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Introduction: Paradigms of Conflict and Mediation in Literary and Cultural Imagination

Ronald Bogue and Marcel Cornis-Pope

> The only gain of civilization for mankind is the greater capacity for variety of sensations—and absolutely nothing more. And through the development of this manysidedness man may come to finding enjoyment in bloodshed. In fact, this has already happened to him. Have you noticed that it is the most civilized gentlemen who have been the subtlest slaughterers, to whom the Atillas and Stenka Razins could not hold a candle, and if they are not so conspicuous as the Atillas and Stenka Razins it is simply because they are so often met with, are so ordinary and have become so familiar to us. In any case civilization has made mankind if not more bloodthirsty, at least more vilely, more loathsomely bloodthirsty. In old days he saw justice in bloodshed and with his conscience at peace exterminated those he thought proper. Now we do think bloodshed abominable and yet we engage in this abomination, and with more energy than ever. Which is worse? Decide that for yourselves.
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> —Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*[1]

The problems identified by Dostoyevsky's underground man more than a century ago, it would seem, are still with us. Our collective capacity for polymorphous sensation and cynical violence has hardly decreased, and our age of instant global communication has only made us more aware of the ubiquity of violent action. Examples of unconscionable cultural violence are readily available on every channel of mass communication. In the mid-1990s we find ourselves visually and mentally violated by images from several theaters of abomination: Waco, Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Chechnya, the Middle East. They all illustrate degrees of the same model of self-reproduced conflict which expands by absorbing

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outside interventions into an underlying structure of conflictive differentiation, perpetuating the insidious cycle of violence.

The violence itself is nothing new, of course, as Dostoyevsky understood. But what appears to be new is the cynical self-awareness that accompanies it, a phenomenon that one can trace to a disintegration of cultural values in an age of expanding communication, a process already underway in 1864 and only accelerated in our century. The current escalation of violence reflects, ironically, both a deepening of the cultural crisis and an intensification of the communicative circuits that exhibit it. The latter contribute their own form of representational violence as they glamorize/naturalize conflict. Crude plot-driven narratives of horror collaborate with cunning postmodern re-presentations to create a permanent spectacle of violence. This theater of overstimulation has been cleverly exploited by recent "revolutions" which, as the 1989 East European upheavals can testify, have spent much of their contestatory energy in the postmodern space of television; and by the entertainment industry which has colonized our imagination with daily doses of domestic, racial, and professional violence: Amy Fischer, Lorena Bobbit, Tonya Harding, the Menendez brothers, O. J. Simpson.

Following Dostoyevsky's hints, we can link the issue of violence in contemporary culture to the ever-widening crisis of modernity. This crisis, as Nietzsche argued persuasively, affects both the system of beliefs and the discursive means that mediate them. Therefore, the study of cultural conflicts must proceed from a critical examination of the ethical, psychological, and narrative models undergirding modernity. Modern culture perpetuates the exclusionary, repressive oppositions of the ratiocentric and logocentric Platonic tradition, but in an exacerbated form, professing values that are—in Nietzsche's view—divorced from reality, predicated on arbitrary foundations and radical exclusions. One may measure a culture's movement through decadence toward nihilism by the degree of arbitrariness (or articulative violence) involved in its constructs. As John Burt Foster Jr. summarizes,

> A culture is decadent so long as it offers a system of values that can shape experience to some extent, even though its capacity to affirm life fully and directly has slipped to a marked degree or never existed. Of course Nietzsche sees all cultures as victories over chaos and hence as arbitrary. But a decadent culture represents a new level of the arbitrary, since its form giving impulse is capable of mastering only a part of the reality presented for assimilation; it operates only by virtue of a radical exclusion, and this exclusion is the measure of its decadence. The situation of nihilism arises

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> when the shaping principle breaks down still further, to the point where no cultural form at all is produced. In that case, people confront the essential chaos of the universe from which all meaning has disappeared, and they experience a total loss of coherence.[2]

Decadent cultures gradually lose their ability to ground their system of values, mastering only "part of reality" through their exclusionary articulations. Nihilistic cultures experience a further breakdown of the "form giving impulse," thereby losing their "capacity to affirm life fully and completely." Therefore, self-willed death ("revenge against life") is, according to Nietzsche, a natural response to the bewilderment and chaos of nihilism.[3] Modernity approaches life with an "instinct of weariness" and an endorsement of fragmentation, but this *ressentiment* against the wholeness of life is only a manifestation of the age-old "will to death" that Nietzsche traced back to the Apollonian, rationalistic side of the Hellenistic tradition and the life-denying, utopian side of Christianity. The model of tragedy that best embodies the agonistic ethos inherited by modernity from the Greeks pitted ratiocentric heroes against an array of cultural taboos. The tragic hero's transgression of boundaries ended in self-violence and cultural purging, as the two forms of mediation which recognized and tried to control the hero's antithetical identity. Nietzsche's antidote to this mentality paralysed by a conflictive rationality is, of course, the Dionysian spirit of personal vitality and political growth, a "self-overcoming" through which the "spirit who has *become free* stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole."[4]

Nietzsche's analysis of decadence and nihilism aptly frames the problem of cultural violence in modernity, but we must note that Nietzsche, by positing an Apollonian/Dionysian duality, elevates a structure of conflictive differentiation (which he otherwise wished to eradicate) into a global view of cultural history defined as a recurring confrontation between opposing types. Hence Nietzsche's example is instructive in at least two ways that bear directly on the essays in this collection. First, his systematic focus on cultural decadence opens an important area of investigation at the intersection of the anthropological, cultural, and political spheres. And second, his work reveals the extent to which any analysis of cultural violence becomes at least partially trapped in the system of conflictive differentiations it critiques. As Derrida and Foucault have suggested in their rereadings of Nietzsche, one cannot "do" cultural history after Nietzsche without seeking out those moments of "difference" that undermine the coherence of history and force

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a reevaluation of the present;[5] nor without confronting the limits and impositions of one's explanatory models. According to Derrida, Nietzsche vacillated between a semiotic understanding of "truth" as an interpretive "fiction" and as a metaphysical search for the "deeper" figurative "truth" of the will-to-power (which could occasionally turn into a search for the disciplining presence of a master-leader as in Nietzsche's 1872 lectures on education).[6] That tension sharpened Nietzsche's awareness of the ideological and rhetorical infrastructures of culture, conferring upon his work a critical-reflexive stance not unlike that of deconstruction. Nietzsche's skeptical epistemology problematized key oppositions in the Platonic tradition (metaphor and concept, mind and body, truth and language, essence and appearance), undoing their conflicting hierarchies through an intersubstituting of terms.

Nietzsche interests us today as the philosopher of modernity who first explored the complex interconnections of cultural systems to power. A work such as *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) suggested an intricate interplay between violence and mediation, describing a mechanism of internalized moral control through threats and violence. At the same time, Nietzsche envisioned a more positive form of mediation that emphasized individual "self-overcoming" and multiple subjectivity (a plurality of individual wills-to-power). Under his influence, the philosophers of postmodernity (Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, Baudrillard) have denounced the "totalizing metaphors" of our traditional ways of dispensing truth, proposing in their place self-problematized modes of semiotic interaction (e.g., Deleuze's "finding, encountering, stealing instead of regulating, recognizing and judging"[7]). For Jean-François Lyotard, as the self-questioning philosopher of a post-Auschwitz world, reality "is not what is 'given' to this or that 'subject,'" but a state of "the differend," that is an irreducible, litigious object that can only be negotiated through partial "testimonies" and questionable cognitive appropriations.[8] Our establishment procedures always involve "totalizing metaphors" that need to be foregrounded critically. Therefore, the mode of articulation he recommends is self-contradictory, combining the task of "perpetually flushing out" artifices of representation with the task of reinventing the familiar rules and categories of thought, seeking a new "realization."[9] This mode of articulation retains an agonistic, confrontational aspect: as long as "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing" against a formidable adversary ("the accepted language, or connotation"), all acts of signification place us in the domain of "general agonistics" (*The Postmodern Condition,* p. 10). But Lyotard's postmodern dialectic of signification also has its pleasurable side, as it mediates between the contractual and the innovative facets of language games: "A

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move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention: what else is involved in that labor of language harassment undertaken by popular speech and by literature? Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*" (p. 10). Innovative cultural agents "can move from one game to another, and in each of these games (in the optimal situation) they try to figure out new moves. . . . What we call an 'artist' in the usual sense of the term, is someone who, in relation to a given purport, the purport of the canvas the medium of the *picta*, for example, proposes new rules of the painting game."[10]

Needless to say, the "artist's" linguistic and cultural creativity is not unbridled; even as it opens up the scene of signification to new articulatory possibilities, it cannot (should not) eradicate all sources of conflict and differentiation. Intellectual discussions of violence find themselves in a similar position: while they cannot hope to remove all traces of violence from their own discourses, they can provide a space for their critique and mediation. As Derrida wrote in the afterword to *Limited Inc.*, apropos of the violent tenor of his own controversy with Searle and Austin:

> The violence, political or otherwise, at work in academic discussions or in intellectual discussions generally, must be acknowledged. In saying this I am not advocating that such violence be unleashed or simply accepted. I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it as best we can in its various forms. . . . And if, as I believe, violence remains in fact (almost) ineradicable, its analysis and the most refined, ingenious account of its conditions will be the least violent gestures, perhaps even nonviolent, and in any case those which contribute most to transforming the legal-ethical-political rules: *in* the university and *outside* the university.[11]

Postmodern feminists will concur with Derrida that the task of transforming the "legal-ethical-political rules" is essential to a rethinking of cultural practices around collaborative rather than conflictive relations. But they will also concede that even the most imaginative, subversive "semiotic" may enforce certain framings and exclusions. The "écriture feminine" advocated by Hélène Cixous can appear as both liberating and contentious: as an art of transgressive "excess" and "perverse" resistance,[12] this heterogeneous language recovers repressed desires but also unsettles the subject's illusion of stability and control. Likewise, Julia Kristeva's rhythmic, bodily "semiotic" is both the precondition of

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symbolic functioning and its uncontrollable excess. . . . Its subversive, dispersing energies transgress the boundaries or tolerable limits of the symbolic . . . [posing] a new recodification of the symbolic."[13]

The two related concerns outlined above—one with the anthropological and ideological roots of cultural violence, the other with the discursive means (narrative, figural, political) that mediate/rearticulate conflictive mentalities—are well reflected in the articles that comprise this volume. By contrast to other thematic collections, *Violence and Mediation in Contemporary Culture* is not a mere sequence of essays but a unified collective effort organized around two issues of considerable import today: the problem of cultural violence in relation to the much-debated notions of difference, representation, and power; and the corresponding question of the role of mediation in providing a communal space for the nonconflictive play of cultural differences. Another distinctive feature of this volume is its analytical comprehensiveness: the nine contributors explore specific manifestations of violence in contemporary culture from philosophical, literary, anthropological, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives, involving their readers in an interdisciplinary dialogue among complementary approaches. Focused on topics as diverse as the semiotics of windows/TV screens, the politics of consumer culture, gender relations in contemporary film, and the dynamics of representation in the fiction of Kafka, Lu Xun, Conrad Aiken, Toni Morrison, and Ronald Sukenick, this volume foregrounds subtle relationships between literary and popular culture, or between discursive and sociocultural forms of violence. A major concern in these essays is the impact of an ethos of force and contestation upon literary and cultural imagination. A number of essays have also envisioned forms of mediation based on alternatives to an agonistic cultural ethos, applying them to fictional or real situations that require conflict resolution.

Those contributors who actively pursue such a model of mediation (Spariosu, Cornis-Pope, Givens) do not propose a simplistic eradication of difference from cultural transactions but rather a nonconflictive economy of differentiation that would take us beyond an oppositional power mentality.[14] At the same time, however, they suggest that mediation has its conceptual and pragmatic limitations, functioning frequently as an extension of violence. An important question these essays raise concerns the politics and pragmatics of mediation: Is mediation an alternative to violence or simply, like Clausewitzian politics, a way of conducting violence by other means? The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers as one definition of mediation "agency or action as a mediator; the action of mediating between parties at variance; intercession on behalf of another." But equally venerable is the now obsolete sense of

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mediation as "division by two; division into two equal parts; halving, bisection." To mediate is to divide *and* to bring together, to represent one of two divided parts, and hence to come between those parts and yet reconcile those parts within a whole. Etymologically, then, mediation points directly to the problem of difference in all its ramifications, and particularly as it bears on the relationship between power and representations.

Terryl Givens's discussion of popular representations of Mormonism (" 'Murder and Mystery *Mormon Style*': Violence and Mediation in American Popular Culture") is a case in point, emphasizing the violence inherent in the acts of sociocultural and fictional mediation that have tried to contain the heretical challenge of Mormon theocracy. Mormonism has a complex cultural identity, as a religious group clearly outside the American mainstream and yet historically and ethnically American to the core. Nineteenth-century fictional representations of Mormonism tended to demonize the religion while at the same time deploring the violence of anti-Mormon bigotry; such representations mediated social violence by "orientalizing" Mormonism as culturally other and by attributing Mormon conversion to the mesmeric elimination of individual will. Givens finds in the works of two contemporary mystery writers, Robert Irvine and Cleo Jones, many of the same patterns of Mormon caricature, with the difference that the gradual assimilation of Mormons within the dominant culture has necessitated a compensatory demonization of "bourgeoisified" Mormonism as *too much* a part of the American mainstream. Through his historical overview of Mormon representations, Givens highlights the persistence of oppositional violence in our categories of otherness and difference. We have advanced beyond the nineteenth-century notions of mainstream (nativist) intolerance, but our new-found multicultural tolerance can be easily disarmed through a reification/sensationalization of differences (to wit, the recent Waco, Texas, and Rodney King dramas). There is, finally, a "close kinship of those representations which demonize the other to relive cultural anxieties and those which appropriate the other with more benevolent intentions." One can apply this conclusion not only to various forms of popular culture (TV shows, films, popular fiction) that have tried to negotiate conflictive issues such as race, AIDS, abortion, and women's politics into the mainstream but also to sophisticated theoretical discourses that have appropriated politico-discursive projects under broader agendas (male feminism, Western postcolonial studies, "straight" uses of "queer theory").

The analyses in this volume explore both ends of the discursive-cultural spectrum, moving progressively from shared practices in mass

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culture that enhance conflict to distinctive literary-theoretical strategies that negotiate/mediate it. The first two contributors (Stanley Corngold and Jerry Herron) concern themselves with the systemic violence of commodity exchange within consumer societies, exploring its economic and semiotic roots. Corngold's focus in "The Melancholy Object of Consumption" is the mediated violence of consumer culture, in which the mass-produced commodity, both as disenchanted simulacrum and as unit of equivalency in the universal exchange of capital, creates a melancholy void in the souls of consumers which the commodity itself paradoxically promises to fill. Depression (the "unhinging of the soul") is regularly produced in capitalism by goods that themselves pose as antidepressants, a fact that becomes particularly clear in recent efforts to commodify depression, such as those of pharmaceutical companies marketing antidepressant drugs or of mental hospitals whose experts promise to tell melancholy consumers whether their depression is genuine or not. Ultimately, these products aim not at providing cures but at creating even stronger psychological needs, trapping consumers in a melancholic carnival of consumption. Corngold's proposed repoliticization of the exchange relations, in the conclusion of his essay, is particularly fitting in view of the new acquisitive fever that has contaminated the countries of Eastern Europe and other developing nations.

In "On Wounding: Windows, Screens, and Desire," Jerry Herron proposes an analysis of the role played by windows, and subsequently by TV screens, as devices for constructing domestic, middle-class interiors. Windows are semiotically overdetermined sites for mediating certain important differences—inside/outside, private/public—that constitute a desirable life. They function like "wounds," inducing a rupture and a discovery process whereby a new class of subjectivity is born. A homologous relationship exists between windows and the screens, first of movie theaters and subsequently of TV. While windows introject, visibly and decoratively, the disciplinary time of culture into the management of private life, the TV screen carries this work further, reasserting a certain temporal sociality—but one that is a parody of social interaction. Herron's examination of home decoration manuals, together with the technoviolence of film and television, demonstrates how commercialized representations are calculated to mediate, or "cure," the wound opened by the modern window. But these examples of technoviolence could also be described as a new form of "wounding" (through disgorging, disindividualizing) that re-stage the domestic wound of spectation.

The three subsequent authors (Albert Liu, Elisabeth Bronfen, and Susan Derwin) are concerned not only with an all-too-familiar form

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of "technoviolence" (film) but also with popular culture in general as the site where conflictual notions of identity, gender, and race are continually raised and transacted. Albert Liu's speculations on the media, violence, and politics converge in the performative image of Schwarzenegger ("True Lies: Arnold Schwarzenegger's Life and Times"). Liu has chosen not to treat Schwarzenegger as a representative cliché of masculine identity, as have most previous commentators,[15] but explores instead his involvement in a network of effects relating technology, recent history, and the representation of violence, effects resulting in the instability of Schwarzenegger's gender configurations and his engagement in new, hypothetical forms of identity. Liu reads Schwarzenegger's image as a limit-case of cultural intelligibility whose aporias of communication contribute to a politics of the disperformative. In many of his films, especially *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2*, Schwarzenegger's inactions have extreme consequences and his actions serve primarily to prevent things from happening. His cinematic representations function as sheer displays of potentialized force and as disjunctive syntheses of irreconcilable elements. In *Terminator 2*, the aporias are exaggerated through the creation of Arnold's cybernetic antagonist/double, the metalmorph assassin T-1000. A unit of pure self-organizing, morphogenetic matter, T-1000 is the embodiment of law as the power to give form. As simulacrum of the Oscar statue, T-1000 is also an image of filmic intelligence, a nonbiological consciousness through which film asserts its autonomy as a living being. A related point that Liu makes is that, for all its resistance to discursivity and a clear semiotics of action, the Schwarzenegger politics of the disperformative is still committed to two forms of mediated and morally sanctioned violence, euthanasia and sacrifice; and to an ambivalent "language" of bodybuilding, at once "asymbolic" and phallic, that privileges "certain kinds of physical experience over modes of identification based on semiotic or linguistic mediation."

Liu's semiotic exploration is fittingly expanded with the psychoanalytic and narratological approaches of Bronfen and Derwin. No analysis of cultural violence would be complete without the latter. In psychoanalytic terms, the mediation of violence is also directly related to the problem of desire, a consideration that is reflected in a number of the volume's contributions. Throughout Freud's writings, the enigma of sadomasochism haunts his theory, forcing him eventually to posit a death drive that is mediated through the agencies of the ego and the superego.[16] For Jacques Lacan as well, from his early essays on the mirror stage and aggressivity to his later works on feminine desire, the mediation of violence is an important concern, taking place as it does

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through the specular ego's transcendence of the fragmented body and through the interdiction of the "Nom du Père" which inaugurates the Symbolic.[17] Further on, in Julia Kristeva's theory of sacrifice, the parallels between social violence and the constitution of the Symbolic are made explicit, the murder of the sacrificial victim figuring the structural violence of language's transformation of the soma.[18] Kristeva's treatment of "abjection" is particularly useful for our focus: the abject, in her description, "disturbs identity, system, order," being related to that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror,* p. 4). By drawing us "towards the place where meaning collapses" (p. 2), foregrounding "the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (p. 5), abjection produces a major crisis in the subject (who becomes a "deject"/a "stray" [pp. 2, 8]) and in the world. On the positive side, abjection allows us to move beyond the Law of the Father into a cultural-semiotic space that disrupts the boundary between self and other, inside and outside, consciousness and subconsciousness. As such, it both challenges the prohibitive violence of the symbolic and returns us to "what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship," to the "immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (p. 10). Modern writing, in Kristeva's view, is best suited to imagine the abject by means of its complex displacements; Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Joyce, Artaud, Kafka, Céline, and Borges are just some of the writers who have mapped the paradoxical play of that which is "inseparable, contaminated, condemned [or unsymbolizable] at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject" (p. 18).

For Elisabeth Bronfen ("The Jew as Woman's Symptom: Kathlyn Bigelow's Conflictive Representation of Feminine Power") and Susan Derwin ("Shattered Hopes: On *Blue Velvet*"), these psychoanalytic considerations are particularly useful in determining the role of violence in feminine desire. In Bigelow's film *Blue Steel* (1989) Bronfen finds a complex cultural representation of the relationship of woman's desire to power and violence. The film's plot operates via a logic of Kristevan sacrifice, the heroine (a New York City cop) gaining acceptance within the culture of masculine authority only through the destruction of the "internal Other," a psychopathic Jew whose death stands in for and signifies woman's violent desire, while also epitomizing the stereotypical need for scapegoating in the culture's symbolic system. The film lends itself to three complementary forms of analysis: a feminist reading, in which the patriarchal anxiety over women's access to power is mediated through the sacrificial cultural representation of the Jew; a psychoanalytic reading, in which the death drive is mediated through the

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imaginary and symbolic processes of the Oedipal trajectory; and a narratological reading, in which heterogeneous scenes of violence are mediated through the hierarchical integration of the narrative elements within a coherent diegetic structure.

Derwin's essay starts with a similar emphasis on the enmeshed questions of longing, desire, and violence in middle-class America which seem to bear out Kristeva's point about "want" and "aggressivity" as logically coextensive (*Powers of Horror,* p. 39). She finds in David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet* (1986) an uncanny reversal of the expected cultural oppositions (domestic suburbia/criminal world, surface/subterranean, ordinary/exceptional), to the point where the repressed "other" (as pathological violence and sexual perversion) becomes a heightened version of the norm accepted by contemporary society. Jeffrey Beaumont enters the subterranean spaces of middle-class America by way of a comfortable voyeurism which finally traps him in a violent economy of sexuality and self-engendering. Sexuality is experienced conflictually as narcissistic, self-enclosing voyeurism by the men and as self-denying masochism by the women. In spite of the threat posed to patriarchal authority by Dorothy's "Medusan" power, the movie leaves undisturbed the Freudian convergence of masochism, representation, and the engendering of selfhood articulated in "A Child Is Being Beaten" (1919). By presenting masochism as a static condition or objective attribute unique to femininity, *Blue Velvet* encourages a certain ethical complacency in the viewer. The troping of masochism onto femininity dissimulates a misogynistic, if more submerged, view of woman as misandrous sadist.

By way of their discussion of popular ideologies of representations, the two essays also engage us in some rethinking of the theoretical models (psychoanalysis, narratology, and feminism) brought to bear on this analysis of feminine power. As Bronfen pointedly asks, "Why does an emancipatory project like feminism require the stereotyping of the Other (the Jew, in this case), that amounts to the sacrifice of this Other?" Derwin's analysis of *Blue Velvet*'s fetishistic structure also raises important questions about the meaning and ideological function of key terms in psychoanalysis (fetishization, narcissistic projection, the return of the repressed), resituating current debates concerning violence against women. Ultimately, the primary focus of Bronfen and Derwin is more sociological than psychological, for their prevailing interest is in a critique of cultural representations as social symptoms. They share this interest with the rest of the volume's contributors. Derwin, Spariosu, and Liu converge in their focus on the legitimation and regulation of violence within (and outside of) the social institution of law. Bronfen joins

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Givens and Lu in analyzing the compensatory mechanisms of sacrificial victimage that mediate social disequilibrium. And all of the contributors, in one way or another, treat representation itself as contemporary culture's prevailing mode of mediating violence, the various signs of massmediated culture tracing the deflections, displacements, and dissimulations of power and domination.

Terryl Givens (whose essay we have already reviewed) and Tonglin Lu move the discussion from visual to print culture and from semiotic forms of violence to political-rhetorical ones. In "Destruction, Revolution, and Cultural Nihilism," Lu explores the paradoxical narrative figuration of revolution in the fiction of Lu Xun, one of China's greatest twentieth-century writers. The writer whom Mao praised as "an obliging ox for the proletarian masses" was no sycophantic propagandist, as this essay shows, but a complex artist who embraced collectivist revolution as a means of undermining feudal power relations yet who recognized the mimetic mechanisms that perpetuated past iniquities in new social structures. Lu Xun, therefore, had little faith in the free play of revolutionary forces as a means of mediating past forms of institutionalized violence. Attracted equally to the values of Confucian collectivism and Western individualism, Lu Xun finally could frame himself as revolutionary subject only in the most antithetical of terms—as fool and madman in his unavoidable commitment to social action, as loner and misanthrope in his necessary isolation from the mimetically shaped masses. Lu Xun's antithetical figuration of revolutionary change has interesting implications for Western theory and political practice, calling attention to the inherent contradictions of an ethos of contestation and transformation. A Western reader will experience these agonic structures both at a philosophic-metaphoric level ("dead fire," "high wall," and "shadow" are Lu Xun's tropes for violence and uncertainty in revolution) and at a semantic level (the neologistic phrases that name the writer's vision of "new life" are devoid of meaning in common language).

Most of the essays in this volume critique the various means whereby mediation functions as an extension of violence. The final two studies, however, attempt to envision forms of mediation that are true alternatives to an ethos of force and contestation and test them against specific cultural and literary practices (the sociopoetics of modernism and of postmodernism, respectively). Mihai Spariosu finds in Conrad Aiken's *King Coffin* the suggestion of an integrative mentality that questions the concept of desire as will to power and enables a process of self-formation guided by peaceful rather than contestatory principles. Marcel Cornis-Pope recognizes in certain works of recent innovative fic-

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tion instances of a transactive model of difference that makes possible modes of transformative cultural mediation. For Cornis-Pope, alternatives to violence are already available, whereas for Spariosu genuine mediation requires a rejection of the fundamental values of the Western power mentality. But both concur that true mediation can take place only through a thorough examination of the basic theoretical presuppositions that underlie the institutions, practices, and representations of contemporary culture.

In "Murder as Play: Conrad Aiken's *King Coffin*," Spariosu approaches the literary theme of homicide as part of the modernist question of the uneasy relation between aesthetics and ethics, play and power, art and life. In certain decadent, postmodernist or "aestheticist" texts, murder functions as a radical form of moral transgression and ultimately as an unrepressed form of archaic, violent play. In such anti-aestheticist works as Aiken's *King Coffin*, however, murder as play serves to question the prevailing rational and ethical values of modern Western culture, yet without embracing the aestheticist's violent, transgressive solutions embodied in the concept of "pure crime." Aiken's novel points to an integrative mentality that calls into question the notion of desire as a Nietzschean will-to-power; at the same time, this integrative mentality goes beyond Hegel's teleological notion of consciousness, implying a continuous open-endedness and autoformation of world and self according to irenic rather than agonistic principles. Through his close rereading of a largely ignored major work, Spariosu outlines a critique of cultural violence, first in the context of the literary tradition of Romantic and modernist fiction, then in the more general cultural context of a pervasive Western mentality of power.

Cornis-Pope argues in "Contest vs. Mediation: Innovative Discursive Modes in Postmodern Fiction" that contemporary philosophical debates over the relationship between representation and power are paralleled in the literary practices of surfictionists (such as Ronald Sukenick) and feminist writers (such as Toni Morrison). These innovative writers seek to replace agonistic models of difference that result in violent contestation with transactive models of difference that emphasize cultural mediation. Sukenick, for example, uses self-reflexive linguistic techniques to destabilize hierarchical and inequitable social codes but also to rearticulate the cultural scene in terms of its differential, transformative possibility. He seeks to replace a power-oriented representational language (whose main figuration is aestheticized rape) with an improvisational, process-oriented language of being. Likewise, Morrison attempts an imaginative metamorphosis of feminine subjectivity in her fiction, emptying conventional symbolic structures of their

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content yet providing her readers with alternative, experimental representations of women and the female self.

Even as they develop strong analytic arguments, the authors featured in this volume are not oblivious to the problems raised by their methodologies. A certain amount of interpretive violence is involved in all acts of theoretical analysis that employ a self-legitimized "technology" to mediate between observed "reality" and "knowledge." Several essays in this volume seek, therefore, more flexible modes of theoretical mediation: playful or paradoxical arguments, counterpointed interpretations, alternative analytic frameworks. Even if they do not/cannot envision a language that would "give up . . . the power principle with its faithful instruments, good and bad mimesis, and good and bad representation,"[19] these essays engage critically one manifestation or another of their own discursive "power principle." Taken together, they negotiate a more tolerant, self-correcting discursive space that allows a dialogic interplay of differences (theoretical, linguistic, cultural, political), along the lines of that described by Homi K. Bhabha: "Cultural difference marks the establishment of new forms of meaning, and strategies of identification, through processes of negotiation where no discursive authority can be established without revealing the difference of itself."[20]

Faithful to this dialogic dynamic, the editors have refrained from settling any real or presumed contradictions among the individual essays. Such excessive mediation would have done violence to the competing foci of this volume (which reflect and challenge such conventional oppositions as popular vs. high culture, modern vs. postmodern, literary vs. cultural studies) without necessarily reconciling them. The reader is invited to participate in this dialogue of viewpoints, enhancing their analytic conversation with his/her own concepts of differentiation and mediation.

With the possible exception of Givens and Lu, the authors of this volume focus on theoretical issues in the representation of (mostly) individual violence rather than on the pragmatics of mediation in collective conflicts, and on dissimulated forms of cultural violence rather than on unmitigated political violence. We must observe, however, if only as a final, parenthetical note, that the mechanisms of conflictive differentiation explored in this volume are equally germane to the analysis of sociopolitical manifestations of violence. The latter can be seen as exacerbated, collective manifestations of the "instincts of decline (or *ressentiment*, discontent, the drive to destroy, anarchism, and nihilism)"[21] that Nietzsche associated with the age of modern decadence; or as virulent examples of the process of conflict-reproduction that enhances itself by absorbing outside interventions into its structure of conflictive differ-

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entiation. Consider, for example, the many instances of ethnic violence in post-1989 Europe. With the collapse of communism, the old class-party system has been replaced in several areas by an assortment of right-wing and left-wing nationalisms that function as an alternative model of self-legitimation through extreme differentiation. Like its communist predecessor, which was predicated on the interests of one class (or rather, on the interests of its nomenclature), nationalistic power relies on invidious distinctions of race, nationality, group, reinforced through exclusionary methods of control: "When the dominant group seeks to portray the identity of the state as isomorphic with its own, the very existence of 'the wrong kind of people' is apt to become a scandal and a threat."[22] This model of conflictive differentiation has spawned not only new ideological and cultural intolerance but also totalitarian forms of "liquidation"[23] and interethnic terror like those in the former Yugoslavia. It is quite clear by now that neither a cavalier disregard of historical cultural differentiations nor their liquidation through terror or manipulation can provide an effective solution for these protracted ethnic conflicts. What needs to be created is a nonconflictive (transactional) sociopolitical space that would allow each ethnic group to contribute its own interests and traditions. The task at hand is not only political but also broadly ideological, involving a thorough rethinking of our conflictive definitions of identity (individual, communal, national) and their replacement with mediative processes of identity formation.

Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, in *White Nights and Other Stories*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1918), 76.

2. John Burt Foster, Jr., *Heirs to Dionysus: A Nietzschean Current in Literary Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 86.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, selected and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 554–55. For a good critical overview of Nietzsche's exploration of the concept and style of "decadence," see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 178–195.

4. *The Portable Nietzsche*, 553–54.

5. M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Donald F. Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–64. For a discussion of Nietzsche's influ-

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ence on Foucault and other postmodern theorists, see Clayton Koelb, ed., *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1986), especially pp. 177–86 ("Foucault and Nietzsche"); Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogation* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), especially pp. 79–85 ("Deleuze's Nietzsche") and 152–60 ("Lyotard's Nietzschean Drift").

6. See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles,* trans. B. Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Derrida, *Otobiographies: l'enseignment de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1984), 23–24, 27–29. For discussions of Derrida's rereading of Nietzsche, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 154, 171, 178, 310, 312; Ernst Behler, *Confrontations: Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche,* trans. Steven Taubeneck (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

7. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 8–9.

8. Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute,* trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 4, 9.

9. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 79, 81.

10. Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming,* trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 61.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 112.

12. See M. Schiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991).

13. Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism,* 2d ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 125–26.

14. For a systematic critique of the "agonistic mode of thought" and its attending power mentality in Western discursive traditions, see Mihai Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); *God of Many Names: Play, Poetry and Power in Hellenic Thought from Homer to Aristotle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

15. See, for example, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana

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University Press, 1988); Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

16. See especially Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1965); "The Economic Problem in Masochism," in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963); "A Child is Being Beaten," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

17. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

18. See especially her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Press, 1982); and *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), especially chap. 11.

19. Mihai Spariosu, "Mimesis and Contemporary French Theory," in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory*, vol. 1, ed. Mihai Spariosu (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), 99.

20. Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routlege, 1990), 313.

21. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and B. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 461.

22. James B. Rule, "Tribalism and the State: A Reply to Michael Walzer," *Dissent* (Fall 1992), 522.

23. For an insightful analysis of the two models of totalitarian "liquidation" that have dominated this century, the "class-party" and the "race-party" approach, see Vladislav Todorov, "Introduction to the Political Aesthetics of Communism," in *Post-Theory, Games, and Discursive Resistance: The Bulgarian Case*, ed. Alexander Kiossev (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 66–125. Parts of this essay have been published in *Textual Practice* 5.3 (Winter 1991); and in *L'Infini* 33 (1991).

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