

# New Europe College Yearbook 1996-1997



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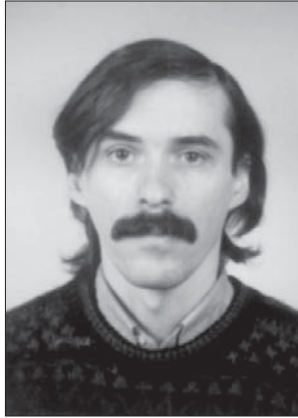
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### **Books:**

*Headlights*, *Shop Windows*, *Photographs*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1980

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# POSTMODERNITY AS A 'WEAK' ONTOLOGICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

## 1. Postmodernism and postmodernity

The concept of “*modernism*”, defining an attitude and an artistic practice which emerged towards the end of the last century, cannot be probed into without discussing the philosophical, historical and socio-cultural background of *modernity*, a much wider notion, yet one which is closely interrelated to the artistic and literary phenomena in question. Likewise *postmodernism*, one of the most widespread concepts in contemporary theories of art (and elsewhere) simply cannot be understood — or is even prone to gross misinterpretation — without an understanding of the world that has engendered it : ‘*il convient de faire une distinction entre “postmodernite” comme type de condition humaine (existentielle, mais aussi sociale) et “postmodernisme” en tant que courant litteraire (ou culturel, si vous voulez)*’<sup>1</sup>. Moreover emphasising the bond between postmodernism and postmodernity is of greater significance than relating modernism to modernity. If modernists, despite their claim to be artists of their time, keeping abreast with the progress of the modern world, promoted an extreme form of aesthetic autonomy and, like classicists, regarded the creative act as pure and impersonal, postmodern artists have shifted their focus towards the insertion of their works in everyday life and have become engaged in contemporary ethical, political and religious dilemmas. Consequently the aesthetic criterion, which was looked upon as all-powerful by modernity, proves insufficient to pass a right judgement and to estimate the genuine value of any work of art. From this point of view, postmodernism draws a full circle in European culture, since it represents a return to the environmental, utilitarian, ornamental and essentially “democratic” perception of art which preceded the Romantic revolution.

I am going to seek the conceptual roots of postmodernity in three fundamental fields of knowledge, while emphasising the common purpose of their three respective endeavours: defining the contemporary human being. For each of these cognitive areas I have chosen the theory of one illustrious analyst of post-modernity as a guiding light. While faithfully following the paths opened by their theories, I will nevertheless consider contradictory viewpoints so that, by the end of this paper, I hope to have achieved a clearer insight into what postmodernity is, not only in its day-to-day tangible occurrences, but in the intricate paradoxical network of its underlying theory. A discussion of postmodern *ontology* will comprise Gianni Vattimo's reflections on his "forerunners" Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as Gadamer's, Jauss's and Rorty's contemporary hermeneutics. I have regarded Jean-Francois Lyotard's work as representative for the formulation of essential issues pertaining to *epistemology* and for the legitimisation of new patterns of cognition. The concept of the "end of history", dealt with by all postmodern theorists as one of the basic aspects of the postmodern age, has been audaciously, if not always persuasively enough, discussed by Francis Fukuyama, the author of the noteworthy book "The End of History and the Last Man". I will enlarge upon his point of view in the third section, although the American historian does not declare himself a disciple of postmodernism. Although divergent as to methodology and detail of investigation, the three theories have in common the sense that modernity, as an age in the history of humankind, has reached its end. The world is taking a new turn, and fundamental concepts like *reality, history, value, thought* and *art* are undergoing radical changes, as, alongside them, is the human being.

## 2. Postmodern ontology

In his book, *The End of Modernity*, Gianni Vattimo's main endeavour is to find points of correspondence between the various contemporary discussions of the concepts of *modernity* and *postmodernity* and the theories of Nietzsche and Heidegger, both late modern philosophers, fully aware of the dissolution of modernity and of the obsolescence of its initial design. As an inheritor of the 18th century rationalist Enlightenment, modernity carried forward the mainstream of European thought, at the core of which was an idealism centred around humanism and progress, the acme of which was reached by 19th century Romanticism: '*Modernity*

can indeed be characterised as being dominated by a view of the history of thought as progressive **enlightenment**, which develops by means of an ever deeper appropriation and reappropriation of **fundamentals**, often considered as **origins**, so that the theoretical and practical revolutions in Western history are often viewed and justifiably labelled as **recoveries**, revivals, returns.<sup>12</sup> This utopian teleological view has been castigated by various thinkers who have revealed the role played by chaos, hazard, and the subconscious in the making of history, the so-called “negative categories”, which, did not only enable prosperity and progress to govern certain ages, but also generated blind alleys, decadence and dissolution, and brought about the death of entire cultures and civilisations. Following in the footsteps of Copernicus’s revolution, which demoted the human being from the centre of the universe, the ruthless *Kulturkritik* went so far as to shatter traditional humanism into pieces. Fr. Nietzsche is, indisputably, “the great shatterer”, whose philosophy has made its imprint upon the century following him, and whose impact is now more powerful than ever. His act of discrediting and, ultimately, of annihilating those values European culture regarded as the most stable and secure, started with the very concept of “founding”, of “base”, of establishing that ontological or cognitive “foundation” without which there could be no metaphysics. Both Nietzsche, and, less radically, Heidegger, bring into discussion the notion of metaphysical *foundation*, but, unlike other critics of European culture, they do not propose any other kind of grounding. With these two philosophers, being is no longer a fixed, immutable plane to which real world phenomena relate; it is a fluctuating, contextual, aleatory entity. Neither concepts nor values pertain to the eternal and the unchangeable, they become relative and dependent on local conditions. Consequently, in their view, modernity (which relies wholly upon the illusions bred by metaphysics) can neither be prolonged nor surpassed: the only acceptable solution is a *separation* from modernity. The following chapter will demonstrate how the meaning of the prefix “post-”, a morpheme in words such as **postmodernism** and **postmodernity** has aroused many controversies because the this separation has been misunderstood.

“The shattering of ontology”, “the weakening of being” and “nihilism” were among the scathing expressions by which humanist philosophers attempted to isolate and discredit Nietzsche’s influence. All these categories have nevertheless been espoused by those to whom the modern age appears mistrustful of absolute values, seeing them as the storehouse of human prejudices and the source of discriminatory and totalitarian

practices. We acknowledge, these rejecters of absolute values say, that we live in a nihilist age, but, taking nihilism to its conclusion is our only chance, since nihilism has come to mean our ability to endlessly create truth and value — albeit short-lived like everything else — instead of false, once-and-for-all norms and dogmas. The “weak” value, created among people for people who live a precise moment in their history is the only kind of value postmodernity enables us to create, since all the other values have proved to be false idols. The dissolution of metaphysics by the revelation of the “weak” nature of being and thinking, the end of history as the never-ending headway of the human being in search of selfhood (for the subject itself, as a substratum — *subjectum* —, has not been able to resist criticism) and the reformulation of truth, a notion which grows similar to an aesthetic concept, are all “nihilistic” ideas. They are equally the premises required by the only optimistic, positive, approach to the contemporary world: the postmodern critique. It is worthwhile expanding upon this last idea. In Vattimo’s opinion, postmodernity no longer regards truth as a gnoseological concept, since it is no longer grounded in a stable metaphysical reality. Like the subject, truth goes on “a slimming diet”, it becomes an instrumental concept of communication and interrelation, very much like aesthetic concepts. Consequently, postmodernism sustains ‘a non-metaphysical conception of truth, which should be interpreted starting not so much from the positivist model of scientific knowledge as from (...) the experience of art and the model of rhetoric.’<sup>3</sup> From now on, the aesthetic experience, which is essentially “weak” will be the model for any type of knowledge. This step is needed for the “aestheticization” of life in the post-modern world, the unexpected consequence of which is a dramatic change in the way culture and art are assessed in the new society. I shall try to show how difficult it is for “high”, elitist culture to adjust to this aestheticisation of the entire life of society.

With Nietzsche, the concept of *human being* is obviously marginalized, since nihilism is ‘the condition in which man rolls from the centre x-wards.’<sup>4</sup> ‘The devaluation of the supreme value’ is expressed by the concomitant “Death of God” and that of man (as an ideal, sublime, atemporal being, as pure judgement). Genuine freedom only emerges once our illusions about man have come to an end. Surprisingly enough, on the wasteland which Nietzsche created by demolishing rationalist humanism, radically opposite ideologies could be formulated. The idea that, after God’s death “everything is permitted” and that morality itself disintegrates, while the only law left is the right of the stronger, has enabled



the establishing of a morality of the “masters” or of the “superior race”; in other words it has led to fascism. Paradoxically and ironically, history has testified to the validity not of the masters’ morality, that of the *Übermensch*, but of that of the “slaves” whom nihilism liberated from the idols of the tribe, a morality which took the form of the new democratic ethics based on human rights. The *Ideal Man* had to die in order for *human beings* to arise, in all their complexity and diversity, as they are in real life. *Absolute value* had to dissolve in order for individual values and group values to have their say, values created between people, not once-and-for-all, but for a limited period, and only contextually valid. As already mentioned, the unavoidable consequence of Nietzsche’s perspective is a certain *de-realisation* of the world. Unbound from the metaphysical chains which had kept it in bondage during the classical age, the post-Nietzschean world is depleted of reality, a phenomenon which finds its most faithful expression in *The Twilight of the Gods*: ‘*the real world has become a fairy-tale.*’<sup>5</sup> In the same way, for Heidegger being is annihilated to the extent that it is completely converted into value, which is in its turn fluctuating and convertible. This effect of unreality, so salient in today’s world, has led to various trends of thought joining against the nihilism of our age. Starting with the first decades of our century, a strong philosophical front has stood up in defence of humanist values. Reunited under the shared motto of “the pathos of authenticity”, early existentialists, phenomenologists, Marxists, and more recently, representatives of contemporary hermeneutics such as Habermas have made great endeavours to defend the great values theoretically. Vattimo points out that all these endeavours have failed. Despite the charges brought against it — “dehumanisation”, “confusion”, “alienation”, “generalised prostitution” — total nihilism has proved much less harmful and more fruitful than all the ideologies which have led to wars and dictatorships. The failure of humanism is perceptible everywhere in our century, in which not only has communism caused unparalleled disasters, but respectable philosophical and artistic trends (existentialism, surrealism, futurism and avant-garde movements) have become compromised by supporting all kinds of dictatorships, from Stalinism to fascism, from Maoism to international terrorism. Vattimo points out that, in striking contrast with these trends, ‘*unerring nihilism calls for an experience of reality, which has become fabulous, and which is our only way to achieve freedom.*’<sup>6</sup> Wherever a society has undergone de-ideologisation and the abolition of absolute creeds (as is the case of contemporary Western, and especially

American society), that society has enhanced its complexity, prosperity and freedom, despite the psychological already referred to.

Together with Nietzsche's assertion that '*God is dead*', in the practical sphere modern technology, which was originally regarded as a source of opening the gate towards totalitarian practices, has contributed to the dissolution of all absolute values and has brought about an unprecedented crisis of *humanism*, a concept that Heidegger considered equivalent to the possibility for metaphysics itself to exist. Between around 1900 and the period after the Second World War, human values underwent a painful crisis, which was mirrored in all philosophical trends. One attempt to provide a cordon sanitaire for these values was the use of dichotomies of the type *humanities* versus *natural sciences* or *culture* (humanist) versus *civilisation* (dehumanising). These dichotomies — in which the first terms defined the fortress of everlasting humanism, a sort of Goethean Castalia wholly isolated from the present day world of decay — proved groundless, partly because humanist values did not appear essentially different from other values, and partly because modern technology, far from emerging as a deadly menace, turned on the contrary into a positive reality. If Spengler or Husserl deplore the loss of the "human core", of the "subject" in the new technological civilisation, Heidegger regards the "surpassing" (*Verwindung*) of humanism as the only path leading to the *Ge-Stell*, to the world of technology as the best instantiation of metaphysics, and, consequently, as the first mark of *Ereignis*, of re-discovery of the self. The subject, as it is conceived by humanists, is not worth defending, as it is identified with reason and conscience, which are defined as correlatives of the object, sharing in the immutable stable character of the object. The subject is a substratum (*sub-jectum*) and, as such, paradoxically relinquishes its very subjectivity, its historicity (*Dasein*). As a conclusion, Heidegger reinforces the necessity to abandon metaphysics, not by transgression as such, but by *Verwindung*, which rather means recovery or convalescence. There is a need for the subject to take up a "slimming diet", since it can no longer claim to be the absolute spirit. As a result of this "slimming", the subject acquires historicity and location, becoming contextual and ephemeral, an entity '*which dissolves its presence-absence into the networks of a society which increasingly turns into a sensitive body of communication.*'<sup>17</sup> The cycle referred to above is thus completed, since postmodern philosophy and practice prove to be solidary and complementary.

Art is the first area to benefit from the consequences of this. The decay of metaphysics provides fertile ground for a general aestheticisation of life. The problem of the “death of art”, which might be seen as the central topic of modernity, acquires a quite different meaning in postmodernity. From the avant-garde breakthrough of the 20s, which denied any confinement of art, to the new avant-garde, with its ubiquitous art, which steps beyond the traditional, isolated and protected spaces (theatres, museums, exhibition and concert halls), the classical view on art has been violently challenged throughout our century. Never has the concept of art reached such relativisation as in the age of media supremacy, since the communication media have become nowadays a kind of perverse (still not totally distorted) embodiment of the Hegelian concept of the absolute spirit. Art does not fade away with postmodernity, but it loses its isolation from the social body (that famous autonomy of the aesthetic proclaimed against all kinds of populisms and dictatorships) into which it finally dissolves. The survival of art implies the renunciation of the “absolute”, so that what was not habitually regarded as art becomes art. The work of art’s questioning of its own status becomes a criterion of value. It can be seen that postmodernity witnesses a triumph of avant-garde concepts, on condition that they be “tamed”. When the avant-garde becomes routine and fits into the “norm”, when what used to be shocking no longer shocks anyone, while that which formerly did not shock has vanished from the picture, we may say that we have entered the postmodern world. Undeniably, any postmodern work includes its own denial, in the form of critical distance, irony, parody, (self) pastiche, which means that the death of art is literally implied in any artistic product, which indeed somehow feeds on this implication. Turning the disappearance of art into the very source of art’s vitality and survival is the optimistic solution the postmodern thinker provides to a problem which the modernist failed to resolve, since the death of art could only be followed by nothingness.

It is not by chance that this has only been achieved in the present age. The impact of technology opens a gap between the historical and postmodern avant-gardes, since technology favours the endless reproduction and the ubiquitous nature of all works of art and thus destroys one of the essential criteria employed by the elitist estimation of the work of art: its uniqueness. The mass reproduction effect mentioned by Benjamin in his famous work *‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’*<sup>8</sup> leads to a curious “living death” of art. Although art pervades all possible spaces and permeates all possible forms, it loses the

immense prestige it used to have when it was considered (admittedly by the restricted elite to whom it was accessible) the repository of all human values and wisdom. Nowadays, the mass media place little stress on “high”, “authentic” art; on the other hand, they widely disseminate information, culture and entertainment according to a unique, essentially aesthetic criterion: *pleasure*. Mass communication alone can achieve social consensus nowadays, a consensus which is neither political, nor ideological, but ‘*a resignedly aesthetic function*.’<sup>9</sup> That is why the death of art should be understood in two ways: its *strong* meaning points to the end of “high” art as the moulder of humankind, as an occult, initiatory world, the preserver of transcendental revelation (we may clearly recognise the “elation-inducing” perspective of modernism); its *weak* meaning concerns the mutation, which traditional thinking would have regarded as unacceptable, even apocalyptic, leading to the dissolution of art into social life through the mass media. The “myth of art” crumbles and art undergoes a boundless democratisation. The “weak” viewpoint does not come after the “strong” one; they are simultaneously displayed and strongly interrelated. Modernism is not dead when postmodernism appears; rather modernism survives by means of postmodernism, due to the specifically postmodern simultaneity of all aesthetic attitudes, ideologies and styles in an ahistorical world, where, according to Al. Philippide, ‘*old and new ages in motley merge; all as one swiftly surge*’. “High” art still survives, despite the dwindling of its audience and prestige. It dwells in its tiny secluded room, ‘*where, within a complex system of connections, the three aspects of the death of art: utopia, kitsch and silence, play and interact together*.’<sup>10</sup> The next chapter will enlarge upon the concept of silence and demonstrate, following Ihab Hassan’s line of thought, that both trends typical of modernity, intellectualism and violent avant-garde, end up in silence — the one in intense meditation over the blank page, and the other in the white noise of pandemonium. On the contrary, postmodernity *starts* from silence in order to build up parallel worlds that will someday compete with the World itself. With postmodernity, while art loses its “life” in the traditional sense of the word (namely its value, significance and mystery), it equally loses its death, entrapped in the limbo of paradox, like the hunter Gracchus in Kafka’s tale. Its condition might be called the “twilight” or the “agony” of art. The art of the present day can only be defined by oxymoron: dead life, sweet agony, “merry apocalypse”, which only draws it closer to the aesthetic trend it so strikingly resembles: *mannerism*.

Together with art, traditional aesthetics is also prone to decay. The “exemplary” character of the work of art lacks support. If it technologically reproducible (consider, for instance, the playing of Vivaldi’s music in a washing-powder advert or the glimpsing of the Gioconda’s smile on a match-box), the work of art can only induce a “sideways”, “marginal”, “casual” perception, as an object glanced at “out of the corner of one’s eye”. Devoid of any stable substantiation of values, the aesthetic approach becomes “weak”. Temporary and perishable, the work of art becomes a mere “password” for Heidegger, a token of its belonging to the world, depleted of its own meaning. This draws it closer to ornamental practices, since they are both embellishing and peripheral. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger describes art as a “background happening”, describable only by means of a “weak” ontology. Casting art back into the role it used to play before Romanticism “ennobled” it and widening the concept until it covers the entire social body are processes which perform the conditions necessary in order for the whole world to become a work of art, as was foreseen by Nietzsche as far back as the previous century, when he wrote: ‘*The world is a work of art in the process of self-making.*’<sup>11</sup> To conclude the discussion on the death of art in the contemporary world, one might say that, like the seed in Christ’s parable, art remains alone unless it dies, but if it dies it may bear much fruit.

In proposing ‘*an essentially humanistic philosophy of history*’<sup>12</sup>, the most important representatives of contemporary hermeneutics, Gadamer, Apel and Jauss stray away from the Heideggerian spirit they would wish to share and turn into opponents of the postmodernity foreshadowed by Heidegger. The great philosopher supplies a nihilist definition for the relationship between being and language: *Dasein* means “being-into-death”. Being lacks “foundation”, it is mere “utterance”, adjusted to the rhythm of discourse. While progressively turning into language, being “weakens”, and the history of metaphysics becomes the history of the progressive oblivion of being. Among contemporary theorists of hermeneutics, Richard Rorty is closest to a postmodern standpoint (without being a postmodern theorist himself). In his main book, *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty lays emphasis on “empathy”, on the intuitive nature of hermeneutic knowledge. In Rorty’s view, once the attempt to build up an epistemology has been relinquished, hermeneutics dissolves into anthropology and becomes ‘*a form of the dissolution of being.*’<sup>13</sup> Split between *homologising* and *difference*, between a Western “ecumenical” ideal and a secular marginality, the contemporary world

looks like 'a huge building site of survivals.'<sup>14</sup> The same definition could apply to contemporary art, which displays a wide variety of trends — from the historicising to the marginalising —, simultaneously unified and pluralised by the great media discourse.

### 3. Knowledge in postmodernity

As far as postmodern epistemology is concerned, the most clear-sighted analysis is Jean-Francois Lyotard's<sup>15</sup>. Having studied various types of legitimising discourses, Lyotard has evinced the increasing substitution of new legitimising procedures for the "modern" legitimisation of power, science, knowledge, etc. Dealing with the beginning of postmodern thinking, Lyotard, like Vattimo, mentions the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. He regards other influences, such as Freud's psychoanalysis, Max Weber's demonstration of the connection between the Protestant spirit and capitalism, and the philosophy promoted by the Frankfurt School, as equally decisive. Neither are Marxist and Neo-Kantian thought neglected, since they inspire postmodernism with major topics. The two postmodern theorists equally agree as to certain common points shared by these theories, and as to overlapping areas in the views of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, etc. One major area would be the scathing criticism of the European Enlightenment, of its faith in reason and its grandiose coherent teleological scripts, which always set man in the centre of being and of history and on the ascendant line of unbounded progress. The Enlightenment provided "scripts" or "grand narratives" which were to play a legitimising and comforting role in European thought for almost three centuries. These scripts generated the illusions bred by humanist thinking about human "predestination" and encouraged far-fetched attempts to fully and coherently justify man's worldly destiny. The rationalist and idealist-Romantic heritage urged modernity to believe in the "objective truth" of various explanatory scripts. Modern man, although deeply fissured, continues to embody an abstract ideal. On the other hand, postmodernity utterly mistrusts meta-narratives and, once it has acquired the skill of deconstructing them, it unveils all the ideological and self-mystifying presumptions underlying any seemingly "objective" discourse. In Lyotard's view, this mistrust, this scepticism towards objectivity, coherence and completeness is the main symptom of postmodern thinking. 'When this meta-discourse [i.e. philosophy] explicitly

resorts to one grand narrative or another, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the national or working subject, the development of wealth, I have decided to designate as modern the science to which they relate in order to get legitimised.<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly enough, doctrines and ideologies so profoundly divergent such as Hegelianism, nationalism, Marxism, hermeneutics and market liberalism appear as various facets of a “totalitarian” modernity, in the sense that each of them proclaims itself the *only* legitimate and thorough interpretation of Man and the only way to influence and shape Man according to certain abstract principles. Lyotard supports the idea of a trenchant opposition between modernity and postmodernity; however, as already suggested, postmodernism does not simply “replace” modernism at a precise historical moment, since there are complex relationships of coexistence and interdependence between the two. Lyotard’s relative manichaeism has been exposed by other theorists, such as Matei Calinescu, who, in the introductory chapter of the postmodern anthology he edited together with Douwe Fokkema<sup>17</sup>, explicitly asserts the following: ‘*Actually, Lyotard’s opposition between modernity and postmodernity, seen within the corpus of his philosophical work, is just another way of personifying the eternal conflict between Ahriman (domination, capital, the acquisitive drive, the will to infinity, mastery, control, richness) and Ormazd (the desire for opacity, paralogy, non-communication, autonomy, the “figural” and “deconstructive” search for “incommensurability”*. Modernity would then be a synonym for Lyotard’s strangely timeless notion of capitalism, while postmodernism would be a personification of an equally timeless desire for freedom and justice.<sup>18</sup> If the notion of a strange “ageless” capitalism (or rather, an “industrial age”, perceived either as a background or as a metaphor) may fit into the notion of modernity as defined by Lyotard, Matei Calinescu’s statement that postmodernism is an “opaque” “non-communicative” world sounds questionable. To counter Calinescu’s opinion, both Lyotard and Vattimo (the author of a book specifically dealing with this topic<sup>19</sup>) perceive transparency and communication — which are, after all, one and the same thing — as the core of the new postmodern liberalism. Lyotard emphasises the fact that within this transparent (or at least translucent) world, only those more conservative institutions that obviously preserve residues from the past will withstand this tendency for a while: ‘*The state will start to look like a factor of opacity and “noise” undermining an ideology of “communicational” transparency, which is accompanied by a commercialisation of knowledge.*<sup>20</sup>

With Lyotard, knowledge no longer plays a formative role. In his view, postmodernity wholly rejects the idea of man's ceaseless "completion", of knowledge enriching the human mind, an idea still supported by modern humanism. In the new post-industrial world, knowledge is valued differently: any value becomes an exchange value, which, like any commodity, fluctuates according to the "exchange rate": *'Knowledge has been and will be produced to be sold, has been and will be consumed to be put to use in a new production.'*<sup>21</sup> Redefined as such, value differs both from the "production force" — in positivist terms —, and from the moulding force — in hermeneutic terms —, which is meaningful only in a world of absolute values and purposes. Knowledge has become an issue that goes far beyond the production of commodities. The real place where knowledge proves decisive is the realm of decision: *'In the age of informatics knowledge as an issue has become more than ever an issue of governing.'*<sup>22</sup> , Lyotard writes, then adds that the question *"Who should make the decisions?"* lies at the heart of this matter. Instead of the grand narratives, it is the logical and linguistic criteria, devoid of ideology but still supporting an endlessly expandable network, that could be able to describe the informational clouds of the present society. Among these criteria, Lyotard shows a particular interest in "language games", as understood by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The following demonstration relies on this specific criterion. Under the conditions provided by the new society, ruling is no longer identified with political decision: *'The former poles of attraction consisting in nation-states, parties, professions, institutions and historical traditions have ceased to arouse interest'* and have been replaced by *'a composite blanket made up of managers, officials, leaders of large professional , trade union, political, and religious bodies, etc.'*<sup>23</sup> . This group takes decisions which impact upon the entire "social fabric" within a complex game, which is in its turn constituted by numberless other language games. In order to be noticed, the social bond need to encompass a "language change" in the context of such a game. Consequently a *general agonistics* takes shape, as a new "power" mechanism in the postmodern world, in which *'to speak means to fight in the sense of to play.'*<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, Lyotard's analysis includes those contrastive aspects which are specific to linguistic structuralism; on the other hand, it lays considerable emphasis on the *ludic* aspect of decision, which is the truly novel element in the new social relations of postmodernity. However the issue of decision is merely described and far from being solved by depicting the new society as an informational cloud governed by a general agonistics. For a decision



to be made possible and to be able subsequently to structure the social fabric, it has to be perceived as legitimate. Legitimation is a key concept with Lyotard. Having experienced world-wide conflicts, holocaust and communist totalitarian regimes, the post-war world can no longer be governed according to the grand legitimising narratives, be they nationalist or Marxist. The erosion of man has entailed demolishing all the ideals and utopias in the name of which countless crimes have been committed. To Lyotard, the main issue which postmodernity faces is the following: how can legitimation occur *otherwise*, so that it may preserve its credibility and prove its validity? Combining epistemology with game theory, Lyotard tries to answer this question by disclosing the way in which '*the atomisation of the social in flexible language game networks*'<sup>25</sup> takes place. Legitimation will be determined by the very nature of these language games.

From the beginning of his study, Lyotard distinguishes two major ways of acquiring knowledge. One is "narrative" knowledge, of folk origin, in which narrative form prevails over content or discursive aims (recollecting the past). The need for fiction, in the form of classical or modern myths, thus becomes synonymous to the need for oblivion, or for the fabrication of a fake memory, more suitable for collective desires and cravings. With this type of knowledge, there is no need for legitimation, since the narrative provides self-legitimation. Scientific knowledge is in striking contrast to narrative knowledge. The pragmatics of the two forms of knowledge are two equally valid, yet mutually exclusive, language games. Narrative knowledge is the form specific to traditional societies, resuscitated by Romanticism and extended into modernity. What Lyotard deals with further on is scientific knowledge, which is highly specific of postmodernity.

In its turn, scientific knowledge can be split into two basic branches (or *games*): research and education. Research features the following presuppositions (or *game rules*): 1. The addressee and the addresser are equally competent; 2. The referent should be appropriate to reality; 3. The addresser is assumed to be telling the truth; 4. There is a double suitability rule: dialectical and metaphysical; 5. Research achieves its purpose once consensus as to its validity has been reached. In its turn, education is underlain by several presuppositions: 1. The addressee does not share the same amount of knowledge as the addresser; 2. The addressee may become an expert; 3. There are "unquestionable" utterances which are conveyed as truths. Lyotard combines the features of the two games

pertaining to scientific knowledge and reveals the following characteristics of this type of knowledge : 1. Scientific knowledge only allows for a denotative language game; an utterance is accepted according to its truth value; 2. Scientific knowledge is indirectly acquired knowledge, isolated from the other aspects of social bonds; 3. Competence is compulsory only for the addresser; 4. The scientific utterance does not get validated by its own formulation. 5 Science is a cumulative process which, because of its diachronic character, involves memory and design.

Between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge there is an asymmetrical compatibility. If narrative knowledge tolerates a scientific mentality to a certain extent, scientific knowledge proves altogether intolerant of a narrative mentality. This is exactly what opponents of postmodernism as being a loss of meaning, a loss of the human value of knowledge. There can be detected in their attitude a nostalgia for the humanist modernity of the past, when knowledge was indeed predominantly narrative.

Once the religious-metaphysical legitimisation have collapsed, knowledge of the European type reaches an impasse. Various types of legitimisation have been devised, in a general endeavour to avoid "nihilism", or in other words legitimisation by consensus. Thus Romanticism brought legitimisation from the people by means of debate and consensus. This view invests the people with the status of "universal expert", whose representatives demolish traditional narrative structures only to replace them by modern, equally narrative, structures. The notion of progress flourished during this period, seen as the acquisition of competence over generations. The golden age, which ancient philosophers identified with a mythical past, was re-located by modern thinkers in the future: it was to be possible owing to the general progress of humanity's. This type of legitimisation still dominates the political life of nations. It turns the issue of state into an issue of scientific knowledge. As a universal expert, the people becomes concerned with the legitimisation of political, economic and scientific power by means of meta-narratives. This interest generates the great "scripts" or legitimising narratives in their two versions: political and philosophical. In the great political script of European modernity, humanity as a whole is represented as a hero of liberty. This view assigns the state with the mission of moulding the people as a nation and of guiding it on the pathway to progress. A classical example is the Prussian state in Hegel's time, regarded by the philosopher as the ideal,

unsurpassable form of state, the emergence of which marked the end of history as the unimpeded development of the absolute spirit.

The philosophical version of the legitimising narratives centres around metaphysics as the exquisite all-comprehensive synthesis of all sciences. In their turn, these sciences are but moments in the development of the spirit, meant to achieve a meta-history of the spirit. It is easy to recognise the Hegelian design in the philosophical version, since they both rely on knowledge of the narrative type. This knowledge engenders that of hermeneutics, which is so suitable for modernity, but altogether incompatible with postmodernity. All great ideologies rooted in the Enlightenment and Romantic idealism have been legitimised either by the political version of the grand narratives, or by the philosophical version, and in most cases by both.

If legitimisation has been an obsession of European modernity for at least two centuries, postmodernity witnesses a process of ideological de-legitimisation as the great scripts have lost their credibility. This process shifts the focus from *aims* (teleology, progress, utopia) to *means*. Agreeing with Gianni Vattimo and other postmodern theorists, J.-F. Lyotard points out that the decay of the great legitimising scripts is not the result solely of humanity's having entered its post-industrial age, but primarily of certain processes regarding the theoretical aspects of knowledge. The seeds of de-legitimisation and of nihilism should be first sought in the erosion of the speculative (philosophical) discourse generated, as Nietzsche remarked, by the sciences being subordinated to and validated by philosophy. If philosophy was predominantly narrative, sciences would become ideological tools in the service of power, losing their truth value and, implicitly, their credibility. Likewise, the emancipatory (political) discourse becomes eroded since there are two types of discourse generated by the people: one descriptive and the other prescriptive. The two types of discourse do not overlap and are generated according to different rules. A fatal gap opens between the scientific and the forensic.

The above considerations might account for the wave of pessimism at the end of the past century and during the first decades of the present century. Irrespective of their proclivities, thinkers were forced to face a huge proliferation of languages which had emerged without any traditional legitimisation. Lyotard points out that the age of pessimism came to an end once new forms of legitimisation had emerged, forms specific to this very proliferation of languages, arising from linguistic practices and

interactive communication. Lyotard goes on to analyse these practices in more detail.

In the postmodern view, the first branch of scientific knowledge, research, is legitimised by *performativity* (from the very start a pragmatic, not a metaphysical criterion). Unlike a few decades ago, the pragmatics of research is influenced nowadays by two changes: the enriching of argumentation and the complication of the administration of evidence. While discussing the richer argumentative strategies, Lyotard shows that argumentative languages are regulated by logical meta-language, which implies consistency, completeness, decidability and interdependence of axioms. Formal logic has lately become considerably enriched: Godel's famous demonstration proves that all systems have limitations, which appear whenever the systems are translated into a natural, inconsistent and paradox-generating language. This leads to the impossibility of exhausting a system by demonstration, something which traditional thought used to consider unacceptable, but which postmodern thinkers consider inevitable, even stimulating. By accepting the haphazard, the incomplete and the contradictory, the very notion of reason undergoes fundamental change:

*'The principle of a universal meta-language is replaced by that of a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems capable of argument in favour of denotative utterances; these systems belong to a universal, however inconsistent meta-language.'*<sup>26</sup> There is a salient discrepancy between postmodernity and all previous ages as to scientific knowledge: while classical and modern science rejected paradox, postmodernity draws its argumentative force from it.

The other recent change undergone by pragmatics is the complication of the administration of tests. The central paradox of this issue is that the test itself needs testing. To apply a test means to find out a fact by means of certain recording procedures, obeying the principle of performativity. The procedure implies the use of complex and costly hardware, which is not available to any scientist. The triad that regulates the administration of tests is *wealth - efficiency - truth*, where causality sets the order of the terms. In the new "empire of performance", the scientific idealism, which used to enliven classical science and urge the dedicated scholars into getting committed to the sheer quest of truth for their own benefit and pleasure, has become not only a naive goal, but also an unattainable target. Science has stopped being a guarantee of humanity's unlimited progress, and has simply become an instance of the circulation of capital:

*'It is the desire to get rich, rather than the desire to acquire knowledge, which imposes the imperative of better performance and higher quality products upon technology.'*<sup>27</sup> Research starts being scheduled according to enterprise management and capitalism grants credits either by financing various departments with practical "applications" or by creating specialised foundations. Consequently, the administration of tests *'is controlled by a different language game, where not truth, but performativity is at stake (...)* The state and/or the enterprise abandon the idealistic or humanistic legitimising narrative in order to justify power as the new asset at stake'<sup>28</sup>. Out of the main language games: denotative (scientific), prescriptive (legal) and technical (performative), power belongs only to the last mentioned. Since reality provides proofs and since technology masters reality, *legitimation is conferred by power*, as power alone makes available that technology which is meant to investigate reality. This is the only real legitimising method acknowledged by the modern world.

Consequently, if in modernity technology was regarded as an appendix of science, in the postmodern world it acquires priority over science. Taking this reversal into account, sciences exist only in order for ever more performative technologies to emerge. A cycle is thus established, in which any increase in power can only be achieved by increasing the amount of information. The postmodern world system is essentially informational.

The second component of knowledge, education, differs from research by its functioning as a sub-system of the social system and not irrespective of the social bond. Its purpose is to contribute to general optimisation. To achieve this purpose, the new forms of education have discarded the humanist ideal of character delineation and simply content themselves with competence delineation. Competence is needed, on the one hand, to take part in the world-wide competition between post-industrial states (which requires the training of experts in languages and information), and, on the other hand, to satisfy internal social needs (doctors, teachers, engineers, or in other words *'actors able to conveniently play their parts in the pragmatic positions institutions need them for.'*<sup>29</sup> Within this framework, Lyotard highlights the meaninglessness of academic autonomy, an issue so much debated in the 70s, since educational institutions are necessarily subordinated to that power which allows them to function. Their role basically consists of the uninterrupted training of individuals. In the new type of society, education has come to replace the question "is it true?" by "is it saleable?", which finally entails a profound change in the notion of reality itself, and thus represents the most puzzling and shattering

challenge of postmodernity. Contrary to all expectations, it is not the idealist and humanist education, the preserver of values and of the sense of reality, which has proved to foster the development of knowledge, but the pragmatic education, based on sheer performativity. *'The perspective of a huge market for operational competence opens up. The holders of this type of knowledge have been and will be the object of demand and even the target of seductive practices. From this point of view, what is heralded is not the end of knowledge, but quite the contrary. Tomorrow's encyclopaedias will be databases. They exceed any user's capacity. To the postmodern citizen they are "nature".'*<sup>30</sup> The idea that the scientist no longer explores nature directly, but searches the databases on nature, in other words explores a secondary reality, created by humans, into which the human being gets integrated from now on, comfortably dwelling in *un-reality*, may be the absolute hallmark of postmodernity. When Lyotard's book was published, in 1979, PCs had not yet invaded the market; only later on their did their rapid spread confirm the cynical, yet insightful predictions of the French thinker. PCs have introduced virtual reality, the illusory core of postmodernity, into the life of ordinary people by means of incorporated databases, person-to-person facilities, multimedia and internet connections.

At the same time, Lyotard favours the idea that there is a certain traditionally "humanist" traditional quality which preserves its role in the new society as well. This quality is *imagination*. When knowledge is fully transparent and informationally substantiated, something else is needed in order to get the advantage in a competitive situation. This advantage is provided by an excess of imagination, by the ability to conceive new moves in a language game, assembling scattered pieces of information at a speed exceeding that of others. As in Asimov's famous story, education relies on two levels of performance, a "mass" one, based on the memorising and recounting of knowledge, and an "elitist" one, which aims at enhancing creativity. The "Age of the Teacher" comes to an end, as teachers are rivalled by databases and research teams and de-legitimation and performativity gain priority.

Legitimation is not a closed issue. Performativity indeed presupposes the existence of a stable deterministic system. In postmodernity, however, stability and determinism lose their absoluteness and, as with all other characteristics, become variable and contextual. Therefore, neither can legitimation be absolute. Within the framework of post-modern knowledge, it is subject to perpetual fluctuation, while sciences find a

new basic function for themselves: the permanent questioning of their own legitimisation. Consequently, the legitimising discourse becomes *immanent*, and dependent on local and consensual circumstances. According to Godel's theory, the internalisation of this discourse necessarily brings about paradoxes and limitations, which, are no longer regarded as "flaws" of legitimisation, as they were in the past, but rather as its objective, unavoidable aspects. As early as the first decades of our century, atomic physics introduced the notion of boundaries to knowledge by quantum theory and Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy. Heisenberg, for instance, reveals that, on the one hand, observing all conditions within a system requires more energy than that consumed in that system, and on the other hand, that perfect control diminishes efficiency. The higher the precision, the higher the uncertainty, the only predictable quantities being the statistical percentages. Next to immanence, *indeterminacy* is the second basic characteristic of postmodernity. Mathematical theories of non-linear equations (Rene Thom's catastrophe theory, the theory of chaos, Mandelbrot's theory of fractals) have followed the same trend towards the theoretical congruence of the post-modern world. Absolute determinism lacks both meaning and reality. In an ocean of chaotic movement there are mere unstable "islands of determinism", engendered by the local state of the system. *Paralogies* are to be encountered throughout the post-industrial universe. Culture and art will also face disorder, paradox and indeterminacy. In Lyotard's view, the human being is re-positioned as a conscience striving (as always) to invest chaos with meaning, but this meaning is now not global but punctual at each and every moment: '*In its concern with the undecidable, with the boundaries of controlled accuracy, with quanta, with clashes of incomplete information, with fractals, with catastrophes, and with pragmatic paradoxes, postmodern science theorises its own discontinuous, catastrophical, unrectifiable and paradoxical evolution.*'<sup>31</sup> . *Mutatis mutandis*, this might equally well describe the condition of postmodern literature: focused on its transcendence during modernity, the text becomes immanent, ceaselessly questioning its own artistic legitimacy.

The end of legitimising narratives becomes thus the end of closed systems. The new science provides the open system anti-model, which undergoes a process of *morphogenesis*, as Rene Thom calls it. This process implies introducing new rules into the game, related to the unpredictable local conditions which may emerge within the '*huge clouds of linguistic matter that make up societies*'<sup>32</sup> .

In its new interpretation, scientific pragmatics can even redefine its links to society. It acts ambivalently, both against power (be it prescriptive or meta-prescriptive) and in favour of power. During a first stage of the informational impact, the manipulation of information by the media was feared as a potential '*dream instrument for the control and regulation of the market system*'<sup>33</sup>, as well as the political system. Numberless mid-century anti-utopias describe such totalitarian worlds governed by rigorous information control. On the contrary, having followed the history of the world during the last decades, the latest postmodern thinkers consider that a boundless proliferation of information renders its large scale manipulation impossible. In their view, a scientific pragmatics based on informatisation '*may serve discussion groups in addition to meta-prescriptions, while providing them with the missing information they most often need in order to make knowledgeable decisions*'<sup>34</sup>. Knowledge itself becomes part of the power of decision. Although postmodern theory starts from a radical nihilism, it ends up by offering an *optimistic* perspective on knowledge, which modernity would have found it hard to imagine. This new optimism, which cannot pass unnoticed in postmodern artistic theory, is still one of the most characteristic aspects of postmodernity. Every person's free access to *all* knowledge (memory and databases) '*foreshadows that kind of politics where the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown will be equally obeyed*'<sup>35</sup>. This is the conclusion reached by Lyotard at the end of a survey which brilliantly combines post-structuralist analysis and down-to-earth pragmatism.

#### **4. The end of history or awakening from the nightmare**

When James Joyce wrote his famous statement '*History is the nightmare I cannot awake from*', above and beyond the terrifying sentential generality of his utterance, he undoubtedly voiced a modernist viewpoint. Since history as a science separated itself from historiography, acquired self-awareness and subsequently laid the foundation for a philosophy of history which claimed to "account for" events by all-embracing metaphysical schemata, that is, roughly speaking, since the Enlightenment, numerous historical outlooks, despite their divergences, have shared the idea of a continuous evolution of society, from barbarism to civilisation, in the sense of its material and moral improvement. The final purpose of human evolution was to achieve a "human ideal" pertaining either to the



past, or to the future. Each historical event had to be acknowledged as part of this triumphant march towards perfection, in which “more recent” meant, by definition, “better”. Even pessimistic views on history, which depict humankind as sliding downwards into evil and degradation — such as Romanticism or modernism — share an ideal and teleological point of view: humankind “has gone astray”, “has deviated from its lofty purpose”, which is simply a different way of asserting the existence of a pathway towards the ideal, the teleology of history and the privileged condition of the human being in the world. The Enlightenment view has been questioned in history as well as in the fields already discussed, by those thinkers who have discarded the idea that history acquires meaning by predestination. With Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and later Heidegger, the human being is never immobile and absolute; with time, humans are subject to becoming by random fluctuations. As a conclusion, there can be no immutable ideal that humankind should strive to reach and there can be no-one to show humankind the way to the peak along the pathway of progress. Abandoning the notion of progress, which underlay the entire philosophy of history during the previous century, opens the way to a different approach to history, which is consonant with postmodern theory in other fields. Postmodernity marks the end of the Joycean nightmare and the human being awakens from history. Recurrent with all postmodern thinkers, the “end of history” signifies, beyond its various nuances, an abandoning of the notions of linear evolution and teleology. Arnold Gehlen was dealing with *post-history* as early as 1957, meaning that the present world of technology, in which progress has ceased to be spectacular and has turned into *routine* practice, conceals a certain immobility at its core which separates it from previous history and somehow places it outside history<sup>36</sup>. With Gianni Vattimo, contemporary history is fundamentally different from modern history due to the dissolution of the science of history with all its branches, including both the philosophy of history and the practical historiography, be it rhetorical or ideological. A history of the contemporary world can no longer be written because everything *nowadays* ‘shows a flattening tendency on the plane of contemporaneity and simultaneity owing to the new communication media, especially television.’<sup>37</sup> This simultaneity or synchrony of all history via the media is one of the essential traits of the postmodern world. It has considerable consequences for art and literature: the artists is suddenly granted access to all forms of art, no matter how “historicised” (therefore *dead*) they may seem from the viewpoint of modernist critique.

The notion of the “end of history”, which is fundamental to postmodernism, is not actually a postmodern contrivance. It has been set forth, in either an explicit or a veiled manner at certain other moments in European historical-philosophical thinking. Hegel is probably the first to reiterate, after millenia, the terrifying sentence from the *Apocalypse*: ‘*And time shall be no more.*’ In Hegel’s view, world history was a continuous advance of humankind towards self-knowledge, that is towards the complete fulfilment of the absolute spirit. In the tangible historical plane, this fulfilment was tantamount to everybody’s acquiring awareness of their liberty: ‘*Oriental peoples knew that **you** were free; the Greek and the Roman worlds knew that **certain** people were free; while we all know that absolutely **all** people (humans as **humans**) are free.*’<sup>38</sup> This statement, in which the aim of history is commensurate with liberty, recalls a Kantian assertion: ‘*The history of the world is nothing else but the improvement of the awareness of Liberty.*’<sup>39</sup> Hegel was nevertheless going a step further, since he was trying to prove that fully acquiring a free conscience was no longer a desideratum, but a wish come true. Admittedly, people could accede to freedom only under the conditions supplied by certain institutions, the most important of which was a modern constitutional state. These conditions were met with, in Hegel’s view, by the Prussia of his time, after the battle of Jena in 1806. As a result, Hegel regarded this date as the landmark of “the end of history”. Historical events would keep on taking place, but the principles of freedom and justice which all liberal modern states rely on had been discovered and implemented, although only partially and in a few states (apart from Prussia, mention could be made of France and the United States after their respective revolutions). From the viewpoint of the ideas underlying the progress of humankind, no further evolution was possible.

Another thinker who, starting from Hegelian dialectics, foresaw an end for history was Marx. After the final victory of communism throughout the world, humankind was not to witness further historical stages. Once the final aim was reached, history would come to an end and no track would be kept of any real progress. The state itself was sentenced to dissolution and class struggle, “the power engine of history”, would end in the victory of the proletariat.

The controversial book of the young American historian Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* (preceded, three years before, by his apprehensively interrogative article ‘*The End of History?*’) has had a great impact on contemporary thought owing to the postmodern

circumstances in which it was written. The book was published in a context which supported the idea of the end of an evolution, and of the dissolution of linearity, causality and teleology, especially in culture, art and literature. Fukuyama does not declare himself to be postmodern and does not use the term systematically. Nevertheless, his book may be considered postmodern in its description of the historical, social, economic and (last but not least) psychological conditions which enable the moving onward of all societies, at various speeds, towards a unique form of socio-political life, identified by Fukuyama as *bourgeois democratic liberalism*. In my opinion, Fukuyama's book rounds off a bird's-eye view on postmodernity from a historical and political viewpoint, focusing on a type of society which could not be achieved outside contemporary democracy and liberalism. His analysis is all the more plausible as it comprises recent events of an overwhelming importance for world history. He deals with those events of the late 80s which led to the irreversible breakdown of the world's second totalitarian regime, communism, fifty years after the fascist regime had been destroyed by the same Western democracies. Under the circumstances, the conclusion is self-evident: on a world-wide scale, democratic liberalism is no longer rivalled by any ideology that might constitute a serious threat or a plausible alternative. The purpose of Francis Fukuyama's book is, however, not to reveal a state-of-affairs (which might only be sheer historical hazard), but to prove its *necessity*: the necessary, increasingly manifest ongoing movement of all societies towards Western capitalist ideals, in other words towards what we call the *postmodern* world.

Fukuyama finds the philosophical foundations substantiating a possible end to historical evolution in the work of Alexandre Kojève, a fascinating personality among the French intellectuals of the 30s. Kojève had delivered a series of lectures providing an unconventional interpretation of Hegel. He agreed with the author of *The Phenomenology of Mind* that history had ended in 1806, with the battle of Jena. All events after this date, some of them world-shattering, such as the revolutions in Russia and China, failed to signify for him higher stages of the "universal and homogeneous" modern state; he regarded these events as pertaining to the same stage and representing the "alignment of the provinces" to the mainstream trend, namely the dissemination of the same principles of liberty and equality among the less advanced nations, under specific forms: '*Observing what is going on around me and what has happened in the world since the battle of Jena, I understood that Hegel had been right to see the end of*

*history as such in this battle. In and by this battle, the avant-garde of humanity actually reached its limit and its purpose, namely the end of Man's historical evolution. What has been happening ever since has been but a spatial extension of the universal revolutionary force which Robespierre and Napoleon implemented in France.*<sup>40</sup> And if for Hegel, Marx or Kojève the end of history was the harmless process of fulfilment of human liberty, the deeply-rooted pessimism of our century, which has witnessed two devastating world wars, the holocaust, the Hiroshima A-bomb, and two totalitarian regimes of unprecedented monstrosity, has utterly discredited history as a unidirectional, progressive and intelligible action force. For the ordinary human being, the very notion of history has acquired negative connotations, as in the Joycean nightmare. Under the given circumstances, Fukuyama's optimism distinguishes his theory from those promoted by modern historians (such as Toynbee) and draws it closer to postmodern theories.

The American historian deals with two aspects of human life which should necessarily overlap in order for liberal societies to achieve their present day form. One aspect is material, the one is idealist-psychological. Economical analysis reveals that there is only one human process that is undoubtedly cumulative and progressive: science. The accumulation of knowledge provides tangible advantages for a society committed to scientific progress. Even those societies that are utterly opposed to the scientific spirit cannot do without scientific findings nowadays, even if only in the military field. The technical and scientific revolution has a considerable impact not only on those states which initiated it, but on all states, whether they are communist, Islamic or feudal. The social advantages generated by science and technology in all fields of life (medicine, entertainment, education, etc.) are so obvious that renouncing them seems inconceivable. Should a world-wide disaster occur, the surviving groups would necessarily resume the process. Thus, at least from this point of view, history follows an irreversible path: *'And if the mastery of modern science is irreversible, once it has been achieved, then a directional history and its various economic, social and political consequences are fundamentally irreversible as well.'*<sup>41</sup>

This does not in any way mean that the accumulation of knowledge should necessarily lead to a society of the liberal type, but only that it constitutes a necessary premise for such a society. States such as the Soviet Union or South Korea are examples of highly industrialised countries which have never been democratic; on the contrary they have lived under one

authoritarian regime or another. Until the 60s and 70s, when the informational post-industrial society emerged, the impact of science and technology was considered rather negative, a source of dehumanisation, uniformity and dictatorship. The imperative of performativity has however led to the progressive rationalisation of production, which has reached its acme in the development of free markets, top technologies and management. Unexpectedly, it was technologies that abolished hyper-authoritarian regimes and that became "*the grave-diggers of communism*" to use Raymond Aron's phrase<sup>42</sup>. Communist states suffered from economical stagnation because of their centralised economy, based on planning from above and unable to adjust to market fluctuations. There is no alternative today to free market mechanisms for achieving that full modernity which is postmodernity.

Under these circumstances, the old socialist idea according to which capitalism survives by exploiting Third World resources and causing their underdevelopment appears as erroneous. Those countries which benefited from industrialisation later on have not been disadvantaged in comparison with the old industrial states. The contrary can be proved by the economic boom of certain countries in south-eastern Asia, which decided in favour of industrialisation by adopting top technologies and which stepped out of their feudal underdevelopment into the post-industrial age. Irrespective of the amount of resources and the backwardness of the population, capitalism has been successful wherever it has been imposed by firm political decision. The underdeveloped countries of the present day do not lack propitious conditions; what they lack — Fukuyama emphasizes — is the political will to pass on to a prosperous society. The idea is also illustrated by Germany's and Japan's miraculous recoveries, these countries being able to rebuild everything out of wreck and ruin.

Without the decision to create a hi-tech economy, the ideal of democracy stays utopian. All over the world there is a salient link between a society's level of prosperity and the degree of democracy in its institutions. Mass education, communication and public services, and a political system able to express the wide range of group and individual interests created by the post-industrial age, have improved the political culture of the population. Consequently, industrialisation generates bourgeois societies, which need legal and political protection in order to secure freedom and equality for their citizens.

Despite the above considerations, authoritarian states of the right wing or Islamic dictatorship type may prove as capable as democracies of

securing economic prosperity both in principle and in practice. They may follow a sterner economic path and spend less on social assistance. The economic growth rate in the Republic of Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship was the highest in the country's history. Therefore, mere economical growth does not seem sufficient to create a modern democratic society, as it may easily lead to bureaucratic authoritarianism. What is evident is that, irrespective of the different ways the constitutive states are governed, today's world community is unified by a single culture, owing to the one-way path the process of scientific knowledge has embarked upon. Both traditionalist societies and totalitarian experiments have proved invalid. Among the traditionalist societies, the most primitive, such as those in Africa, Papua or South America are almost extinct, while the totalitarian ones are hybrids bordering on the dominant civilisation. Richard Rorty shares this opinion and in *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature* points out that the encounter with "absolute otherness" is ideal and utopian<sup>43</sup> under present day circumstances, when a generalised European-American culture allows the existence of antiquated societies only as "sites of survivals"<sup>44</sup>. For this civilisation, founded on knowledge and technology, to convert into a democratic world, another component is, however, needed. Fukuyama seeks it in a realm, which, unexpected as it might appear, proves fruitful in the search of the philosophical and psychological roots of democracy.

This component is human nature, the "ideal" factor which needs to be added to the economic factor. The citizen of the liberal-democratic world is no longer the grotesquely satirised selfish philistine bourgeois, solely concerned with their own prosperity. The essence of their existence is political, and economy plays but a minor part in political life. After all, the political struggle is a struggle for idealistic and psychological recognition, specific to the genuine human being. While searching for the "first Man" and his political motivations, the American historian resorts to Hegel once again. In *The Phenomenology of Mind* the original Man appears as a being who experiences wholly non-material needs alongside his natural needs. Among these non-material needs, the "desire for the desire of others" ranks primary and implies the need for recognition, love and appreciation on the part of other members of the community. In their struggle towards recognition, human beings surpass their biological condition, as they come to act against their own instinct of self-preservation and to show heroism and a spirit of sacrifice. This need for recognition could be called vanity, self-love, craving for glory, pride or dignity.

Fukuyama uses a term he borrows from Plato's *Republic*, "*thymos*", which could be translated as boldness or wit. The Greek word has neither negative nor positive connotations (or rather accepts both) and enables the historian to employ it as the basic element of his demonstration. The present day democratic world is generated by the joint action of technology and *thymos*. All along history, *thymos* has embodied the human spirit of justice and the rebellious rage against injustice. The *thymotic* component of the human mind is responsible for most historical events such as wars or revolutions to a higher extent than economic causes. In 1989, for instance, East-Europeans did not demonstrate in the streets in order to ask for higher material prosperity, but because their dignity had been painfully injured for so long.

*Thymos* is a duplicitous component of the spirit. Its exacerbation, in the form of *megalothymia*, becomes aggressive and anti-social. This is why philosophers such as Hobbes or Locke had attempted to confine it or even eradicate it as if it were a human vice. This exacerbation defines the aristocratic *thymos*, which is essentially opposite to the bourgeois spirit, as it is liable to perpetuate a morality of the master, as opposed to a morality of the slave. Although so bitterly despised by Nietzsche, the morality of the slave has paved its way triumphantly through history, from the Christian revolution to the bourgeois one. Spiritually, the slave has proved to be more complex than the ancient philosophers or Nietzsche himself had ever fancied, since the slave is equally endowed with a *thymotic* nature, which is wholly opposed to that of the master. Present day bourgeois society is the consequence and the end of the "slaves'" struggle for recognition, which has constituted the historical movement itself, in the form of a "universal recognition" which combines the morality of the master and that of the slave. The liberal state transcends all the irrational modalities of *thymos* — nationalism, racism, etc. — granting the individual full recognition as a *human being*. It is the only possible way to rationally satisfy the *thymos* of all citizens. The form of state which confers this recognition is, to quote Kojeve, "*fully satisfactory*" and history as a movement of ideas comes to an end. In real life, it is the granting of rights that enables the recognition of citizens.

Francis Fukuyama manages to combine the necessity of an advanced economy with that of the free, *thymos*-based, option for democracy. The economic liberalisation of society generates the conditions required by democracy through the need for universal education, egalitarian par excellence, which in its turn creates the need for universal recognition.

But for this need, people would go on living happily under dictatorships that witness prodigious economical growth, such as that of South-Korean. The extremely violent popular upsurges in that country prove the contrary. The final conclusion the book reaches is that history came to an end once the liberal democracies vanquished all the other types of state: monarchic, aristocratic, theocratic, fascist, communist, etc. With the exception of the Islamic world (a peculiar case which I do not propose to discuss here) democracy has become the explicit ideal, asserted as such, of all societies dwelling on this planet and the central component of a transnational world. It is not hard to identify this transnational world with Lyotard's informatized world or with Vattimo's "recovery" from the nightmare of a horrendous history, in other words with a *post-historical*, *post-industrial*, *post-humanist*, consequently *post-modern* world, in which 'time shall be no more' as in the Apocalypse prediction. The merits of Fukuyama's demonstration are all the greater as it goes beyond its own conclusion. The final part of his book pits the idea of the inevitable ongoing movement of the world towards democracy against the extremely contradictory actual geopolitical situation. Why has democracy not been embraced by the whole world? Which are the most dreaded enemies of the democratic world nowadays? Why is democracy irreversible? — These are questions the American historian strives to answer in an objective and honest way.

As already emphasised, the postmodern space becomes fractal, paradoxical, virtual, giving rise to vertigo and illusion as in Escher's engravings, and finally creating a feeling of unreality. The notion of time is also subject to other bizarre, yet everyday phenomena. Postmodern, transhistorical time becomes a "weak", aestheticised time, no longer perceived under the tragic, elegiac, nostalgic or pathetic aspect it was envisaged in the modern age, but as a storehouse of images ranged in conformity with weak and artistic criteria: the pleasant, the amazing, the delightful. A photo album, a slide set, a video tape displaying images we ourselves have shot, postmodern time undergoes the same process of irrealisation as does space and turns into a motley, simultaneous and shallow patchwork. The myth of Chronos devouring his children is replaced by the myth of the same Chronos, castrated by a diamond scythe.

The same feeling of unreal time permeates an article written by Sergio Benvenuto, '*The Third Time*'<sup>45</sup>, which basically deals with the ambiguisation of temporal concepts in present day American society, in which a bizarre hybrid is growing within the past-present interstice. The past becomes a kind of present owing to the hundreds of museums,



entertainment parks and castles, which in California (undoubtedly the most postmodern region on the globe) and in other parts of the United States, reconstruct the historical realities of the ages past at a one-to-one scale, in a bedazzling surrealistic melting-pot in which history becomes a storehouse of shallow images, all of which are exhibited on the present plane. In such places, the most famous (or, as Americans would say, *infamous*) of which are places like Disneyland, the Paul Getty Museum or Renaissance Fayr, a European feels completely disoriented. This reckless enterprise is inevitably accompanied by dizziness and an acute feeling of kitsch. To the American, these places are only part of their ahistorical, popular — in the Bakhtinian sense — perception of reality. The past made present and flattened is one side of the American perception of time. Its counterpart is the reverse tendency, equally powerful in the American world and equally strange to Europeans: that of historicising the present. Among the museums and entertainment institutions which present past monuments as being present, there are others, just as numerous, which display recent moments by setting them at an estranging historical distance. There are museums of the 60s and the 70s, of pop-art, of rock stars, of the hippie movement, all minutely reconstituted. There are exact reconstructions of renowned establishments. Prisons like Alcatraz are visited as if they were museums. Hence the feeling that Americans live their whole history at once, while, on the other hand, they keep visiting their own present as if it were their past: *'Mummifying the present means giving a popular dimension to the social sciences that haunt the United States... To us, the inhabitants of the Old World, there is a "continuum" between the past and the present: we celebrate the past, but fail to "grasp" the present. In the New World, the past, including that of paleontology<sup>16</sup>, is magically projected into the living present. On the other hand, the present, because of the irony of the "spectacle" or of museum — and philological — display, grows increasingly remote. Thus the American loiters through a different time dimension, somewhere between our (historical) past and our (invisible and non-representable) present: a different kind of elation, vacillating between presence and absence.'* Benvenuto emphasises that this is the vision of a grown-up child, remarkably fresh and with a huge ludic and ironical potential.

## 5. The postmodern option

Having analysed three theoretical approaches to postmodernity, I am persuaded that the topic exceeds the confinements of a literary survey. However, I find it impossible to understand postmodern art and literature without these preliminary discussions. Had I focused on literary phenomena alone, I might have run the risk of presenting a mere list of procedures and traits inexplicably featuring in post-war poetry and fiction, and of enhancing, instead of diminishing the confusion of contemporary literary criticism. That the evolution of the literary system can only be explained by means of its inner logic is sheer illusion. The global changes in present day architecture and mentality are decisive for any artistic approach, since, more than ever, art participates nowadays in the world's social and communicational network. While moulding the network, art has become one of its epi-phenomena as well. Such changes are dramatic enough for us to discard the concept of "trend" in art or thought (such as classicism, Romanticism or modernism) and to talk instead about the emergence of a new *civilisation*, as different from the modern one (that of the period from the Renaissance to the Second World War) as the modern age was different from the Middle Ages. That would be one reason why postmodernism could be called *post-humanism* or even *post-Europeanism*.

Facing not only a literary or artistic trend but a whole new world entails fundamental options on the part of any intellectual (or indeed anyone) educated in the spirit of European humanist culture. Integration into postmodernity requires a long and painful process during which the intellectual must witness the breakdown of many basic premises of their location in the world. The more the individual used to be attached to certain ideals or values regarded as perennial and immutable, the greater the anxiety and confusion experienced in front of an apparently (and programmatically) indetermined, chaotic and unstable world. This end of millenium witnesses a tragedy of alienation. The revival of nationalisms, tribalisms and fundamentalisms, as well as the excessive anti-Americanism present even in advanced European countries, are the anguished response of peoples and individuals whose fear for the future has reached its climax, so that the only solution they can devise is taking refuge in the past. The feeling of privacy, safety and comfort inspired by religious faith, or the creed in a homeland or in a nation (leading at the extreme to chauvinism, intolerance and nationalism) appears to many as more appealing than an impersonal society of an infinite abstract complexity, in which individuals compete

fiercely, according to the rules imposed by performativity. But this is only a pastiche of the liberal world. In real life, the postmodern world that is being created nowadays, although not “fully satisfactory”, is closer to the ideal of a world “that can be lived in” than any other world ever created on earth. Detachment from reality (and even *irrealisation*), perspectivism regarding values, the end of history as humankind’s triumphant progress towards one human ideal or another, and pluralism, are all the new premises which provide the foundation upon which personhood may be structured. It is up to everyone to decide whether they *want* and whether they *can* exist in the postmodern world, whether they want and can pursue art, science or management under the new circumstances. Resignation is no solution. No state of things should be accepted only because it looks inevitable. Any intellectual that strives to be a postmodern thinker should be aware of the price postmodernity asks us to pay. Questions such as how one can keep a religious faith when any kind of faith becomes relative and contextual (how can one “contextually” believe in God?), or how one can practise art when values are dissolved, involve commitment of the individual conscience and life design. The hope that one may relieve oneself from irrational *thymoses* overnight and that democracy and tolerance may be learned as part of the curriculum is simply utopian. Regarding postmodernity as a new myth of the golden age, as a new Cernishevskian “crystal palace” where all problems get solved by themselves and where humans are necessarily happy sounds more than naive. Dostoyevski’s man from the pit would answer these utopias in a boastful, wayward, yet fully humane voice: *‘What I’m asking you is this: what can you expect from man, a being endowed with such bizarre features? Bestow all the goodness of the earth on him, or immerse him in the pool of happiness till he is blowing bubbles to the surface. Bestow upon him economic satiation so that he need no longer lift a finger (...), well, even then, man, ungrateful as he is, just out of contradictory spirit, will hit you with some piece of mischief at you (...) It is precisely his fancy dreams that he will want to hold on to, his villainous tomfoolery, only to prove to himself that people are still people and not piano keys (...) And unless more fitting means are within his reach, he will contrive destruction and chaos, he will concoct God knows how much suffering, but he will act to his heart’s delight.’*<sup>47</sup> Far from being extinct today, communist and fascist nostalgias, terrorism and nationalisms are seeing a recrudescence that only testifies to their responsive nature as an expression of dread for the future. It is the high price, unendurable for some, of integration into the new civilisation, since nobody parts with the past smiling, but bleeding.

## NOTES

1. Virgil Nemoianu, 'Notes sur l'état de postmodernité' in *Euresis*, 1-2/1995, p. 17. In the same essay Nemoianu also proposes one of the most interesting views on postmodernity, which is characterised, in his opinion, by nine essential elements: '1. La centralité de l'élément communication/mobilité; 2. La société postindustrielle; 3. La transition de la révolution de Gutenberg (...) au visuel télévisé et à la présence virtuelle; 4. L'établissement de nouveaux rapports entre les hommes et les femmes; 5. La tension entre le globalisme et le multiculturalisme; 6. La conscience de soi, l'autoanalyse; 7. La relativisation et l'incertitude des valeurs; 8. Le jeu parodique avec l'histoire; 9. La religiosité postmoderne 'spirituel/mystique'' (pp. 18-19).
2. Gianni Vattimo, *Sfârșitul modernității*, Pontica Publishing House, p. 6.
3. Gianni Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
4. Quoted by Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
5. *Idem*, p. 26.
6. *Idem*, p. 31.
7. *Idem*, p. 48.
8. See the discussion in the preface of Vattimo's book and then its 6th chapter: 'The Structure of Artistic Revolutions'.
9. G. Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
10. *Idem*, p. 60.
11. Quoted by G. Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
12. *Idem*, p. 112.
13. *Idem*, p. 154.
14. R. Guideri, quoted by Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
15. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Condiția postmodernă*, Bucharest, Babel Publishing House, 1993.
16. J-F. Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
17. Matei Calinescu & Douwe Fokkema, *Exploring Postmodernism*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990.
18. Matei Calinescu, in 'Introductory Remarks', p. 5-6.
19. *Societatea transparentă*, Pontica Publishing House, Constanta, 1995.
20. J.-F. Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
21. *Idem*, p. 20.
22. *Idem*, p. 26.
23. *Idem*, p. 36.
24. *Idem*, p. 29.
25. *Idem*, p. 39.
26. *Idem*, p. 77.
27. *Idem*, p. 79.
28. *Idem*, p. 81.
29. *Idem*, p. 85.

30. *Idem*, p. 89.
31. *Idem*, p. 101.
32. *Idem*, p. 108.
33. *Idem*, p. 111.
34. *Idem*, p. 111.
35. *Idem*, p. 112.
36. A. Gehlen, quoted by Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
37. G. Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
38. Hegel, quoted by Fukuyama in *Sfârșitul istoriei și ultimul om*, Paideia Publishing House, 1994, p. 59.
39. Immanuel Kant, quoted by Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
40. Alexandre Kojève, quoted by Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
41. F. Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
42. Raymond Aron, quoted by Fukuyama, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
43. R. Rorty, quoted by Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
44. R. Guideri, quoted by Vattimo, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
45. In *Lettre Internationale*, Romanian version, Spring 1994.
46. The movie *Jurassic Park* is the basic subject of Benvenuto's article.
47. Feodor Dostoievski, *Omul din subterană*, Bucharest, Orfeu Publishing House, 1993.