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Presentation Notes: An Attempted Analysis of Frank Davey's Political Postmodern

Project

After reading Davey's article, "Contesting 'Post(-)Modernism, this is how I have

come to understand [Davey's notion of] postmodernism:

Notably, the structure of Davey's article is resonantly postmodern: a pastiche of

criticism with no CLEAR end/resolution [outside of emphasizing the need/necessity of

'valorizing politics' (286), shifting the focus from postmodern debates to a political

forum]– he summons a panel of criticisms to evoke/simulate/suggest/insinuate that this

debate is on-going, open for further interrogation. Moreover, the article itself, in both

style and form, being a dialogic survey outlining the competing understandings and

assertions of postmodernism, embodies the postmodern notion of fluid conception,

evading everything from language to logos - adhering and subscribing chiefly to the

belief that the Canadian demographic is fragmented, or to use his term, 'decentered', and

such is echoed in its treatise of literature and politics at large.

Davey's article sets the stage for a "critical" exploration, navigating through the

plethora of [post]modernisms, opening the debate in a forum for continual revisitation,

refusing to arrest or transgress beyond the understanding of postmodernism as being a

question of political unrest. As such, this fusion/injection of politics into postmodernism

is potentially the most recurrent understanding/stance required for approaching Davey's

notion of postmodern discourse as he places the question of politics at the center in an

attempt to illuminate the postmodern conception of dispersed power-politics, a question of perpetual de-centering—which I will later critique as being subverted by a reliance on an increasingly technological *modus operandi*: replacing the modernist view of "art as a potentially integrating, restorative force, a remedy for the uncertainty of the modern world" (Murfin 268) with technology as the uniting force that centers a decentered world: a questionably 'anti-postmodern' proposal.

Returning to Davey's argument, he grounds his debate within the chaos of competing pluralities, in effect, decentering its focus from literary criticism to that of politics. As such, this article presents a hodgepodge of intersections, borrowing and lending, relying and refuting, necessitating and negating, negotiating and asserting various critical arguments, citing theories of Hassan, Spanos, Kroetsch, and Hutcheon, to name a few, posing the postmodern project, even condition, as a coiled medley of competing ideologies nestled in the fluidity of their advocacy and understanding.

Scaling, cycling, touring, and challenging the criticism which purports to camp in the postmodern field, or that which denies its very existence, Davey demonstrates that postmodernism is highly problematic in not only its reception, but also in its very nature by not being rooted in anything concrete other than the mélange of pluralistic, plentiful paradoxes, constantly subverting the ground on which it claims to rest, undermining its own conventions- even the concept of being conventional!

This suggests the limitation of postmodernism as a concept/heuristic tool/label: the fracture in the tectonics of Canadian postmodern implications and applications, which Davey coins as the "parable of the history of the sign 'postmodernism'" (285), show themselves when we see that there are "no major institutions affiliated with it, no

publishing houses constructed as publishers of postmodernism, and no journals of 'Canadian postmodernism'" (285). However, this lack of institutional grounding/patronage does not reflect the fact that 'minorities" attain/achieve notoriety through the manipulation and championing of "coveted marginality" (285); the irony/problem with this is that postmodernism supposedly engages in the questioning/preservation of margins, and yet there is no connection between political marginalization and postmodernism. In this sense, postmodernism as a concept is not reflected in the postmodern 'condition" (i.e. fragmentation/alienation), presented in the political landscape of thriving liminal articulations, creating/collecting a composite of decentered centralized minorities. (However, Davey does mention that there is a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity; but the fact he draws light to this distinction seems to undermine his own use of the concept seeing as he views postmodernity as a social movement, and at the same time his original enthusiasm for postmodernism centers around the promise of its political implications). Therefore, postmodernism as a potentially unifying force (i.e. through the championing of difference, tolerance, pluralities, choice, etc.) for "postcolonialism, gay rights, Canadian regionalism, feminism, aboriginal rights, south Asian culture, poststructuralist theory, etc" (285) is lost as almost all of these interests "have their own institutions and publishers, and have represented themselves more effectively, both in literary and general politics, than they ever did under a postmodernist umbrella" (285). Rather than legitimizing and asserting themselves by "finding common ground among those with continuing interest in opposing hegemony" (286), Davey suggests that "the cumulative effect of this process is the depoliticizing of postmodernism as a sign" (285-6); therefore,

postmodernism, as a political movement crumbles, rending its resonance strictly as "an academic term denoting a complex of textual convictions and practices" (286).

However, as Davey suggests, the "success of all [marginal/'decentered'] projects depends most of all on an effort to valorize *politics*, to enrich and open political process so that contestation and negotiation within it are available to as many groups within one's culture and literature" (286) as "it is in all our interests – whatever the particular discursive fate of a term like postmodernism –that such debate not be foreclosed, that it remain ' political,' and that 'Canada' remain a site of dialogue and argument" (292). This argument may place by reflecting on the relationship between modernism and postmodernism.

Taking a step back, out of my inferences/understandings, and towards the text itself, Davey draws upon the Derridean notion of being 'under erasure' in the epigraphs of the article, which itself echoes the paradox of postmodernism. Under erasure, if I have understood it correctly, is rooted in the Heideggerean ontological dialectic surrounding "B/being." Heidegger, in his writings, drew a line over the word, crossing it out, suggesting that no formal assumptions can be made about the status of being. Therefore, citing Scobie, " 'post' […] does not indicate temporal sequence: the two movements [namely, modernism and postmodernism] are implicated in each other" (245) and as such, these terms "should be understood as having a Derridean 'mark of erasure' hovering over them…" (245); therefore, in a/effect, the Derridean suggestion of putting "key words' 'under erasure,' in order to show that, while their continued use is indispensable, [suggests that] no firm assumptions can be made about their status or meaning." (245). Therefore, the terms modernism and postmodernism

pose/hold/represent a confounded relationship to one another, positioning postmodernism in a palimpsestic position, 'hovering over', superimposed, but not entirely superseding modernism. Moreover, this also demonstrates how we usurp tradition to pervert it to our own ends, while also perverting our own ends: the notion of appropriating to undermine, a quintessential/deviant [post]modern practice which Davey postulates as "the ambiguous relationship postmodernism bears to modernism – its claiming to be its successor (*post*modernism) and its seeming admission of dependency upon it (post*modernism*)" (262).

Similarly, Davey arrives at his understanding of postmodernism through salient modernist constructions. Davey delineates the 'recurrent' depiction of modernism as being "historical catastrophism" (246), (i.e. we live in a wasteland) "regard[ing] the break with the past as disinheritance or Fall" (246). Davey also favours Hassan's version of modernism as being

> profoundly alienated from both society and language. Vainly seeking refuge in transcendence, this modernism retreated into silence and reflects on the horror of the metaphysical void it believed it discovered [;] [c]onversely, 'the postmodern spirit [...]participates in the renewal of shapes, straining the structures of human life. Thus the reign of terror, wonder, and burlesque in our age' (247).

Furthermore, Davey emphatically states that this "reading of modernism as preoccupied with personal and cultural failure, and straining for the transcendence which only silence could offer, [...] **informed** [his] survey of Canadian literature for *From There To Here*" (247) [my emphasis], privileging a hermetical understanding of modernism from which to buttress and juxtapose Spano's postmodernism as a "reintegrat[ion] [of] the individual

subject into history and participatory politics" (249), transitioning the debate into a political context as opposed to metaphysical/ontological one. Poignantly, Davey does not hone in on the literary facets/tropes of postmodernism, because literature, when it is no longer able to offer mirror of the world on which it is writing about, becomes a **political question**, because now art is not able to offer a myth, *mythos*, a picture of what things should be. As such, this could be understood as why the 'post-modern spirit participates in the renewal of shapes and structures of life.' As such, Davey's postmodern project is political. Politics, according to Davey,

> are among humanity's most valuable construction. They enable us to live together despite differences, dislikes, disagreements, and intolerances.[…] Literary power itself can be deployed to construct more openings in society, to organize institutions and structures that facilitate diversities and communication among diversities, to interrogate and disempower hegemonies and oligarchies; it can make the political gesture of claiming to dissent from politics (287).

However, Davey is also aware of the subversive capability of postmodernism to this project. Moreover, "it can be deployed in self-serving ways that construct solitudes and abet hegemonies by slowing social dialogue (287). Therefore, politics, as a tool, a methodology, centers the debate and this understanding is adopted by Davey's understanding of postmodernism.

From here, Davey delineates how, through an analysis of Canada's national affirmation, its "national celebrations [alongside] the increased cultural importance of regions, regional centres, and regional publishing" (250), which he describes/coins as

'decentralized politics' (251), he "strategic[ally]" (250) deploys his understanding of post-modernism enmeshed/ensconced in political jargon:

> The replacing of strong central direction with a network of interacting and conflicting forces of a world scale, recurs at each level of social organization. The city decentralizes to become a 'field' of strong individuals and groups; the province decentralizes to accommodate the interacting assertions of its cities and municipalities; the nation-state decentralizes to accommodate the yearnings of its provinces. Technology's 'global' village' has no dominant centre—neither in itself nor in its parts (251).

This understanding, or advocacy of postmodernism, using a political paradigm, drawing on the purported 'decentralized' 'global village', implemented through an increasing reliance on technology, is highly problematic and flawed. It suggests that postmodernism is the perpetual diffusion of power, championing the 'lack' of unity; however, it also suggests that technology is the new center, and we are unified in our pursuit of said center. Therefore, using the arguments of Grant and Heidegger, 'technology in the new ontology.' In other words, the idea that "technology's 'global village' has no dominant centre" masks the fact that technology is an all pervading ontology; furthermore, it suggests/ presupposes the notion/idea that we cannot think outside of the technological paradigm. Even though 'technology' does not have a dominate regionalized/localized/ geographic center, i.e a building, it is still an ontology, suggesting that aside from it lacking a strong central dimension, this interaction is only grounded on technological principals, and technological views of the world: man seeks to master human and non-human nature. As such, technology and ontology precluded any understanding of itself,

or any ability to look at it from a different point of view - technology is the hegemony.

Moreover, is technology is the new ontology, are we as 'decentralized' as we think, or is

our thinking caged in the dictates, nonetheless condition behaviours to the detriment of

any other conceptions?

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