politics altogether.

For years *Marxism Today* has been arguing for a definition of the political as a 'war of position' in which absolutely nothing is given or guaranteed. Such a 'marxism without guarantees' has already dispensed with Lyotard's 'meta-narratives'. Furthermore, the concentration in the work of people like Stuart Hall on the ways in which language has been used within contemporary British politics to actively construct - to *articulate* - 'imaginary communities' clearly points a way forward beyond the impasse (or the armchair) in which so much of post-modern theory gets stuck. Thatcherism attempts to hegemonise the long-term movements described, though differently inflected, under the rubrics of new times and postmodernism within its project of 'regressive modernisation'. There is nothing natural about the relationship between those forms and forces and that political will, just as there is nothing given or permanent about the 'we' that Thatcherism has called into being.

This much is clear in recent debates over nationhood and national tradition. The struggle over the meaning of modernity, national identity and the past has offered a significant point of tension in Britain throughout the late 80s - a point of tension which is there to be cracked open in the current controversy around the role of design and architecture in British life. Thatcherite definitions of 'Britishness', national heritage and national pride have sought to align the 'shape of the future' with a selective image of the past so that even the disruptions and upheavals of today's 'communications revolution' are drawn into the charmed circle of national tradition through the analogy with the Industrial Revolution and the Victorian railway boom (the connection is especially pointed in London where the great 19th-century railway termini are being redeveloped as luxury hotel, leisure centre, office and shopping mall complexes).

At the same time, within architecture where the term first originated, 'post-modernism' has been used to describe developments as different in conception and appearance as the nostalgic, neo-Georgian repro-kitsch of Quinlan Terry, a planned 19-storey grey, pink and red office block in the City of London and the 'discreet' horizontal 'groundscrapers'; huge, lateral, deep plan dealing rooms located nearby, sometimes concealed behind the original facades of a block of 'historic buildings'. 'Postmodernism' here has functioned largely as a cover for unrestrained development for profit.

It's also clear that in Britain the

tower block has become a powerful symbol of a superseded socialist era. In the current debates, the tower block's collapse is used to point up the weaknesses of that other larger edifice - the postwar corporate state, with its mixed economy, its embattled health services, its strained, unlikely social and political consensus forged in the white heat of Harold Wilson's modernising techno-jargon. The acquisition a few years back of a neo-Georgian Barratt home in an 'executive estate' in Dulwich marks the ideological cut-off point from failed Utopia to new realism, from council house Britain to 'enterprise culture', from stately-home and country-house conservatism to the tougher, 'fairer' contours of the 'property-owning democracy'.

Yet, beyond all the idealogising, nobody - not even the architects - would claim that the original 60s' tower blocks were ever widely popular. There is a vast literature within sociology devoted to the librium addiction and loss of community associated with Britain's 'vertical streets'. The enthusiastic responses to Prince Charles' vision of Britain as first and foremost a landscape to be conserved rather than designed, testified to the strength of popular feeling on the issue. The affirmation within certain types of postmodernism of the particular against the general; the decorative, the 'fantastic' and the 'aspirational' against the 'rational', the 'formal' and the 'academic'; the desirability of maintaining continuity with the past, the reverence for the 'human scale', are all themes that can be articulated to a more imaginative and democratic, more innovative and plural version of socialism. In the words of Alexei Sayle: 'No more living 200 ft in the air in a thing that looks like an off-set lathe or a baked bean canner'.

Charles Jencks, the architect who coined the term 'post-modernism' in the first place, stresses the importance of dialogue with clients, users and tradition/the past in the planning of new buildings. It is this assertion of the legitimacy of other people's desires that links postmodernism to a positive appraisal of new times. In new times the old hierarchical model of the expert standing Moses-like at the apex of a triangle and the masses laid out along the base waiting for deliverance collapses. The favoured metaphors for intellectual activity in modernism were military (the revolutionary 'vanguard', the artistic 'avant garde'), technical ('writers are the engineers of the soul' - Stalin), mechanical ('houses are machines for living' - Henri le Corbusier) and medical (the critic as 'surgeon'). In postmodernism, ecological and organic metaphors predominate along with the softer model of the expert as facilitator and consultant. Postmodernism here has more value as one key to a pragmatic approach to consumer demands than as a global

account of a 'consumer economy' or as an insistence on any particular architectural style.

It's worth saying that within its own terms one of the more blatant paradoxes of Baudrillard's account of post-modernity is that it is itself a totalising 'meta-narrative' - one which makes the media, not the factory or class struggle or science, the 'motivating' force - the literal end of history. According to Baudrillard the masses were an invention of the modern period: one of the myths used to legitimate Fordist projects as diverse as 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', parliamentary democracy and selling soap powder. The decline of Fordism exposes the myth of the masses as an active force so completely that we live today - to quote the title of one of Baudrillard's books - literally 'in the shadow of the silent majorities', so that all meanings 'implode' into 'the black hole' left by the masses' 'disappearance'. The 'logic' of this position is as circular as it is solipsistic.

What is of course so often forgotten in the hype surrounding Baudrillard today is that there is a tradition of cultural socialism closer to home that is rooted in a similar scepticism towards the notion of the 'masses'. The late Raymond Williams always insisted that the 'mass' was a category intellectuals tended to reserve contemptuously for other people, never for themselves. And if, after all is said and done, we still have need of meta-narratives then *The Long Revolution* may ultimately prove more *useful*, more progressive and empowering than the one that frames the theory of postmodernity because it acknowledges the fact that faith and idealism are themselves part of the historical process, vital constituents of the political *will*. It is also possible that something like a sociology of aspiration for new times might grow out of the less totalising approach to 'ordinary people' that Williams recommends.

One of the features of post-Fordist production is the leading role given to market research, packaging and presentation, while it doesn't literally *produce* the social, it's nonetheless the case that marketing has provided the dominant and most pervasive classifications of 'social types' in the 1980s (the yuppie is the most obvious example). We use these categories as a kind of social shorthand even if we are reluctant to find ourselves reflected in them. We live in a world and in bodies which are deeply scored by the power relations of race and class, sexuality and gender but we also live - whether or not we know it consciously - in a world of style-setters, innovators, sloanes, preppies, empty nesters, casuals, sensibled, the constrained majority, and today's prime targets, the pre-teens and the woofies.

These are the types outlined in commercial lifestyling and 'psychographics' - forms of research which

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don't present descriptions of living, breathing individuals so much as hypothetical 'analogues' of 'aspirational clusters'. In other words the new intensive but speculative forms of market research are designed to offer a social map of desire which can be used to determine where exactly which products should be 'pitched' and 'niched'. All these types could no doubt be translated back into the old language (it would perhaps be relatively easy to return them to the axis of social class) but everything specific would be lost in the translation.

It's clear that such research methods and the marketing initiatives associated with them have been developed precisely to cut across the old social-sexual polarities. The parameters are designed to be transcultural and transnational (the spread of 'psychographics' in the UK is linked to the drive to go pan-European in preparation for 1992). We may find such forms of knowledge immoral, objectionable or sinister - a waste of time and resources which is unforgivable in a world where people are starving and in a country where people are still sleeping in the streets - but the fact is that they do actively create and sustain one *version* of the social. They depend for their success on the accurate outlining and anticipation (through observation and interviews with 'target' subjects) not just of what (some) people think they want but of *what they'd like to be*. A sociology of aspiration (or new times) might begin by combining the considerable *critical* and *diagnostic* resources available within existing versions of sociology and cultural studies with the *descriptive* and *predictive* knowledge available within the new intensive market research to get a more adequate picture of what *everybody* says they want and what they want to be in all its radical plurality. The challenge would then be to produce and distribute the required goods and services more efficiently, and equitably than the opposition. Such a mix of traditional academic/social-work and commercial/marketing-knowledge functions would take the Left beyond the ghetto of 'miserabilism' to which it is regularly consigned by the loony Right. Such a shift would require what certain forms of postmodernism recommend: a scepticism towards imposed general, 'rational' solutions; a relaxation of the old critical and judgemental postures.

This is not to give up the old ground or the old contestatory strategies on which left politics have traditionally been made. The identity and the faith, both bound into a *progressive* conception of modernity, remain in place. But beyond that a new kind of politics - as flexible and responsive to new demands and initiatives, as the software that powers post-Fordist production - will have to be envisioned. This is true even in the 'depthless' field of the media upon which Baudrillard operates.

Within the transfigured 'public realm' established by transnational communications networks new forms both of alliance and contestation are also possible. One of the things ignored in the more 'fatal' versions of new times is the binding power of the new transnational media systems: the power they have to move people not just to buy *into* networks that offer forms of community and alliance which can transcend the confines of class, race, gender, regional and national culture. Popular music offers many examples of this kind of bonding. Some of these 'communities of affect' (rather than 'communities of interest') are explicitly Utopian. The simultaneously most spectacular yet most participatory examples to date of the kind of bonding made possible across transnational communications systems have been the televised events organised around Band Aid, Sport Aid, Live Aid and the Free Mandela movement. This is where you see the optimistic will in action. Televangelism is another less engaging example of this kind of mobilisation specific to the media age.

Rather than 'psychic autism' (Baudrillard) or 'the waning of affect' (Jameson) such phenomena suggest the possibility of a new kind of politics existing primarily in and through the airwaves and organised around issues of universal moral concern. Such crusades are likely to be extended in the 90s. Once again the desire to feel and to feel *connected* to a transitory mass of other people, to engage in transitory and *superficial* alliances of this kind is not intrinsically either good or bad. Instead it has to be *articulated*. Jimmy Swaggart managed to articulate the yearning for community and righteousness one way. Jerry Dammers, founder of the Two Tone movement and co-organiser of the Mandela concert, helped to direct the flow of similar desires in a radically different direction.

At the local level, the airwaves are there to be actively occupied (rather than passively tuned-in to). In the 'UK', the use of music and style to articulate new ethnic identities underneath and against the monolithic version of 'Britishness' available within Thatcherism has become one of the most remarkable (and marketable) aspects of cultural politics in the 80s. Rap, house and funk music, for instance, are merely the latest in a long line of musics that have offered forms of community *across* the international black diaspora. At the same time they have literally plugged the fans back (through rhythms, lyrics and 'quoted' snatches of speech from dead black leaders) into a version of black history and struggle in the New World - from slavery to civil rights to black power and the buppies - which may otherwise have lain silent and forgotten. Through sampling and citation, through rap and talkover, through mixing desks and on turntables, multi-

ethnic musical traditions have been transformed and adapted on the ground to give a particular *modernist* voice and shape to a specifically black, British structure of feeling, in a place and at a time when the new Right has been implying that blackness and Britishness are, as Paul Gilroy puts it, mutually exclusive categories. In this way, the new syncretic or synthetic black British styles in the 80s which rely on musical and sartorial cut-ups - mixes of sounds and images plundered from a range of ostensibly unrelated sources - form part of an ongoing process of active self-definition which is now being consciously extended by a new generation of black British independent film and video makers, writers, intellectuals and record producers.

Now young Britons of Asian origin have adopted similar strategies in the various styles associated with bhangra music which merges traditional Punjabi dancestyles and rhythms with Indi-pop, black US and white GB funk, house and disco rhythms. Through the patterns of belonging and distancing established in these forms of cultural production, new forms of 'British' identity become available which circulate along with the records themselves in the clubs and cassette players and on the pirate radio stations. At a time when the integrity of the national culture is asserted against a common European identity, a genuinely cosmopolitan post-colonial space is opened up within and against 'Englishness' - a set of identities available to all irrespective of their skin colour, 'rooted' in the airwaves. The process is by no means confined to black and Bengali subcultures. The 'break up' of imaginary Britishness can be heard too in the assertion of the Pogues' republicanism, in The Proclaimers' militant Celtic style. It's not just the 'United' in the 'United Kingdom' that is being broken down today. The rise of women singers and musicians like Yazoo, Sade and Tanita Tikaram simultaneously challenge the monolithic sexism and heterosexism of 60s' and 70s' 'rock' and racist notions of ethnic 'belonging'.

All these contradictory tendencies and possibilities could be described as part of the landscape of new times - a landscape which has yet to solidify, which is still to be made. They represent real challenges which cannot be written off as part of some linear global 'logic' of postmodernism any more than they can be effectively framed within the old language of the Left. Contrary to what Baudrillard says, there is nothing 'fatal' or finished about new times. The task for the 90s has to be how to rise to the challenge, how to abjure certain kinds of authority we might have laid claim to in the past, without losing sight of the longer-term objectives, how to articulate a new kind of socialism, how to make socialism, as Raymond Williams might have said, without the masses. •

'Contrary to what Baudrillard says, there is nothing "fatal" or finished about new times'

