

NO ANTHRO-APOLOGY:
Der(r)id a ing a Discipline¹

J.A.P. Mourrain
(Renée Denüvo)
University of California Irvine

A review of books.... without consequence: Writing Culture
and Anthropology as Cultural Critique

It was like a (bad) dream and in slow motion -- or rather SUPER SLO-MO according to the new technology -- with the detail and magnification of an ob-scene and obsessed pornographic representation: clearer than clear, more real than real -- hyperreal.

There were two voices: a dialogue. Out of phase, however, it sounded as if there were many. A polyphony? A symphony? No ... a cacophony! Hollow-phonetic sounds, sufficiently out of phase at their point of divergence, produce a false sense of depth as they converge on a shiny support surface. Here is the false seductive depth of interpretation, where the asynchronous multiplexing of representations generates a hollow-graphic image of culture: reality, but with one less dimension.

You have long since received the message but the images continue to haunt you in incessant re-play, fore-play, back-play: Slo-Mo, freeze-frame, the parody of the real, the uncanny familiarity of the simulacrum. And even though you are sure and assured that, at one time, all of this was meaningful, you can't help but enjoy the vertigo and exhilaration derived from free-floating signifiers: "play it again".

Is anthropology re-playing an old familiar tune; modernism or post-modernist? Habermas or Lyotard?² Is the literary turn (Writing Culture [WC]) or the experimental moment (Anthropology as Cultural Critique [AC]) anything more than a slo-mo re-play of a distinction that has long since lost its excitation energy; now involuting and centripetal? Or: What would be the alternative? What does it take itself to be: a line of escape from "that increasingly ill-defined slogan word ... Positivism" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:179)? Or perhaps, what we have here is a less hegemonic and totalizing anthropological response to a (perceived) crisis in representation (occurring everywhere?): "Why should a preoccupation with genres of description, rather than with the usually more prestigious and

totalizing theoretical discourses, be a current vital concern?" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:5), we are asked.

I won't pretend to capture the intentions and drives behind this moment in intellectual history and historicizing; there are too many voices here to synthesize (at least nine at the moment). And it would be impossible to orchestrate such poly-phony: in any case it would be pretentious. What I propose instead is to offer, not an accounting (with its illusions of balance and summation), but a recounting (the lure of the strategy and the summons): a kind of "so to speak" story, perhaps ...

THE LITERARY TURN: A FATAL STRATEGY

Contemporary anthropology, it is said³, has made a literary turn (figuratively speaking). One can wonder, of course, whether this is to the left (Post-Marxism), to the right (Post-Structuralist), or perhaps it is a U-turn (Post-Humanism). The two 'texts' I have chosen to review celebrate this equivocal turning point in the 'coming of age' of American anthropology. Of course, there may be differences among the various anthro-apologists who celebrate this turning point -- for example, their individual 'investment' in the hermeneutic enterprise; or the extent to which culture is textualized; or the significance each attributes the "modes of textual production". Nevertheless, certain elements or motifs (if not motivations) do seem to cross-cut these various projects of "literary experimentation": 1) a focus on textualization, discursive practices, and their dialogic articulations;⁴ 2) an investment (historical and epistemological) in interpretive anthropology with some ambivalence to the Father (Geertz), and a deconstructive flair that signals this ambivalence and; 3) most centrally -- in the word(s) of Steven Tyler (1987) -- an emphasis, or focus, on the "RAYTING" of ethnography in order to decenter the author and monophonic authority.

By situating their projects in the wake of what Lyotard described as our Postmodern Condition (1984), and consequently après la crise (a crisis in representation in AC and a crise de conscience in WC), these anthro-apologists have placed "contemporary anthropology" in a clearing where metanarratives have been razed and univocity fragmented, where voices proliferate, and where incommensurability (the différend) is apotheosized. Although it is claimed that "these essays do not prophesy" (Clifford 1986:24), their tone is nonetheless apocalyptic!⁵

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually -- as objects, theaters, texts -- it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances (Clifford 1986:12).

Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned, revealed to be characteristic of a science that has claimed to represent cultures (Clifford 1986:15).

The tone and the text proclaim the end of monophonic authority, the end of culture as object, and the end of representation; but also the end of vision, at least in/as one sense: the end of the eye, of image (the pre-figured) as the privileged metaphor (and metaphysics) of (re)presentations. The end of vision (sight) but not the end of vision (in-sight) and self-consciousness: "... la fin approche mais l'apocalypse est de longue durée".⁶ The all too familiar end of history, end of representation, end of man, apocalypse is the intellectual climate that conditions these project(ion)s.

The anthro-apologists of the literary turn, like the mystagogue priests Kant denounced, reveal and de-cypher the secret mysteries of culture (and the RAYTINGS it provokes).⁷

The grand-seigneur tone is sanctioned by a salto mortale, ... the projection [saut] of concepts into the unthinkable and the unrepresentable, the obscure anticipation of a mysterious secret coming from above. This projection in the immanence of a vision without concepts, this impatience focused on the most encoded secret, liberates a poetic-metaphoric excess (Derrida 1983:87).

The apologists of anthropos revel in the liberated "poetic-metaphoric excess" which the apocalypse reveals: a leap [saut] of faith into the mysteries and mystification of "profound half understandings". Marcus, for example, in what appears to be a celebration of the strategies of the "modernist form of the essay", writes:

The essayist can mystify the world, leave his subject's actions open-ended as to their global implications, from the rhetorical posture of profound half understanding, half-bewilderment with the world in which the

ethnographic subject and the ethnographer live. This is thus a form well suited for a time such as the present [our postmodern condition?], when paradigms are in disarray, problems intractable, and phenomena only partly understood (1986:191).

In the end (only partly understood even while we stand under it, as our condition), the representational (and political) economy shifts (from under us) from 'laissez faire' to 'anything goes'. As if such a crisis in representation (or a crise de conscience with its modern solution crystallized in self-consciousness)⁸ necessarily 'entailed' a freedom from totalization. As if chaos (or polyphony) was the asymptotic consequence of order (or monophonic authority). Actually, the limit condition, or crisis, simply offers (for those who have made the leap) the lure and illusion of an endless (open combinatorial play of meaning. Intractability, partial understanding and dis-array is an illusion produced from the sheer magnitude of the matrix (the grid of intelligibility); a consequence of our inflationary culture. These combinatorials and permutations (the arena of diversity), however, still re-ly on the hermetic (closed) logic of the binary (fact/fiction, object/subject, etc.). The "recombinant forms", exalted as experimental, remain ineluctably attracted to the old structuralist "epistemology of fission"; binary distinctions and their explosive (exponential) permutations, the law of the excluded middle, formal closure, and the fetishism of form.

But simply being re-signed to (or celebrating) the fragmentation and proliferation of narratives (and authority) -- the peits récits-- merely denouncing totalization, closures, and metanarratives, or rejoicing in "the carnivalesque arena of diversity" (Clifford 1983:136) provides no response-ability [Krisis] to our post-modern condition. "For when the One is pulverized", warned Lacoue-Labarthe, "and identity dislocated, when polemos reigns, then, contrary to what the speculative believe, there is no longer any question of doing whatever one wills, and it is urgent to be just" (1984:34).

Free-floating apologies simply (but in no simple way) offer the illusion [leurre] of a degree-of-freedom: diversity, heterogeneity and multiplicity as the asymptotic condition of the Law of Excluded Middles. In this form, in the ecstatic form, they easily become absorbed (and de-fused) in the simulation of distinctions, of dialogues, and of positions; where expressions without consequence become articulated on the frame of a previous polemic -- modernism/postmodernism.⁹ Consequently, and despite themselves, these voices become caught in the scenario of a second life, of a

second take, where the hollow-phonetic echoes of the dialogic provide sense of depth: the return of certain motifs and motives which " ... merely disappeared from the horizon of a life whose trajectory, specifically diverted by these events, bends sufficiently, and unconsciously, to provide the opportunity of a second existence" (Baudrillard 1983:267-8).

The second coming is the fatal strategy of the literary turn in "contemporary anthropology".

MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM: THE SECOND COMING

All of the elements are present (the stage is set); fragmentation, partiality, collage, polyphony, indeterminacy, equivocality, crisis/chaos, the death of metanarratives and, of course, the magic trick of the vanishing referent. The signs of our time!

The images projected are so real (more real than real) that the simple 'evocation' of postmodern fragments and their epistemological 'partiality' has induced reactions that mimic or parody the old modernist anomie; vertigo or dizziness before the void. Here are some all too familiar retorts, from B. Scholte, which I offer without much commentary:

I find an exclusive appeal to aesthetics and poetry politically inadequate (1987:41).¹⁰

... spinning textual tapestries inspired by native design does not, of course, guarantee a moral center. In fact, the latter threatens to disappear from anthropological praxis altogether. And there is the rub ... could the literary turn itself be an ethnographic illustration of 'bourgeois chique'? (1987:44).

A heightened sense of class consciousness (bourgeois, labourer), a moral center, and 'adequate' political action are recommended in lieu of social indistinctness (the masses, consumers), nihilism, and schizo-politics. But there is something uncanny here. For these are the very terms with which Habermas (1981) 'framed' the post-structuralists as neo-conservatives; and which are responsible for the skeletal (emaciated, and not emancipating) character of the ensuing debate. The post-modern/modern polemic, set in motion by Lyotard and Habermas (and mediated by Rorty), exists today (and here -- in

anthro-apology) merely as the emptied form of a previous life, one which continues to haunt "the undertakings of the present".

Distant voices, from a previous life, dub over the presence of speech and the fullness of dialogue, producing hollow-ponic reverberations and token (pro)positions. Here we can even hear the echo of Richard Rorty in Rabinow's shadowing of Clifford: the critic's critic, mediating both within and without, "responsible" for re-contextualizing the différend in practical terms, through some acute sense of the common.¹¹

Everything is complete. The tenuous triad is framed: Clifford, Scholte, and Rabinow; or was it Lyotard, Habermas, and Rorty? No matter, this is without consequence. Since, in this re-enactment and re-staging of a prior articulation (modern/post-modern), in the simuacral re-play of this debate, in its ecstatic form, in this escalation to extremes to "outmatch and outbid", in the exaltation of the sublated form, the setting has been eliminated, sublimated.¹² There is no longer a setting for confrontation: a consequence of the logic of deterrence and of dissuasion. In the logic of dissuasion, new contexts are de-signed where the energies of distinctions, of debates, of positions are sublimated and de-fused; a simulated slo-mo re-play implodes the poles and short-circuits oppositions: this is the consequence of the fetishism of form and of the event without consequence, where things spin on their own axis with vertiginous exhilaration/acceleration until all excitation energy has been dissipated.¹³

And even though these texts project images (motifs, elements, propositions) which simulate (and stimulate) positions, distinctions, and dialogues which are familiar, there is something uncanny, as if all of this were lacking a dimension -- depth.

"NOT YET THOROUGHLY 'POST-MODERN'!"

The anthro-apologists of the literary turn may object, as Clifford their porte parole does, that: "most of us at the seminar, excluding Steven Tyler, were not yet thoroughly 'post-modern'!" (Clifford 1986:21). And yet, one can read in(to) this equivocation some of the tensions and re-tensions specific to the anthro-apologetic re-play.¹⁴

The 'approach' to the post-modern (the not yet thoroughly) is neither asymptotic, probabilistic, nor telic; it is of a quite different order. Perhaps this approach should be rephrased the "not yet thorough post-modern". For there is a lie here in excess, a secret withheld. The truth of the matter is that this anthro-apology is not

postmodern, is not deconstructive, is not post-structural -- despite and, more importantly, because of the "signs" it emits. And yet, neither is it strictly modern(ism), nor strictly interpretive. There is a play (a give and take) in these projects, an unresolved tension that can be heard in their apocalyptic and apologetic tone.

In the hollow-phonetic reverberation of the dialogic we can hear, not the Nietzschean laughter of deconstruction, but a nervous laughter, which perhaps Freud would have read as an ambivalence towards the Father -- Geertz. An interpretive moment underlies and undermines the deconstructive intentions of this anthro-apology; an interpretive inertia (hysteresis) dampens the deconstructive ecstasy (hysteria) of the literary turn.

The experimental moment in contemporary anthropology, according to the historiography of Marcus and Fischer, lies in the wake ("rooted in the trend" [1986:16]) of Geertz' interpretive anthropology, but not (and 'there is the rub') at Geertz's wake. Although the death of the Father is simulated in the ecstatic and sublated form of this contemporary anthro-apology, a strong libidinal investment in the economy of interpretation (hermeneutics) persists.

Crapanzano's (1986) reading of Geertz' reading of a cock fight as a reading of Balinese culture (in Writing Culture: appropriately titled "Hermes Dilemma ..."), for example, attempts to de-construct Geertz' "phenomenological-hermeneutical pretensions". He observes, that "despite these pretensions",

... there is in fact in "Deep Play" no understanding of the native from the native's point of view. There is only the constructed understanding of the constructed native's constructed point of view. Geertz offers no specifiable evidence for his attributions of intention, his assertions of subjectivity, his declarations of experience (1986:74 emphasis added).

Certain 'significant' points, both epistemological (the origins of the construction of "native-ity") and metaphysical (the attribution of intentionality and the assertion [presence] of subjectivity), surface from this reading only to be re-submerged, absorbed and de-fused, in the essay's overriding concern with the "modes of authority", and its obsession with legitimacy: that old phallogocentric complement of the quest for paternal certainty.

So when deconstruction is summoned (beyond the grave) to perform the task of demystification (of the principle of Reason,

monophonic authority, textual coherence and closure, or the Culture concept) it is often present in arrested form: called upon merely to finger the "modes of authority", the "genres of description", or the forms of rhetoric and "literary artifices". But the simple accounting (listing) of the strategies (intended or unintended) that create the illusion of mastery, coherence, and closure in the subjected texts is only one moment (perhaps the "experimental moment") in a deconstructive reading. Uncovering the "modes of authority" in ethnographic texts certainly initiates a "critique of the underlying assumptions" in ethnographic presentation, but as a listing it stops short of deconstructing anthropology's metaphysical investment and economy.

The apologists of anthropos remain 'partially' committed to representation, to the presence of speech (in dialogue), to the positive, saturated, centered character of meaning and symbols, to the self-conscious subject (as interlocutor) or to its displaced (yet not decentered) equivalents intersubjectivity and intertextuality.

No longer can they image the abyss of language, nor conceive of a radically different process like the absorption of meaning, rather than its production. The linguistic sarcophagus is well sealed, and it re-lies on the shroud of the signifier (Baudrillard 1979:80).

Arrested, stultified and stunted, these quasi-deconstructive readings remain at the level of textual exegesis or explication de texte. And (strangely enough) it is the insistent (and hasty) distinction between "genres of description" and (the "more prestigious and totalizing") "theoretical discourses" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:5) which absorbs and de-fuses all of the deconstructive (potential) energies. The opposition between fact and fiction, description and theory, escapes unscathed in the mere reversal of the (ideological) strategy of reduction (fiction over fact). Description (and fiction) is privileged over theory (and fact), but leaves these distinctions ("the epistemology of fission") virtually intact. The same metaphysics is fatally re-played in this ex-cription of fact and theory.

This is an event without consequence (Baudrillard).

CLOSING REMARKS (IN LIEU OF CLOSURE):

To suggest that these quasi-deconstructive readings are arrested because they are "not quite thorough" would only be a "partial truth" and without consequence. Perhaps what is most interesting here, in this anthro-apology, is that every deconstructive reading is also doubled/dubbed [*doublée*] by some interpretive inertia or investment (historical and epistemological), by some hermeneutic seduction, by the desire, not only to RAYT cultures, but to READ (interpret) them adequately (adaequatio: the reproduction of what exists). An adequation, deferred in deconstruction, is full-filled in the interpretive moment. And adequate RE-DING, not quite a search for the "Truth" of culture, of the thing [*Ding an Sich*] (anthro-apologists have broken with realism and objectivism), is something like a search for the value of the performance (the performative) -- not quite truth but almost (at least for the purpose of formalization). The interpretive moment in RE-DING culture reinstates the fullness, presence, and positivity of meaning and dialogue, which the deconstructive moment suspended. And thus, the anthro-apologists of the literary turn become "caught in the web of signification they themselves have spun".

Now, without any entry from Derrida (without consequence) this essay would not be considered complete (for this genre): So here it is. Where? There -> "No apocalypse [nor apologies], not now, full speed ahead ..." (1984).

NOTES

1. " ... at the precise point at which sense emerges from non-sense ... at this frontier ... we realize that man defies his very destiny when he derides the signifier" (Lacan 1977:158).
2. It would be without consequence to point out (finger) the anachronism of such a re-play. If this were my only point I would give voice to Huyssen who remarked: "To reject the validity of the question Who is writing? or Who is speaking? is simply no longer a radical position in 1984. It merely duplicates at the level of aesthetics and theory what capitalism as a system of exchange relations produces tendentially in everyday life: the denial of subjectivity in the very process of its construction After all, it does matter who is speaking or writing" (Huyssen 1984:44).

For a mediated version of the "debate": Richard Rorty (1984) "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity".

3. Bob Scholte (1987) "The Literary Turn in Contemporary Anthropology" -- a critical review (with consequence) of Writing Culture, and a reply from Steven Tyler "Still RAYTING: Response to Scholte". I will return to the content of this review/response shortly.
4. Lamenting the absence of contributions from feminists, Clifford puts the focus of this project in perspective: "Our focus was thus on textual theory as well as textual form: a defensible, and productive focus. Within this focus we could not draw on any developed debates generated by feminism on ethnographic textual practices" (WC:20). Perhaps this is because textualization de-sexualizes: "Which is why interpretation is so characteristically opposed to seduction, and why every interpretive discourse is least appealing [séduisant]" (Baudrillard 1979:76, unless otherwise noted translations are my own). I will later focus on the tensions, internal to this project, between interpretation and deconstruction; the ambivalence to the Father; and the "not yet thoroughly 'post-modern'!"
5. Jacques Derrida, D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie (1983:11): "Apokaluptô, I discover, I unveil, I reveal things ... "
6. (ibid:81): " ... the end approaches but the apocalypse is for the long haul".
7. "The mystagogue priests are also interpreters; the hermeneutic and hermetic seduction is the essence of their agogical [agogique] power ..." (ibid:33). "The mystagogues profess to withhold, as if privately, the privilege of a mysterious secret ... They reserve the right to reveal or unveil the secret, and guard it jealously. Jealousy is a major trait here. They never transmit the secret to others in common parlance, but by initiation and inspiration. The mystagogue is philosophus per initiationem or per inspirationem" (ibid:27-8).

[Jane Kepp's poem, "The Hermeneut's Dilemma, or, a Jargon Poem", as preface (ix) to Writing Culture illustrates well this "philosophia per initiationem". The issue I am highlighting

here, however, is not the role of jargon, as Kepp perhaps (in)senses (a conservative and reactionary response all too familiar in anthropology), but one of tone -- the apocalyptic and apologetic tone.

8. In The Tremulous Private Body, Francis Barker (1984) describes the emergence of self-reflection (contemporaneous with the formation of bourgeois mercantilism) as a dominant mode of subjection (through internal monitoring and control: diaries, for example. Only later, in the enlightenment, is it consciously presented as a critical moment of thought. Ever since Nietzsche, however, it has become difficult to appeal (in good faith) to self-consciousness as a critical dimension of thought. Yet, as Marcus and Fischer explain: "In this essay [AC] we will consider the degree to which contemporary ethnographies insist on a self-consciousness about their historical context of production, and thus discourage readings of them which would fix their description as eternal social and cultural forms" [AC:21, emphasis added]. Or Clifford, in his article "On Ethnographic Authority" (1983:120, emphasis added): "Alternate strategies of ethnographic authority may be seen in recent experiments by ethnographers who self-consciously reject scenes of cultural representation in the style of Malinowski's frontispiece". We must be dealing here with a figure of speech.
9. To claim that the dialogic space has been mapped out is not to claim that the issues articulated around this distinction are passé: this would be without consequence (see note 2). A more interesting critique would demonstrate how the framework (previous life) of a historically and politically infused distinction shapes (haunts) and de-fuses (even self-reflective) discourses which orbit its field of attraction. This is a fatal strategy, where motifs and motives are ineluctably inverted and reversed. So we can ask (with Huyssen): "Isn't the 'death of the subject/author' position tied by mere reversal to the very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius, whether for marketing purposes or out of conviction and habit?" (Huyssen 1984:44, emphasis added).
10. Keesing (1987:166) offers a similar retort in his article "Anthropology as Interpretive Quest": "Indeed most symbolic anthropologists, in the name of cultural relativism or

interpretive detachment, have been strangely blind to the political consequences of cultures as ideologies, ... Where feminists and Marxists find oppression, symbolists find meaning". A provocative ending that covers up the (historically and symbolically) mediated and ambivalent character of oppression (which doesn't make its effect any less "significant"). Does one find oppression in the same way that one finds lost keys? Or does one see oppression as one (even the strangely blind) sees the solution to a problem?

11. See Rabinow's article in Writing Culture "Representations are Social Fact"; or even "Discourse and Power: On the Limits of Ethnographic Texts" (1985) [Reactions and responses to Clifford's article "On Ethnographic Authority" (1983)]; or, perhaps, his article "Facts Are a Word of God" (1983): three essays which seem to echo the pragmatist concern for a happy (synthesized) communication: a common ground.
12. Jean Baudrillard Les stratégies fatales (1983:9): "Things have found a way to elude the dialectic of meaning, a dialectic which bored them: they did so by infinite proliferation, by potentializing themselves, by outbidding their essence, by going to extremes, and by an obscenity which henceforth has become their immanent purpose and insane justification".
13. I am thinking, perhaps as analogy, of the "iran=Contra-verse" where the legislative and the executive collide/collude on summer TV in the simulation of a debate: an event without consequences where the setting (for confrontation) has been eliminated, deterred (unearthed).
14. Tyler (1987:50) is unequivocal: "Writing Culture is not post modern; its authors [except for the exception?] neither invert the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology nor revolutionize the three-fold hierarchy of epistemology, politics, and aesthetics. ... it preserves the myth of a privileged discourse that founds or grounds all the others". Although unequivocal, this explanation masks the uneasy tensions that exist, here, between epistemology and aesthetics, and especially, between interpretation and deconstruction.

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