

DECONSTRUCTION AS CULTURAL HISTORY/ THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF DECONSTRUCTION

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Among those diverse writers who are conveniently gathered under the post-structuralist umbrella, Jacques Derrida is, perhaps, the most serious. The Derridian critique of "the West," a critique of the logocentric discourse into which he intervenes, purports to be radical in the sense of getting at the root of what the West means. He performs that critique according to the standard of seriousness that he believes has been set by the historical West, that is, the privileging of metaphysical inquiry. It may seem paradoxical or even perverse to call Derrida serious when he urges one to be playful. Yet play, for him, is the consummation of textual work which liberates him from the hegemony of metaphysical absolutes, what he calls "master-names." Derrida transmutes the practice of metaphysics into the play of master-names. He pits them all against his unique word "*différance*," which holds the place occupied by master-names, not to control them in a new metaphysics pretending to mirror an ulterior Being, but to permit them to play within and between texts. Derrida takes metaphysics, which was meant to provide an opening of Being to language and of language to Being, and encloses it into self-dependent textuality. The deconstructive move is either postmodern play or modern seriousness, depending upon one's perspective.

Derrida's thought will be understood here as paradigmatic of the contemporary moment of western culture, specifically the culture of the

modern West. The aim will be to historicize his thought, not in order to fit it into a teleological pattern that shows it to follow from previously temporalized moments, but to expose it as an intelligible development from an earlier thought on similar themes. That prior thought will be Georg Simmel's emblematic critique of the serious business of metaphysics. His critique did not cause deconstruction to be thought and written according to some mysterious dialectic of ideas. Rather, Simmel anticipates the deconstructive move, which makes his modernism and his reflection on history particularly appropriate for a rapprochement with postmodernism. His hyper-modernism provides the historization of postmodernity.

Simmel, the playful modernist, will be deployed in this writing to situate Derrida's thought in a modernist discourse, and Derrida will be deployed to extend Simmel's discourse on and of cultural history into the current postmodern moment of western culture. The result will be a Simmelian history with Derridian content and a Derridian deconstruction with historical import. The extrinsic intention of this writing will be to configure what is called postmodernism in a cultural history.

Central Ideas/Life

In his late work Georg Simmel stood on the boundary between cultural history and metaphysics. His most ambitious philosophical work, *Lebensanschauung*¹, deployed the hot discourse of metaphysics, seeking a Derridian master-name to define that which is present and extra-linguistic, and using that word, "Life," to control his text, as Derrida says, "from the outside." But in "The Conflict in Modern Culture,"² his last work, Simmel deployed the cool discourse of intellectual history to interpret all master-names, including his own, as "central ideas" that characterize cultural epochs. In his cultural history the master-names were not, as they were for Hegel, tokens of a progressive struggle of Being to achieve self-lucidity, but operators functioning to integrate the diverse regions of culture. Central ideas work culturally to bestow meaning on human pursuits. As long as they perform that function it does not matter if they have named some ulterior Being accurately.

Simmel did not make as clear a distinction between metaphysics and cultural history as was made above. He sought to control the text of "The Conflict in Modern Culture" from the outside by appealing to his metaphysics of Life as its foundation. In order to make Simmel's text available for informing Derrida's writing with an historical dimension that text must be deconstructed to free cultural history from its metaphysical foundation. At the outset of "The Conflict"³ Simmel discusses "the ultimate reason why culture has a history," summarizing his metaphysical thesis that "life, having become spirit," perpetually creates forms in

which to express itself. These forms, "which become self-enclosed and demand permanence," eventually fail to satisfy life, the essence of which is a "restless rhythm" opposing "the fixed duration of any particular form."⁴ What might be called normal history for Simmel is the ceaseless supplanting of one form by another over time: when life is constrained and frustrated by a regnant form, it creates another in which to express more adequately its current condition, in an unending process. When, however, life becomes conscious of itself as form-giving activity, as it does in Simmel's metaphysics, history enters an abnormal phase. Life, acknowledging that no form can ever provide permanent satisfaction, rebels against the submission to any form, putting a tragic stalemate into play, since the rebellion against form cannot cancel the essential need of life to express itself in form. The conflict in modern culture is that of life against itself, of form-giving activity against submission to its own creations, leading to chronic frustration and dissatisfaction.

The deconstruction of Simmel's text finds its purchase point in that text's nostalgia for a normal history. At the root of normal history is Simmel's understanding that history has been a dialectic of illusion and reality that he has succeeded in demythologizing. Prior to his writing, history has proceeded with life creating a series of forms, each of which was thought to define a Being that comprehended and fulfilled life, though actually it was only expressing vital impulse. Metaphysics has been life's veiling of itself in myth, but in Simmel's text it becomes its own demythologization, revealing its presence to itself. In Derridian terms, "life" is the master-name of Simmel's "metaphysics of presence," controlling all of the differences in his text from the outside. Indeed, Simmel often capitalizes "Life," using it to embrace the interplay of life and form, as though he were able to get beyond the conflict. According to Derrida, metaphysics, especially the tradition of modern rationalism from Descartes to Hegel, always tries to get outside the conflict or play within the text by embracing it in a name. But that name, for Derrida, is "logocentric," articulating dispersion in a specious unity. Simmel's "Life" provides no such unity, but merely names the dispersion specifically as a "conflict." His metaphysics is the self-denial of the pretensions of logocentric writing within the affirmation of the logocentric form. It is almost a deconstruction of metaphysics, but not quite. It stalemates logocentrism by proclaiming that Being (Life) is inherently opposed to itself. It is an anti-logocentrism, a vital skepticism, which remains bound to logocentrism through nostalgia expressed in the form of tragedy. Being, for Simmel, is tragic. There is a reason for the differences, even if that reason is Life's inherent nonconformity to rationality. A deconstruction of Simmel's text lets go of the tragedy by decapitalizing life and leaving the difference(s) between life and form to play within the text. "Life" becomes another master-name to be taken up into cultural history.

In the deconstructed text of "The Conflict" life and form are no longer mediated by privileging life as Life. Uncapitalized life may, indeed, be the

generator of form (and there may also be a dialectical opposition between life and form), but there is no greater Life, controlling the text from the outside, to inform that opposition with tragedy. In the play of the text, life has its pretensions to self-expression and form has its pretensions in expressing life. What allows these differences to be unnamed, the place of Life in the text being taken by the permissive prohibition *différance*. Tragedy need not be eternal and is freed for interpretation as a moment of cultural history.

What does cultural history become in Simmel's text if it is lifted out of its foundation in his metaphysics of presence? It is no longer the struggle of life with or against form, but the successive displacement of master-names or "central ideas," each of them controlling discourses and practices in the various regions of culture. Simmel, indeed, anticipates Michel Foucault's⁵ discussion of "epistemes" by defining cultural history not as an intelligible order but as "the displacement of an old form by a new one."⁶ The deconstruction of his text opens the possibility that the contradictions and paradoxes ranged under the master-name "Life" are characteristics of the discourse controlled by that master-name and are not indicative of a permanent structure of Being, albeit the structure of deconstruction. "Life" itself may be subject to displacement by other "central ideas" or there may have been an end, for the time being or indefinitely, to "central ideas." Simmel's own cultural history, relieved of its foundationalist backing, opens the way to just such possibilities, to a post-structuralist or Derridian reading.

Simmel's discussion of central ideas as cool cultural history has strong resemblances to current post-structuralist interpretations of language, discourse, writing, and text as modes of cultural control. Divested of the metaphysics of life, the central ideas are operators in discourses and texts that perform the function of regulation through centric unification. Simmel brings the notion of central ideas into his text after he has laid the foundation for cultural history in his metaphysics of life. As he turns to cultural history proper, "the arena of the history of ideas," he makes a textual jump that will make him "range a little further afield." In fact, he enters a new field, grounding cultural history in a specific cultural object, the master-name of metaphysics: "In every important cultural epoch, one can perceive a central idea from which spiritual movements originate and towards which they seem to be oriented."⁷ From the viewpoint of the metaphysics of life the central idea is a product of "Life's" tragic struggle, but from the standpoint of cultural history "Life" is but a central idea, to be analyzed in terms of its intellectual content (the idea of tragic struggle) and its adequacy in fulfilling the requirements of a central idea, the rules by which a central idea is constituted. Simmel's text stalemates itself by grounding cultural history in Life and then by making "Life" a moment in cultural history. Deconstruction is not an operation imposed on his text, but a move that is proper to it and a name for what happens within it.

Simmel states that although the central idea of an epoch is "modified, obscured, and opposed in innumerable ways," it "represents the 'secret being' of the epoch."⁸ The structure of that secret, the uniqueness of the central idea as a cultural object, is its joining of "the most perfect being, the most absolute and metaphysical phase of reality" with "the highest values, the most absolute demands on ourselves and on the world."⁹ The central idea performs the same function for spiritual culture in general as the master-name performs for the text of metaphysics: it exerts control over spiritual culture from the outside by purporting to give spiritual culture a foundation ulterior to itself and a regulative aim beyond itself. For the metaphysics of Life, the central idea is an expression of life through which life interprets itself as other than itself, according to the contents taken up into a form. But for cultural history the central idea is a mode of discipline through which spiritual culture is organized. Having discerned the form of the central idea behind its shifting historical contents, Simmel deconstructs it, just as Derrida deconstructs the master-names. He notes that the central idea is constituted by a contradiction: "Whatever is unconditionally real does not require to be realized nor can one evidently say that an existing most unquestioned being is only supposed to come into being."¹⁰ Here the tragic Simmel cedes to the playful Simmel. Remarking that "*Weltanschauungen* in their ultimate perfections do not concern themselves with such conceptual difficulties," he advises that whenever ultimate "is" and absolute "ought" are joined "one can be assured to locate a really central idea of the respective world view."¹¹ As a cultural historian Simmel is a deconstructionist.

The major portion of "The Conflict" is devoted to a discussion of how the central idea of "Life" can interpret the spiritual culture of the West in Simmel's own time, the early twentieth century. He notes briefly how "being," "God," "nature," "ego," and "society" have successively displaced one another as central ideas in western history, but he configures no orderly progression of them. When he turns to discuss the central idea of "Life" he treats that idea as an expression of philosophical culture and not as his own master-name. Retextualizing the discourse of "Life" as a phase of cultural history, Simmel repeats his metaphysical theses but now takes an ironic distance from them. He concludes his remarks by placing the movement toward "Life" as a central idea in "the most general cultural perspective." In that context "Life" indicates "a turn away from classicism as the absolute ideal of human culture."¹² As "the ideology of form," classicism "regards itself as the ultimate norm for life and creation."¹³ It is the binary opposite of "Life," the most direct contender with it for cultural mastery—indeed, the master-name of its ideology is "Form" or perhaps "Culture." Here Simmel deconstructs his own metaphysics by stalemating its hegemonic pretensions. He remarks that "nothing more adequate or refined has taken the place of the old ideal," but then reminds us that "[t]he attack against classicism is not concerned with the introduction of new cultural forms:" "Instead self-assured life wishes to

liberate itself from the yoke of form as such of which classicism is a historical representation."¹⁴ Although Simmel believes *that* "Life" is the central idea of his time he does not here believe *in* that idea, as he seems to do in his metaphysics. He knows that it excludes the discourse of classicism, of the regency of "Culture," and in "The Conflict" he places himself in the "arena of the history of ideas," where "Culture" is King. As Derrida advises, one should compare title to text. Simmel's metaphysics of Life is an incident within "The Conflict in Modern Culture." And the text stalemates the metaphysics.

Considered strictly as a central idea, "Life" is not adequate for the requirements of such an idea; that is, it cannot join the "is" and the "ought" because "oughts" are always constituted in forms and the idea of "Life" "wishes to liberate itself from the yoke of form as such." The idea of "Life" prescribes that the form-giving activity, which is essential to "Life," never submit to any of its own creations. Yet submission to "Form" is just what a central idea is supposed to engender. "Life" is that peculiar central idea which deconstructs the notion of the central idea as a cultural operator. Rather than unifying culture it disperses it into the manifold loci of its creation, signalling an end of cultural discipline and control. As Simmel traces how the idea of "Life" has worked its way through the spiritual culture of his time he illustrates how the form-giving activity strives to possess, indeed absorb, its creations in a frustrated effort to be simply itself. "Normal history" has ended and perhaps with it the idea of history itself.

The irony within Simmel's cultural criticism is that life is "self-assured" and yet doomed in its rebellion against form. The tone he takes when he describes expressionism in art, popular mysticism in religion, "the new morality" in sexual relations, and pragmatism in philosophy is one of ironic compassion, not tragedy. He reports on the tragic conflict; he is not a partisan within it. At each point he stalemates the movement towards "Life" with the counter-play of autonomous form. Expressionist art is a denial of the necessity "for the identity between the form of the cause and that of the effect," of the assumption "that a successful artistic response must be morphologically similar to the stimulus that evoked it."¹⁵ Instead of representing the stimulus, the expressionist follows the inner impulse evoked by that stimulus, creating an exteriorization of feeling rather than a publicly available meaning. Similarly, the pragmatist denies autonomous standards of cognitive validity and interprets truth as a function of success; the "new moralist" rejects the general forms of erotic gratification (marriage and prostitution) in favor of free love; and the popular mystic replaces faith in transcendent order and obligation with the feeling of piety. In each case the cultural moment of high modernism is an assertion of life against form, a denial of the autonomy of form. Simmel's final judgment on all of these cultural tendencies is that they display a wish of life "to obtain something which it cannot reach": "It desires to transcend all forms and to appear in its naked immediacy.

Yet the processes of thinking, wishing, and forming can only substitute one form for another."¹⁶ The reign of "Life" as the central idea is contingent on the desire that it expresses. Were that desire to be displaced by another there would be a new central idea or, perhaps, none at all. Or, perhaps, the desire for a central idea might simply be lost.

The command of "Life" that life submit to itself is self-contradictory because life is formless and yet inherently creates forms. This is not the same kind of contradiction that attended all of the preceding central ideas, which, from the viewpoint of "Life," made certain contents of "Life" its origin and aim. "Life" has no aim to reach, but it is not adequate to itself when it is made to be its own object. Its contradiction does not produce an illusion that permits it to sustain itself, but is the frustration of all illusions, ever repeated as long as it retains "self-assurance," which is its own illusion or, better, delusion. Is cultural history still in the moment of "Life?" Has "Life" been displaced by other central ideas? Does culture now do without central ideas? Enter Derrida, the postmodernist.

Master-names/différance

Considered as an exemplar of a moment of modern cultural history, that of high modernism, Simmel epitomizes the struggle between romanticism and classicism for cultural supremacy. Although Simmel described his moment as one in which self-assured life struggled to liberate itself from the yoke of form, a view of that moment from the current epoch sees it differently. Simmel's own thought is hardly self-assured, but is, on the contrary, agonized by frustration. That frustration took material shape in the ideological warfare and wars of ideology of the 1930s and 1940s; for ideology is merely political expressionism, the effort, as Jose Ortega y Gasset argued in *The Revolt of the Masses*, to do without standards. The moment of high modernism is that of the agony of the West, the final revolt of romance, fighting under the master-name Life, against constraints of the mind. Freud's Eros/Thanatos, Unamuno's Reason/Faith-Life-Experience-Imagination, and Simmel's Life/Form were the counters in that serious game. That game ended after World War II and may have been replaced by another that defines a postmodern epoch. From this epoch, high modernism appears for philosophical culture as a war of classical and romantic words, not as the tragic destiny of the romantic words. As a high modernist, Simmel's thought is Janus-faced. He has made the conflict between classicism and romanticism self-conscious and has shown that it cannot be resolved. But then he enters the conflict as a partisan, on the side of Life, transmuting irreconcilability into a tragic essence of Life. Simmel the cultural historian adumbrates conflict. Simmel the metaphysician enters into that conflict on one side. But the metaphysician fails to achieve victory over the cultural historian.

The *best* he can do is stalemate classicism. But he *can* stalemate classicism. Postmodernism will not amount to a revival of classical prescriptions founded in central ideas purporting to record ultimate presence. High modernism revealed metaphysics to be a cultural form and no more. In a post-modern period, non-classical culture will be King, if it is possible to speak of cultural regency.

Whereas high-modernist philosophers practiced tragic metaphysics in the wake of the modern comedy of successive classicisms attempting to control romanticism, Derrida, the postmodernist, deconstructs the texts of metaphysics to liberate them from the control of their master-names, so that the words within them can play freely through their differences. That is, for Derrida, what Simmel called "central ideas" are reinterpreted as terms which regulate discourses. It is no longer a question of whether or not the master-names refer to, mirror, or record some ulterior and foundational Being, as they were meant to do; because Derrida's critique of metaphysics aims at definitively disestablishing any such pretensions of language to, in Heidegger's words, "name the Holy." As a critic of modernity, Derrida presents an anti-metaphysics, which denies the metaphysical project of naming Being, rather than a contra-metaphysics, as Simmel's was, which reinterprets other metaphysical texts in terms of a new text with its own master-names, such as Life, tragedy, and temperament.

Derrida's anti-metaphysics is based on a single and straightforward argument which he presents with special lucidity in his published address, "Différance."¹⁷ His claim is that western metaphysics has been founded on the assumption that there is an originary and irreducibly simple presence that thought can capture in a name and that will be able to control all discourses and texts from the outside: every signifier will be derived from the master-name and will be led back to it, fusing ground and goal in much the same way as Simmel asserted that the central idea functioned. Derrida negates the metaphysical pretension by arguing for

a primordial, and irreducibly nonsimple and, therefore, in the strict sense nonprimordial, synthesis of traces, retentions, and protentions (to reproduce here analogically and provisionally, a phenomenological and transcendental language that will presently be revealed as inadequate) that I propose to call protowriting, prototrace, or différance.¹⁸

For Derrida, there are texts that bear/bare the traces of that which makes these texts possible but which these texts can never capture, because the extra-linguistic holds itself back from the text, permitting its signifiers to differ in a play of signification. The possibility for such play in the text is grounded in the prohibition of presence: The interval that constitutes "what is called the present" must not only separate the present from what it is not, but "must, also and by the same token, divide the present in itself, thus, dividing, along with the present, everything

that can be conceived on its basis, that is, every being—in particular for our metaphysical language, the substance or subject.”¹⁹ Deconstruction is founded on metaphysical negation, not on linguistic theory. It is a metaphysical prohibition that prohibits metaphysics by putting forward the metaphysical proposition that the interval which constitutes the present as present MUST “divide the present in itself.” But what grounds does Derrida have for denying a unitary present, such as, for example, a Simmelian intuition of life (Life)? There are none. The *best* he can do is to stalemate the metaphysics of presence, but he *can* stalemate it.

Putting the necessity of denying a unitary present into question deconstructs Derrida’s text. Rather than ending metaphysical discourse he shows that it can be prohibited by an alternative speculative possibility to the assumption of that discourse. Yet his prohibition can be stalemated by just the claim that he prohibits. What is at stake in Derrida’s thought is not the question of the meaning of Being or even the possibility of raising that question, but the textual politics of freedom and control. Derrida has understood that the master-names of the metaphysical tradition function to control discourses and texts, and, as a partisan of freedom, he seeks to displace them with the word, “*différance*,” which holds the place that they occupied, but denies the perquisite of that place to provide the *logos* of the extra-linguistic. There is nothing to stop “*différance*” from being displaced by one of its old antagonists or a new one. Had he pursued a stalemating strategy deliberately he would have argued that the interval which constitutes the present as present MIGHT divide the present in and of itself. But just as Simmel was not content to let classicism and romanticism play with and against each other, and took up the romantic lance, so Derrida is not willing to play off the metaphysics of presence and its antithesis, but takes the side of liberated writing against the written about. His thought is emblematic of a moment in cultural history that privileges ... culture.

Derrida is a partisan of the freedom of culture, not the cultural freedom of the subject, self, or individual; but the freedom of cultural practices, especially writing, to follow their own ways without constraint “from the outside.” To accept the prohibition-permission of “*différance*” is to opt for play against discipline imposed from the outside to regulate cultural practices. According to Derrida, “everything is a matter of strategy and risk” in the text of “*différance*.”

It is a question of strategy because no transcendent truth present outside the sphere of writing can theologically command the totality of the field. It is hazardous because this strategy is not simply one in the sense that we say that strategy orients the tactics according to a final aim, a *telos* or the theme of a domination, a mastery or an ultimate reappropriation of movement and field.²⁰

The strategic aspect of “*différance*” is the prohibition: it blocks any

pretenders to transcendent truth. The hazardous aspect of "*différance*" is the permission: it leaves the field of writing free from reappropriation and free for play, for "a strategy without finality ... blind tactics..."²¹ Derrida privileges "play" even more than he does "*différance*." He asserts that "the concept of *play* [*jeu*]" is beyond the opposition of philosophical-logical discourse and "its integral and symmetrical opposite, logico-empirical speech," designating, "on the eve and aftermath of philosophy, ... the unity of chance and necessity in an endless calculus."²² "We know," according to Derrida, "that there has never been and never will be a unique word, a master name."²³ The "unnameable" is not "some ineffable Being that cannot be approached by a name," but simply

the play that brings about the nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures we call names, or chains of substitutions for names. In these, for example, the nominal effect of *différance* is itself *involved*, carried off, and reinscribed, just as the false beginning or end of a game is still part of the game, a function of the system.²⁴

"*Différance*" is the permission to play in and with the cultural form of metaphysics and, if, metaphysics has been the center of the control of culture and of cultural control, it is also the permission to play in and with all cultural forms. Metaphysics has interpreted itself as a serious quest for the meaning of Being, but when it is deconstructed it becomes the risk of meaning nothing. The purport of Derrida's project is summarized neatly in his interview with Henri Ronse:

To risk meaning nothing is to start to play and first to enter into the play of *différance* which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences.²⁵

The play is indeterminate and objectless; it is its own excuse for being; it need not be justified: it is culture asserting its autonomy from ... life (Life), not the expressive life of high modernism, but life as the effort to control culture, which high modernism became when it took the form of the ideological bureaucracy. Deconstruction (postmodernism) signals not "the eve of philosophy" but the rebellion of culture against the efforts of life to constrain it. It seeks to turn life, with all its practicalities and purposes into, as Kant called it in *The Critique of Judgment*, "purposeless purposiveness," into play.

From the viewpoint of a Simmelian-style cultural history postmodernism is the riposte of culture against life; it is the next moment in "the conflict in modern culture," which Simmel could not anticipate—the moment of self-distrustful life seeking liberation from its essential frustration by alienating itself in the free play of forms, voided of any import that they might have for any ulterior interests. Derridian thought is emblem-

atic of how the revolt of culture plays itself out in philosophy, which is to say that no claim is made here that Derrida intends to liberate all forms of culture into forms of play. What Derrida does to, with, for (?) metaphysics is being done throughout contemporary culture. The importance of his thought for cultural history is simply the significance that Simmel accords to "central ideas," the significance of metaphysics as control through fusion of the "is" and the "ought" (even when it appears as an anti-metaphysics).

Derrida's text lends itself to the historization being done here. He remarks that

the efficacy of this thematics of *différance* very well may, and even one day must, be sublated, i.e., lend itself, if not to its own replacement, at least to involvement in a series of events which in fact it never commanded.²⁶

It is just such an "involvement" that is accomplished when "*différance*" is made an emblem of the current moment of cultural history. "*Différance*" is not replaced, but retextualized by the stalemating strategy of revealing that it can do no more than stalemate. Deconstruction is not the "eve of philosophy," but the dawn of the philosophy of play, another philosophy among many, but compelling because it is the philosophy of the present, if not of the presence. And here Simmel, in another guise, provides the concept for opening Derrida's text into a discourse on the contemporary cultural moment, a supplement to Simmel's own discourse on cultural history.

Play-Form

In his sociological writings, prior to his turn to cultural theory, Simmel described just the sort of liberation of culture that Derrida undertakes. Under the notion of "play-form," Simmel discussed a number of cultural forms which are detached from the practical aims of life. His brief text on the notion of play in its relation to life allows a Simmelian interpretation of Derrida which permits an understanding of the current cultural situation from within Simmel's text of "The Conflict of Modern Culture."

In his sociological writings Simmel specified and restricted his master-binary "life/form" as a cultural-binary "natural-form"/"play-form." "Life" here is defined as the dynamic of human experience as a whole, which is impelled by passion, interest, and desire. Out of the dynamic life-experience forms are created which regulate through an intelligible pattern how desires and interests are to be pursued, and passions are to be expressed. The initial forms created in/by life are means to aims that are ulterior to themselves, at first sensuous and practical, later more idealized or ideal. Cognition, for example, begins as a servomechanism

for practical tasks and may later become science, that is autonomous from any practical-sensuous end, but which has the ulterior objective of true cognitions according to a standard of truth or episteme. Science "autonomizes" the contents of practical cognition, making true cognition an end-in-itself. For Simmel, practical cognition is clearly a "natural-form" developed by/in life to satisfy vital impulse. Science, however, transcends practicality by elaborating autonomous standards for ordering cognitive contents. It is, adding a term to the lexicon of Simmel's text, a "spiritual form," which does not escape nature but reorganizes what the natural-forms have given.²⁷ Both natural- and spiritual-forms have their aims exterior to themselves. Adding another term, they can be ranged under a category called "transitive-form." But, according to Simmel, the destiny of form is not exhausted in transitivity. Form can order contents so that they are made fully immanent to itself, creating a play-form with no object but its own perpetuation and the pleasure which that perpetuation gives. In the play-form life submits to form for its own delight, a sweet triumph of form, the polar opposite of the tragic effort of life to absorb form into itself.

Simmel defines the play-form along the axis transitivity-immanence. All the play-forms are "lifted out of the flux of life and freed of their material with its inherent gravity": "On their own decision, they choose or create the objects in which they prove or embody themselves in their purity."²⁸ In play-forms the flux of life (transitivity) persists, but it is gathered into the display of the form for its own sake, giving "play both its gaiety and the symbolic significance by which it is distinguished from mere joke."²⁹ The immanence of life to play-form is illustrated by one of Simmel's examples, the hunt. The natural-form of the hunt is a means to procuring food, whereas the play-form of hunting, the sport of hunting, is undertaken for the pleasures and attending to the enactment of that form for its own sake. Life submits gladly to one of its own creations without endowing that creation with any transcendence to itself. Indeed, life is pleased to acknowledge its authorship of the play-form. It would ruin the play if life referred the play-form to something transcendent, as it does when it refers the "central ideas" of metaphysical discourse to the presence of Being. In terms of Simmel's discussion of play, Derridian deconstruction may be interpreted as the play-form of metaphysics. For a Derridian Simmel, metaphysics is a spiritual-form which seeks to articulate a "central idea" which joins the orders of "is" and "ought." Although Simmel does not identify a natural-form that metaphysics spiritualizes, Derrida provides, through his critique of metaphysics, the hypothesis that the natural-form of metaphysics is the practice of controlling discourse with master-names. In the natural-form of discursive control any word that succeeds in achieving the closure of discourse from the outside will do. Metaphysics takes up the contents of discursive control, for example, religious conceptions, and submits them to rational analysis and synthesis, guided by the objective of

enunciating presence with its proper word, the master-name. Through its denial of presence, Derridian deconstruction deprives metaphysics of its transitivity, of its ulterior object, transforming its discourse into a play of philosophemes and epistemes within written texts, the Simmelian play-form of metaphysics, which Simmel himself never glimpsed. For Simmel metaphysics remained tragic—the rebellion of creative life against its creations. For Derrida, there is metaphysical play and/or play with metaphysics. For Simmel life seeks to make form immanent to itself, and the tragic structure of its effort is “Life.” For a Simmelianized Derrida, life makes itself immanent to form and the emblem of that playful procedure is “*différance*.”

Derridian deconstruction provides the paradigm for describing the postmodern moment of cultural history in terms of Simmelian cultural history. The philosophical phase of postmodern spiritual culture is deconstructionist play in which the texts of metaphysics are liberated from the burden of enunciating presence so that their philosophemes and epistemes can play in a strategic and adventurous game ruled by “a strategy without finality.” The effort to make life immanent to form is the *motive* for deconstruction. One does not transcend the metaphysical texts, but plays within them, writing, as Derrida³⁰ notes, in their margins and between their lines: life is expressed by playing within a given form. And the result is not a new exemplar of the old form: deconstruction does not produce metaphysics, but appropriates it as culture using “blind tactics.” The next moment of the metaphysical tradition is not in this sense, but in a liberation of it from its serious aim, from its pretension to control discourse from the outside; similar to the sport of hunting which frees the tactics of the hunt from the control of a desire to procure food. By displacing the master-names with “*différance*” Derrida articulates a far-reaching cultural program. If the spiritual-form of metaphysics is stalemated by its play-form of deconstruction, and if the play-form is taken up to the exclusion of the spiritual-form, then the natural-forms of making discourses submit to closure are deprived of any logocentric authority. That is why deconstruction is not a move back to classicism, but a non-classical privileging of culture, a romantic privileging of culture in Simmel’s sense of romantic; a privileging of flux over fixity, of the unbounded over the restricted, and of the Dionysian over the Apollonian. Life plays in its creations and all natural-forms of closing discourse now become simple bids to install hegemonic discourses: Derridian play de-authorizes metaphysics and, along with it, all discourses and, even more widely, as he acknowledges, the spiritual culture of “the West.”

When life plays in de-authorized forms it surrenders its high-modernist pretensions to express itself, but it gains, in turn, relief and release from any obligations to make form serve an external controlling objective. “Deauthorize in order to play” is the formula of the postmodern moment of cultural history. Postmodernism raises the question of whether life can reject authority in favor of play. From one viewpoint, that is not a genuine

question. As long as life must struggle to survive it must deploy forms to reach ulterior objectives. But perhaps there is a more genuine question about the possibility for spiritual-forms to be made play-forms, creating a culture in which play with culture is ground and goal, and in which natural-forms are but practices on the way to or thwarting play. This is, perhaps, what the postmodern moment of cultural history seeks to achieve. If so, then another question follows about the fate of a culture which pits natural-form against play-form without the mediation of spiritual-forms. Is what George Santayana called "the authority of things" strong enough to bind life to practicality without what he called the "sensitive cuticle" of belief? Can life tolerate cultural freedom, that is the freedom of spiritual culture from the constraints of life's practicalities?

Freedom of spiritual culture is the watchword for the postmodern moment of Simmelian cultural history. The root of that freedom is in the exteriorization and concretization of spiritual-form into a sensuous-form which is thereby made available for play within it. Derrida's transformation of the originary and irreducibly simple presence of metaphysical discourse into the synthesis of marks of the texts of metaphysics, in which he playfully writes, is just such an exteriorization and concretization. For the metaphysical tradition the text is an expression of the words of presence, of presence itself; but for the deconstructionist it is the play of *différance*. That is, the metaphysician creates new texts, trying to chain writing to an ulterior Being; but the deconstructionist frees writing by operating on given texts or merely by reading them without attempting to force any unity on them. The text that the deconstructionist reads is a sensuous object, pervaded with form. And the deconstructionist participates in that form by making it a play-form, by simulating its moves in "calculations without end." Play presupposes the externalization and concretization of spiritual-form so that there will be something to play *with*. Otherwise spiritual culture demands preoccupation - the object is not all there; one must strain beyond it to grasp its import or significance.

Throughout contemporary spiritual culture there is a movement towards the exteriorization and concretization of spirit into sensuous play-forms. In the domain of appreciative culture, including the misleading binary art-entertainment, this movement is most obvious and well known. Perhaps the most significant change in spiritual culture since Simmel wrote "The Conflict" has been the emergence of television as the dominant site of aesthetic experience. Considered as a phenomenon, as comprehensively as possible, television is the play-form of living. It is not a question here of the contents of particular programs or of the specific effects of the medium on the sensibility, but of television as a world of sensuous-forms which is perpetually ready to come into being at the turn of a switch. As a whole, television takes all of the materials of vital activity and re-presents them to the viewer in a context or situation that has been voided of any necessity of reference to an ulterior object, opening up a field for a play of images in which nothing

is essential. Just as Derrida erases or strikes over, the viewer can change channels or turn off the set. Just as Derrida writes in the margins and between the lines, the viewer can praise, comment, criticize, and emote at whim.³¹ The viewer, indeed, participates with different degrees of emotional intensity in the play of images and meanings, which are always displacing and cancelling each other. Even seriousness is but a serious tone, taken up into the governing context of the "blind tactics" of a heterogeneous series of games bumping up against each other.

Culture here is free in the sense that even if programs, ads, and announcements take themselves seriously as specific meanings, they lose their seriousness when they are juxtaposed to each other. That is, life is deconstructed by television when television is taken as a total text, as the text, and when its "imagemes" are considered not in isolation but as bits of the incoherent totality. Life is all there, with some editing to be sure, but deprived of any seriousness, of any need to act on it. Television asks only to be watched or, even less, just to be on, or even only to be there, ready to give the play of images. It is available for the life of the viewer to become immanent to its play-form in any manner; for example, as hypnotic subject, compensating neurotic, critic, or couch potato.

From the modern and modernist viewpoints, which privilege activity, television appears to encourage passivity; but for a postmodern sensibility it is playful rather than expressive. The expressionist art that Simmel analyzed was an effort by the creator to subdue form, to make form immanent to life, which meant that in some way the object of expressionist art had to defy interpretation by its appreciators. Postmodern art, exemplified by the total text of television, and epitomized by MTV, works in the opposite direction, making life immanent to form, by presenting pre-interpreted sensuous-forms in which the viewer participates vicariously. Vicarious participation is the characteristic disposition of the postmodern spirit, present in Derridian distance from metaphysics and pervasive in the distance of the viewer from all of the details of imagined and actual life given by television. The images play across the screen, just as the philosophemes and epistemes play through the text; and the viewer plays with them, just as Derrida deconstructs the text. Television is present as a perpetual context, but what runs across it is "the spacing of differences." To "read" the text of television is to surrender to its juxtapositions and displacements, never allowing any image to be a master-image, providing a meaning for that text from the outside. "Watching television," rather than "seeing a program," is a paradigmatic example of postmodern play. Regardless of what is on, spirit wants to play in "calculations without end," an adventure, however, without risk, and without any demand to make or possibility of a practical effect. One need not even feel in a particular way or even feel at all. Derrida, one might say, is the philosopher of television. Deconstructed texts are simulacra of television.

The play-form, through which spirit participates in a form without ulterior result, is epitomized by television. The same movement towards play in and with sensuous-forms is present throughout contemporary leisure and consumer culture. More than any other site of contemporary culture the shopping mall exemplifies play-in-public/public play. Similar to television, the mall is a context in which the contents of practical life appear as sensuous objects in a manner which makes them available for play: they are on sale as what Heidegger called a "standing reserve." Here again, although life is more edited in the mall than it is on television, a wide array of contents are juxtaposed to one another without any coherence except the abstract one of having been selected to attract buyers. In an environment relieved of adversity the shopper, who is a potential buyer from management's and the retailer's viewpoint, is free to reject that definition and become a *flâneur*, an empirical wanderer through a theme park displaying the commercial version of the totality of life. Shopping for something is like seeing a program, but "going shopping," "going to the mall," is like watching television—a form of play within a field of signifiers, in this case signifiers of utility and enjoyment. One can drift from shop to shop, examining products, imagining what one might do with them, and, all the while, even if one refrained from making a purchase, allowing free play in and with the standing reserve. Simply drifting through the standing reserve is sufficient, with no ulterior reference or purpose. Life becomes immanent to the sensuous forms in which it participates, but playfully, at a distance, deconstructing the sale situation in calculations without end, but also without risk.

On the side of art the movement towards play-form has already been well documented in postmodernist criticism. Current literary movements and genres such as magic realism, meta-fiction, and the narrative essay are open for(u)m(s) in which the categories of standardized-modern judgment are fused with one another, juxtaposed, and transgressed. Any genres and themes can be brought together within works of the new literature, which are pre-deconstructed so as to appear already as fields for the free play of signifiers. Such pre-deconstruction is exemplified by the magic realist's insertion of fantasia within the standard version of the perceptual world, the meta-fictionist's intrusion of the activity on the construction, and the narrative essayist's shuttling between the discourses of fact and fiction. In each of these cases both the writing and the reading are playful, creating a complete immanence of life to play-form. Whereas the providers of the leisure culture's play-forms (television and the mall) are not playful themselves, the creators of the new literature are at play when they create, deconstructing literature as they supplement it. Both writer and reader wander; there is much more adventure and risk here, though, of course, the new literature is subject to the constraints of the publishing industry.

Derridian play and play-forms are present at many of the sites of contemporary culture. They operate to deprive spiritual and now ma-

terial culture of any ulterior objectives, disclosing culture as mere culture, as simply sensuous-form which can be removed from practical or expressive import and reappropriated as the spacing of differences among those sensuous forms (the discourses of metaphysics, the programs on TV, the groups of products in the mall, and the transgressed genres in literature). At the current moment of contemporary culture it is especially difficult to elude recognition that culture is sensuous-form and not the expression of spiritual entities or forces such as "values," "norms," "intentions," "the spirit," or "the subject." Even if those terms are not meaningless, postmodernism shows that they need not control, that it is possible to play within sensuous-forms as well as to use, exploit, or control them, that the freedom of culture is available for life as one of its possibilities, at which point "life" becomes a player in discourses and an operator in texts such as this one, losing some of its foundational confidence. Postmodernism stalemates modernism by affirming play as the destiny of form.

But surely life must do other than play. The background of postmodernist spiritual culture is a technological culture which is at the opposite pole from play. A nuclear power plant or an operating room are not venues for a *flâneur*. They are specialized and serious, hallmarks of the adversity which life seems necessarily to encounter. By making spiritual culture a form of play, postmodernism renounces the sublimation of technological culture into systems of ulterior meaning such as religion, metaphysics, and humanized art.³² The practical seriousness of technology now confronts a playful spiritual culture without the mediation of unplayful (serious? practical?) spiritual-forms. A new conflict emerges within culture-as-culture between technology and play. Can life tolerate cultural freedom and dispense with religious, metaphysical, and aesthetic controls and mediations? Can technology be disciplined without spiritual mediations or can a spirit of play distense technology?

Envoi: De-Deconstruction³³

Simmel concluded "The Conflict" wondering whether cultural history, the empirical wandering engendered by the interplay of life and form, had not drawn to a close with the hegemony of the central-idea/master-name "Life." But uncaptialized or decaptialized life proved in the following decades to lack the tenacity to hold on to itself, to assimilate the forms it had created into itself. Rather than fitfully trying to possess culture, life let it go and fell into the habit of being possessed by the artifacts of sensuous form. Simmel saw life in its youthful, upward swing of self-assurance, but now, at the *fin-du-siècle*, we observe its senescence. There is a new "central idea," Culture, which is implied in Simmel's deconstructed cultural history and displaces the "master name" "Life" with itself. Deconstructed cultural history is the historization that dwells

within postmodernity, not imposed on it from the outside, but generated inside it. It is not the deconstruction of deconstruction, but de-deconstruction, the seepage of history into postmodernity, of the history in/of/by/for the *Kulturwelt*, not the *Lebenswelt*.

Lebenswelt history is a drama, such as Simmel portrayed as the tragedy of Life struggling through its inward tension between life and form to achieve an ever-elusive peace. Deconstructing Simmel's drama yields a cultural history lacking any extra-textual unities, but maintaining extra-textual references, the references of uncapitalized "life." Life (life) goes on as different from and penetrated by form, but it has no story to tell: it is de-dramatized. Nor does form have a story to tell. *Kulturwelt* history is simply the interplay of life, full of dispersed references, and form, which takes the open form or nonform, of Derridian wandering, Deleuzian rhizomatic thinking, and Lyotardian drifting. When culture itself becomes its own self-assertion or, alternatively, the self-assertion/denial of a life without self-confidence, there can be no drama of culture, nothing controlling/inspiring culture from the outside to be anything other than it simply is. That is how it becomes free for(e)play. There is no longer any motive that it serves. Rather, it absorbs all motives and makes them serve its essence of fragmentary signification. Of course, the only way that it can do this is through the mediation of a weakened life which allows culture to mean nothing but its own dispersed meanings. Culture is liberated for play because life is too weak to do anything but play. Decapitalized life does not have the strength to assert itself as "Life" and is not sufficiently integral to make any other master-name stick. The frenzied search after fundamentalisms counterpoints postmodern spiritual culture, but is finally merged into it because no fundamentalism can displace or repress the myriad others. Life (life) is too solipsistic to pay allegiance to anything but a narcissistic fundamentalism. It (it) mainly exists without allegiance to anything, not even to its own gratification. Post-modern play is not selfish, but at most therapeutic.

Can technology be disciplined without spiritual mediations or can a spirit of play dis-tense technology? There is no discipline in post-modernity, only disciplines, which are ever vulnerable to deconstruction. Play does dis-tense technology. If life is too weak to do anything but play, if it exists merely to submit to being endlessly formed and reformed, then Culture will be liberated for play. Let life be liberated foreplay. Of course "Humanity" (life) may die in the process. But the neutered master-name of motiveless control (play)—Culture—is King in the postmodern moment of "Cultural" history.

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Notes

1. See Georg Simmel, "The Transcendent of Life," *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. and trans. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971 (1918)), 353-74.
2. Georg Simmel, "The Conflict in Modern Culture," *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine, trans. K. Peter Etzkorn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971 (1918)), 375-93.
3. Ibid., 375.
4. Ibid., 375-6.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970).
6. Simmel, "The Conflict," 376.
7. Ibid., 378.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 388.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 382.
16. Ibid., 393.
17. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans., David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 (1968)), 129-161.
18. Ibid., 143.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 135.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 159.
24. Ibid.
25. Jacques Derrida, "Implications: Interview with Henri Ronse," *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 (1967)), 14.

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26. Derrida, "Differance," p. 135.
27. The term "spiritual-form" is coined here to make a place in Simmel's theory of forms for what he calls "spiritual culture" in "The Conflict." "Spiritual culture," for Simmel, embraces all of those activities and artifacts that are not bound directly to practical-sensuous ends, but which are regulated by ideal ends such as truth (science), perceptual significance (art), and right conduct (ethics). He uses spirit not to refer to the religious life but to the autonomous operations and standards of mind, in accordance with the discourse of philosophical idealism.
28. Georg Simmel, "Sociability," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans., Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950 (1908)), 42.
29. Ibid.
30. Derrida, "Implications," 4.
31. For indications of the use of television as a form of play, see James Lull, "The Social Uses of Television," *Human Communication Research* 6 (1980), 198-209.
32. For the notions of "humanized" and "dehumanized" art see Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (New York: Anchor Books, 1956).
33. We are indebted to Arthur Kroker for the word "de-deconstruction" to characterize the textual strategy of this writing.