ONE

The Discourse of Political Modernism

She says, "Yes, I was talking to Joan Braderman about the subject in signifying practice, and she brought up the idea that everything is fiction except theory."

—Yvonne Rainer, "Looking myself in the mouth. . ."[1]

In a 1972 essay on Jean-Luc Godard's *Vent d'est* (1970), Peter Wollen coined the term *counter-cinema* to describe the emergence of a number of independently produced films characterized by a militant hostility to commercial, narrative cinema as well as a commitment to radical politics and formal experimentation.[2] Otherwise known in France as *films tableaux noirs*, or blackboard films, the objective of counter-cinema was to engage an admittedly limited audience with theoretical problems concerning the social function of representation and the potential role of film in political struggle.

Although in the past twenty years the term *counter-cinema* has lost its currency, the question of the necessary engagement of film practice with theory, on the one hand, and with formal innovations characteristic of modernism on the other, is still a living issue. Sylvia Harvey succinctly describes this tendency in contemporary film theory by naming it "political modernism."[3] As a theme dominating the recent history of Anglo-American film theory, political modernism is the expression of a desire to combine semiotic and ideological analysis with the

development of an avant-garde aesthetic practice dedicated to the production of radical social effects. Although this term has been mobilized to describe the work of a variety of independent filmmakers in Europe and America (including Yvonne Rainer, Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, Sally Potter, Chantal Akerman, Peter Gidal, and many others), my discussion of political modernism refers neither to a film style, movement, nor even a "theory" properly speaking, but rather a logic or order of discourse common to both film theorists and filmmakers since 1968.

My recourse to a concept like political modernism follows the arguments of Mary Kelly with respect to the history of modernism in postwar art movements. In her essay "Re-viewing Modernist Criticism," Kelly suggests that the historical and social intelligibility of the concept of "modernism," which is appropriate to a theory of art as well as to the art objects themselves, is only possible if considered as a discursive field.[4] Far from simply describing the aesthetic codes pertinent to a style or movement in art, the discourse of modernism is considered instead as "produced at the level of the statement, by the specific practices of art criticism, by the art activities implicated in the critic/author's formulations and by the institutions which disseminate and disperse [these] formulations. . . . [The] reading of artistic texts is always in some sense subjected to the determining conditions of these practices, crucially those of criticism" (RMC 41-42).

Critical and theoretical practices are not only crucial to the reception of aesthetic works, they are also fundamental to their intelligibility as "knowledges," conscious or not, that underwrite the conception and execution of aesthetic works as well as their reception and interpretation. As early as 1921, Roman Jakobson suggested as much in his essay "On Realism in Art."[5] Jakobson argues that aesthetic codes are historically variable social facts whose intelligibility relies not only on the formal principles of aesthetic practice, but also on the theoretical and critical conventions by which these codes are understood and disseminated as norms of meaning, interpretation, and use. It is a question, then, of *critical institutions* whose conventions of interpretation and comprehension (whether formulated or

unformulated) may be canonized and subject to the same "laws" of historical evolution and influence as aesthetic codes, although they can develop unevenly with respect to one another.

In sum, the aesthetic text, whether it is a question of Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral* (1947) or Wollen and Mulvey's *Penthesilea* (1974), must be understood as being "informed by discursive operations at the level of its conception, production, and reception in a way which is neither prior to, nor derived from, but coincident with, language" (RMC 49). Understanding the historical emergence of a discourse on political modernism is therefore primarily a question of critical work on film theory. Although the "theory" in question has not been formulated in either a systematic or noncontradictory fashion, it may nonetheless be documented in journal articles, books, artists' statements, catalogs, and so forth, as well as analyzed as a network of themes that construct definite objects, problems, questions, definitions, and so forth within a determinate logic.

In the editorial introduction to an issue of *October* dedicated to "The New Talkies," the themes characteristic of the discourse of political modernism are given exemplary expression:

> The texts presented here issue from the entrance of cinema into the academy. They proceed from the radical critique of representation, through methods of textual analysis and deconstruction at work within the disciplines of psychoanalysis and semiotics, towards the analysis of the impact of the recent resurgence of *text* within film practice, *specifically in its claim for a critical, discursive function within cinema itself.* The period in which we locate the development of this practice is the past decade, although its origins are seen to derive from issues, events, and methodological options that form during the 1960s.[6]

The editors continue their discussion by outlining a series of issues that have governed their current editorial policy.

1. "The convergence of European and American film practice upon the critical, discursive function." This statement implicitly refers to Peter Wollen's rewriting of the history of modernism in film according to the idea of the "two avant-gardes." In this influential essay, Wollen asserts that there are two basic tendencies that characterize the history of the po-

litical aesthetics of avant-garde film. The first is the painterly tradition of North American experimental film, which defines as "modern" art taking as its object its own materials of expression. The second is a European "narrative" tradition that from Eisenstein to Godard is concerned with problematizing cinematic illusionism by exploiting, through various montage strategies, the heterogeneity of the semiotic channels available to film. Moreover, Wollen notes the possible emergence of a third trend that combines the reflexivity of the former with the intertextuality of the latter. Godard's films between 1968 and 1972 exemplify this possibility for Wollen and inspired his aesthetic collaborations with Laura Mulvey.[7] This third avant-garde is, in fact, what the editors of *October* call "The New Talkies."

2. "The manner in which film practice thereby claims a theoretical function." In a 1974 interview in *Screen*, Peter Wollen argues that political aesthetics must distinguish between three levels of film practice—agitational, propagandistic, and theoretical. Each of these levels is conceived as achieving different purposes for different audiences: "Agitation is for a specific conjuncture and for a specific limited audience. Propaganda is aimed at a mass and presents a general kind of political line and broad ideas, and the theoretical film again is for a limited audience and a specific conjuncture but a theoretical conjuncture rather than an immediately political one."[8]

According to the discourse of political modernism, what are the terms of film practice's engagement with theory? On one hand, this engagement is posed as the explicit or implicit appropriation of theory through verbal or written citation. Wollen notes this strategy in "The Two Avant-Gardes" and explores its use in his own films with Laura Mulvey. On the other, Wollen describes the relation between film theory and practice in terms of a "kinship of problematic" where the literary theories of the journal *Tel Quel* inform the objectives, logic, and aesthetic strategies of his and Mulvey's films. But more importantly, in the discourse of political modernism the history of avant-garde or experimental film is thought to be allied *a fortiori* to problems of film theory. In this manner, Annette Michelson and others have argued that modernist aesthetic

strategies have an expressly epistemological objective. Often referred to as the "critique of illusionism," the aim of modernist film practice is considered to be a refutation of the transparency of conventional film technique through the full exploration of the material properties of cinematic expression.[9]

3. "The social and political determinants of such developments and the question of the spectator/audience." Clearly, the objective of any politically oriented aesthetic theory or practice is the transformation of its presumed audience. The constant emphasis of the politically motivated avant-garde art movements in the twentieth century, especially those allied with Marxist thought, has been the necessity of redefining the relations that the spectator is assumed to hold with cultural artifacts in their transmission of the beliefs and values dominant in capitalist societies.

However, in the discourse of political modernism there is a decisive reorientation of the problem of the viewer and the ideological function of art through the disciplines of semiology and psychoanalysis, especially Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud. In the sixties and seventies, this triangulation of Marxism, semiology, and psychoanalysis was accomplished by Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and other writers associated with the French journal *Tel Quel* whose ideas were introduced to Anglo-American film theory primarily through the work of Stephen Heath and the British journal *Screen.* As Colin MacCabe recently notes, "Marxism's abiding problem has always been to explain the way in which capitalist relations reproduce themselves in non-coercive ways. Throughout the seventies there were many who felt that the key to such an understanding lay in an analysis of culture which would not simply read it off as an effect of the economic base but would understand its ability to reproduce subjectivities, a reproduction finally determined by the economic relations but the mechanisms of which had to be comprehended in their own right."[10]

Unlike the linguistic and formalist emphasis of the early phase of structuralism, from this point of view the principal focus of criticism is no longer the simple description of the system of the aesthetic text, but rather an analysis of the subjective re-

lations produced by aesthetic language. Of primary importance to this project were Julia Kristeva's analyses of avant-garde literature and her attempts to establish a "science of signifying practices." To analyze cinema as a signifying practice would include specifying in a film's particular forms of material organization "the semiotic logic of sociality in which the (speaking, historical) subject is embedded."[11] What is politically at stake for the modernist text here is how the status of the subject-spectator may be problematized through modernism's particular forms of semiotic organization, or rather, through its strategic form of disorganization, and how relations of aesthetic pleasure and cognition might be redefined.

4. "The relation of formal innovation to the discursive project." This is the principal issue held over from the main tenets of modernism in the arts by discussions of the avant-garde in contemporary film theory. Formal innovation is considered necessary to the "epistemological" problem of modernism because it links the problem of subjectivity to the semiotic forms of the avant-garde text. For example, in his editorial introduction to *Afterimage* 5, Peter Sainsbury argues that the necessity of formal innovation is motivated by the belief "that creative work in the arts, and particularly in film, might be a process of re-inventing and re-constructing modes of representation and perception—conditions of consciousness—which are systematically denied within the terms of the current socio-political and cultural reality."[12] Although fully congruent with the views of Clement Greenberg, the sense of statements such as this one, as I argue in subsequent pages, has been fully renegotiated within a theoretical framework more typical of the work represented by the journal *Tel Quel.*

5. "The emergence of feminist film theory and practice and their consequences for the discursive project." It is true, and crucially so, that the emergence of feminism in the 1970s has in part determined not only the political priorities of the current avant-garde, but also the *theoretical* priorities. Feminism's stake in questions of representation and sexual difference, as well as its interest in the conceptual tools of psychoanalysis and semiology, are crucial determinations in the discourse of

political modernism's conceptions of how aesthetic languages could challenge patriarchal ideologies.

What I have outlined here is the discourse that political modernism presents *of* itself. However, there is reason to inquire of a discourse that represents itself as "theoretical," whether this is a theory, properly speaking, or the simple presentation of the elements of a theory, or what Althusser would call a "problematic."

According to Louis Althusser, a problematic is a structure that organizes discourse in a specific and complex configuration of concepts, questions, and definitions. It defines the problems assumed by the discourse as well as the range of their possible solutions. Although these problems may not be formulated in a systematic or continuous fashion, they nonetheless define both the limits and the continuity of "knowledges" produced. The structure of a given problematic therefore determines what is visible and eloquent within the purview of the discourse it produces and what must be silenced or rendered invisible in order to maintain the continuity and self-identity of its conceptual system (although it need not do so self-consciously). In this manner, a historically given theory "can only pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed. . . .*"[13] Moreover, if this structure is not necessarily present to itself in the theoretical discourse under consideration, that of political modernism, then the task of criticism is to reveal it through a symptomatic reading. The themes produced by the discourse of political modernism must be considered in another light. Rather than simply taking the discourse of political modernism at its word, the epistemological stakes unconsciously subtending the logic of this discourse and the history of its forms must now be considered.

If the *discourse* of political modernism has a specificity that can be described, it lies neither on the surface of its characteristic statements nor in their common point of reference. Rather, I am interested in the specific forms of conceptual

organization that order the regularity of these statements while determining their epistemological value. In short, according to terminology introduced by Michel Foucault, my aim is to define the formation of political modernism as a specific "discursive practice."[14] According to Foucault, a discursive practice conditions the possibility of an institutionalized corpus of knowledge and determines the grounds for its intelligibility. It regulates the order and dispersion of discourse by engendering a specific grouping of objects, organization of concepts, positions of address, and kinds of rhetorical strategies. As such, the formation described presents a finite but not necessarily quantifiable field of *enoncés*. Often translated as "utterance" or "statement," an *enoncé* may indeed correspond to what I have already called "themes." An *enoncé*, however, is restricted neither to the field of speech acts nor by linguistic definition. When speaking of "discourse," Foucault refers equally to philosophical, juridical, literary, and even banal administrative writing, as well as maps, schemata, diagrams, mathematical formulas, and paintings.

The *enoncés* characteristic of a discursive practice are not quantifiable because in principle they may be produced and dispersed endlessly, but only on the basis of an epistemological finitude; in other words, and as experience demonstrates, one can speak endlessly and know or say very little. According to Foucault discursive practices are analyzed by establishing their conditions of "rarefaction." That they are prolix or prodigious matters little, for a discursive practice can be described in its uniqueness only if one is able "to determine the specific rules in accordance with which its objects, statements, concepts, and theoretical options have been formed: if there really is a unity, it does not lie in the visible, horizontal coherence of the elements formed; it resides, well anterior to their formation, in the system that makes possible and governs that formation" (AK 72). Or more simply put: "A discursive formation will be individualized if one can define the system of formation of the different strategies that are deployed in it; in other words, if one can show how they all derive (in spite of their sometimes extreme diversity, and in spite of their dispersion in time) from the same set of relations" (AK 68). The discursive formation

is not a "structure," however, nor is it a privileged field of propositions or a generative system to which a field of thought can be reduced. Rather, Foucault describes it as a "collateral space"—a manner of correlating themes, concepts, definitions, questions, and rhetorical strategies that sets their conditions of emergence as such and circumscribes them as a particular, and historically specific, theoretical horizon. A discursive practice serves as a conceptual limit, not only with respect to the possibility of certain kinds of statements, but also as an "epistemic imperative" that establishes conditions of knowing prior to any cognitive subject.[15]

What I have referred to as the principle themes of political modernism, then, are not independent propositions or concepts, but rather "enunciative strategies"—ways of constituting and distributing concepts while permuting them within a finite epistemological space. Similarly, the discourse of political modernism is not a product of, nor can it be located wholly within or attributed to, a given book, essay, manifesto, author, or theoretical or aesthetic *oeuvre*. In its uniqueness as a formation of discourse, political modernism can only be defined by the following procedure:

> One stands back in relation to this manifest set of concepts; and one tries to determine according to what schemata . . . the statements may be linked to one another in a type of discourse; one tries in this way to discover how the recurrent elements of statements can reappear, disassociate, recompose, gain in extension or determination, be taken up into new logical structures, acquire, on the other hand, new semantic contents, and constitute partial organizations among themselves. These schemata make it possible to describe—not the laws of the internal construction of concepts, not their progressive and individual genesis in the mind of man—but their anonymous dispersion through texts, books, and *oeuvres*. (AK 60)

Every *enoncé* derives its identity and its epistemological status from its positioning in this collateral space as a field of association and correlation. "Every statement is specified in this way: there is no statement in general, no free, neutral, independent statement; but a statement always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, de-

riving support from them and distinguishing itself from them: it is always part of a network of statements, in which it has a role, however minimal it may be, to play" (AK 99).

Therefore, in order to describe fully the discourse of political modernism in contemporary film theory, the elaboration of its principal themes is not in itself sufficient. An account must also be given of the intertextual context in which political modernism emerged as well as of the series of relations or schemata that enabled this context to be formulated and to produce and disperse statements. Here again the *October* editorial charts a specific path for analysis by acknowledging the historical filiation of contemporary film theory with the emergence of "structuralism" and "poststructuralism" in the sixties and seventies. More specifically, what emerges is a disciplinary web marked by the association of several "new" conceptual systems; namely, literary semiology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstructive philosophy, and so forth. Concomitant with the appearance of these systems of thought was the critique and reformulation of a specific object—the *sign*—understood not as a transparency or as a representation identical to itself and its referent, but as a form of resistance, inherently inadequate to its own uses, that placed the experience of the epistemological subject under suspicion.[16] Clearly, the formulation of contemporary film theory is governed to a significant extent by its assimilation of elements from this intertextual space, especially in a manner mediated and systematized by *Tel Quel*'s *théorie d'ensemble*—a particular triangulation of textual semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism that so strongly influenced the editorial positions of *Screen* and other Anglo-American film theory publications.

The appearance of this interdisciplinary space has now been mapped more or less adequately in several studies.[17] For the moment, it suffices to note that the possibility of academic film theory in its current forms was conditioned by the theoretical agendas, rhetorical strategies, and conceptual schemata already established in this particular discursive space. And in order to comprehend the specificity of the discourse of political modernism in film theory, its themes have to be elaborated and analyzed with respect to these relational schemata.

Before beginning, however, two points must be emphasized. First, although I describe these schemata in the form of the statements and logical oppositions characteristic of the discourse of political modernism in both literary and film theory, they are not reducible to elements of a propositional logic. If one were asked to construct a theory of the avant-garde text, there might be a temptation to call these elements hypotheses; however, they are only rarely articulated in a systematic fashion, remaining, for the most part, unformulated assumptions in the discourse of political modernism. In my analysis, I consider them to be methodological conveniences that function, according to the "laws of rarefaction," to designate relational structures subtending the formation of statements. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx describes a "relation" not as an object, thing, or concept, but as a locus or a network wherein an object or a concept is constituted by or in its relationship to other determinations or sets of determinations. Similarly, each schema that I outline describes not a hypothesis, but an element or series of elements combining and recombining in dynamic and not necessarily self-conscious constellations.

Nor can these schemata be described as constituting a discursive "system." This is my second point. The relation between academic film theory and the intertextual and institutional context from which it emerges is not one of continuity, influence, derivation, or any other metaphor of paternity. Rather, it is a question of transactional and often contradictory sets of relations of selection, exclusion, limitation, and appropriation. In describing the discourse of political modernism within this transactional space, what appears is not the system of a theory, but rather a "regularity" in the organization of concepts, assumptions, and propositions that is ordered by a definable series of oppositions. To look for regularities in the production of discourse one would not merely describe the repetition, reiteration, or reoccurrence of themes, objects, problems, and concepts, although this may be a beginning. In repetition, regularity recognizes the display of a curve that is the limit of all that can be said, understood, or considered true within a given field of discourse. This does not mean that once one has discovered the forms of conceptual organization for-

mulating a field of discourse, and if one understands the principles of rarefaction, consolidation, and unification that hold it together, that it is then possible to know and say everything or to consider the field closed off or finished. For discourse is equally productive of contradiction, nonsense, and nonrecognition—one cannot step outside of it in order to comprehend its internal configurations. This notion of regularity, to which I often refer, understands the logic of political modernism not as a constitutive theoretical unity, but as evidence of the discontinuous activity of discourse. It interrogates the different manifestations of political modernism, whether under the guise of an *oeuvre* or individual text, or author or institution.

The most fundamental theme of political modernism can be stated as follows: *the possibility of a radical, political text is conditioned by the necessity of an avant-garde representational strategy;* or more precisely, strategies emphasizing the material nature of language or cinematic presentation, especially in the form of an auto-critique. This is the precise meaning that the editors of *October* give to their formulation of a "critical, discursive function" in the cinema. Here *discursive* means a reflexive concentration on the forms and materials specific to cinematic expression; *critical* defines the "epistemological" project of modernist cinema as the full exploration of its means of representation and its "deconstruction" of normative, representational codes.

The intelligibility of this statement ultimately derives from a single, broad opposition—that of *modernism versus realism.* The history of twentieth-century debates on aesthetics founded on this opposition—the argument between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács in the thirties is the best known—has been characterized by a competition between two types of textual form. Moreover, these forms are thought to be mutually exclusive according to epistemological criteria. On one hand, there is the declarative or "realist" text that assumes a normative status in its presumed transmission of " 'knowledge' to a reader whose position is stabilized through a discourse which is to varying degrees invisible."[18] The interrogative or modernist text, on the other hand, disturbs the unity and self-presence of the

reader by discouraging identification and by drawing attention to the work of its own textual processes.

This division of aesthetic work into two broad, mutually exclusive genres of discourse is by no means self-evident and the genealogy of its logic is complex. However, the derivation of the discourse of political modernism is productively traced from the debate in postwar France over the theory of writing or *écriture* as a form of political action, inaugurated by the publication of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard). Published in 1947, Sartre's book demanded that the writers communicate the possibility of human freedom according to an existential ethics of political and literary action. In his opening chapter, "Qu'est-ce que l'écriture?," Sartre distinguishes between *langage*, as the collective inventory or means given to all writers to achieve the ends of communication, and *style*, which as the index of the author's freedom in language designates how one renders what one wishes to express. Since in Sartre's assessment prose is by nature bound to language and thus the responsibility of communication, Susan Sontag notes that "Sartre's inquiry into the nature of literature is throughout governed by this ethical conception of the writer's vocation, as is his relatively pejorative treatment of the 'crisis in language which broke out at the beginning of this century,' which he characterizes as a situation favoring the production of private, obscurantist literary art works confined to an 'audience of specialists.' "[19] The political obligation of writing, whose ethos is clarity and "form following function," motivates Sartre's condemnation of the French literary avant-garde of the turn of the century.

Roland Barthes responded to these arguments in a series of essays published in *Combat* in 1947, which were later turned into his first book *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*. As opposed to Sartre, Barthes was interested in restoring to *écriture* a sense of form and the politics of form such that the "crisis in language" of the literary avant-garde acquired a positive, even revolutionary value. Locating his philosophical base in Maurice Blanchot and Gaston Bachelard, Barthes gravitated toward the avant-garde of his day, championing Alain Robbe-Grillet and Bertolt Brecht through his critical essays of the 1950s and

eventually defining a trajectory basic to the nascent theoretical position of *Tel Quel* in the early '60s.

Like Sartre, Barthes develops his argument through a tripartite distinction between *langue, style,* and *écriture. Langue* represents the historical dimension of literary action. Belonging to the entire linguistic community, it describes not only the possibility of the sociality of discourse, it also defines and delimits the inventory of means available to literary creation. Like *langue, style* also functions not as choice but as an inventory for the writer. But as opposed to the sociality of *langue, style* is an archive of creative resources that is profoundly individual, biographical, and ahistorical. In fact, Barthes describes *style* as the "biology" of the writer or his network of obsessions. Where *langue* and *style* are represented by Barthes as "objects" or "structures," *écriture* is defined as a process. Between the sociality of language and the individuality of style, *écriture* defines both the activity of literature as a function of conscious choice and selection and the ensemble of formal features constituting the work of literature.

Although Barthes understands the political nature of *écriture* as an *ethical* category, reflecting his engagement with existentialist positions, he nonetheless articulates this problem as one of aesthetic form. Barthes proposes a distinction between myth and history (prefiguring his use of those terms in *Mythologies*) as the opposition of "classical" to "bourgeois" *langue* whose epochs are divided by the Revolution of 1848. In the classical period before 1848, literature exists as a given; or, in Phil Rosen's description, it is for Barthes a mythical *donnée* that is totalized as a reflection of bourgeois social hegemony and inseparable from it.[20] After the revolution, however, the category of literature itself comes into question as the universality of bourgeois social domination is undermined and therefore literature is required to acknowledge its historical being. Lacking a definite and indisputable social function, identity, or value, literature is dispersed into a variety of modes of writing which, in the tradition of Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé, come increasingly to take not the world but literature and writing themselves as the object of their activity. This acknowledgment of the historical and representational character of social

and ideological categories leads Barthes to name *écriture* as the "last episode of a Passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness" (WDZ 5). Susan Sontag's gloss provides this account of Barthes' argument: "As literature abolishes 'more and more its condition as a bourgeois myth,' *écriture* pushes aside language and style, absorbing 'the whole identity of a literary work. . . .' As modern literature is the history of alienated 'writing' or personal utterance, literature aims inexorably at its own self-transcendence—at the abolition of literature" ("Preface," xxi).

In its historical dimension, *écriture* increasingly adopts a formal character that aims both at semiotic reduction, "writing degree zero," and the defamiliarization of literary stylistics—for example, the elimination of mimesis, foregrounding and dispersion of point of view, deanthropomorphization of narrative and emphasis on markers of narrative activity—common to the work of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, and others.

Within a discourse on literary stylistics, the notion of *écriture* delimits the fundamental problem governing the emergence of political modernism. In Stephen Heath's description, Barthes claims for "writing degree zero," "an 'epistemological break' which recasts the whole nature of literary practice in terms of an activity of language, making it no longer a simple discursive line at the service of a fixed logic of 'the True' or 'the Real'. . . ."[21] No longer capable of adequately "representing the world," in Barthes's scenario writing in the modernist era turns inward on itself, ceaselessly reflecting on its forms and rhetorical purposes.

With the advent of *Tel Quel* in 1960 under the editorship of Philippe Sollers, the emergence of *écriture* as the name of a contemporary, avant-garde literary practice tended to dissolve the ethical and existential dimension of "writing" in favor of the formal and theoretical conceptualization characteristic of the discourse of political modernism. In the critical and rhetorical strategies of *Tel Quel* writers such as Barthes, Sollers, and Jean-Louis Baudry, the concept of *écriture* was presented not as a transparent representation or as the recovery

of a fundamental meaning resolvable to an identity of any kind, but as a production or process where writing and reading were understood as moments of equal value.

In the rhetorical uses of the *Tel Quel* group, *écriture* referred to at least three different though interrelated concepts: a practice of avant-garde fiction, a theory of the sociality of language, and a philosophical concept specified in the work of Jacques Derrida. Moreover, among the theorists of the *Tel Quel* group, the concept of *écriture* tended to eliminate as much as possible the boundary between aesthetic and theoretical work. "Writing," Barthes asserted, "is in its widest sense a theory. It has its theoretical dimension and conversely, no theory can refuse *écriture* if it is to resist being mobilized by a pure *écrivance*, that is, a purely instrumental use of language. . . . Theory, if it is conceived precisely as a permanent auto-critique, must unceasingly dissolve that signified or meaning which is always prepared to reify itself under the name of "Science." And it is in this way that theory articulates itself . . . within *écriture* as the rule of the signifier."[22]

By the time of the Colloque de Cerisy in 1963, *Tel Quel* had defined its editorial project as the development of a theory of *écriture* that emerged equally from the textual practices of criticism and avant-garde fiction.[23] Throughout the sixties *Tel Quel* engendered a new division within the concept of *écriture*, or what Jean-Louis Baudry called its two axes: "its concrete practice—fiction—and the theoretical formulation of that practice."[24] On this basis, the second principal theme of political modernism can be described: *that modernist writing is intrinsically a theoretical activity.* Consequently, a second binary division opened in the discourse of political modernism defining the formal activity of the modernist text as a *theoretical practice* opposing the *ideological practice* of realist forms.

This presumed theoretical function of modernist work, as conceived in opposition to the ideological values of realist work, is described succinctly in Stephen Heath's study of the *nouveau roman.* Moreover, Heath's adaptation of an Althusserian terminology to describe this opposition (theoretical versus ideological practice) tells much about the Anglo-American reception of *Tel Quel* thought and the development of the