Few things have contributed more to the debasement of contemporary intellectual and cultural life than the honored place now accorded to deliberate obscurity. Deconstruction and semiology, structuralism and post-structuralism: these and kindred obfuscatory theories imported from the Continent are favored staples in much of what passes for intellectual discourse today. Combined with the unexamined assumption that the realm of high culture—indeed, that the very idea of high culture—is irredeemably tainted by political interests, this triumph of opacity has largely succeeded in transforming serious discussion of art and culture into a congeries of hermetic language games.

In our academic journals, university classrooms, and even in our museums’ exhibition catalogues, arcane, pseudo-philosophical jargon and radical sentiment compete to forestall genuine engagement with aesthetic or intellectual issues. Alas, only the radical sentiment receives clear and frank expression. Thus even as clarity and intelligibility are spurned as simple-minded, the traditional ideal of disinterested scholarship is bluntly dismissed as a cover for class privilege; at the same time Western culture itself is pilloried as a bastion of unacknowledged sexist and imperialistic attitudes. Given this intellectual climate, it is hardly surprising that criticism should degenerate into a species of cynicism for which nothing is properly understood until it is exposed as corrupt, duplicitous, or hypocritical. Nor is it surprising that the ideal of art as a relatively autonomous endeavor—an endeavor, that is to say, which is free from direct political imperatives—should be ridiculed as a fantasy perpetrated by the entrenched and parochial interests of bourgeois taste. Today, while criticism—or what generally goes under the more impressive-sounding name of “critical theory”—pursues its polysyllabic hunt for suppressed political motives, many artists have likewise adapted themselves to the prevailing ethos and have more and more come to see themselves primarily as purveyors of politically “correct” attitudes and politically approved notions of social enlightenment.

There can be little doubt that the primary source of these evils is the academy. For it is precisely
the predominance of aggressively opaque rhetoric and political posturing in the humanities departments of our colleges and universities that has validated and, as it were, underwritten the proliferation of such practices. In seeking to understand the origin of this cultural debacle, however, one must not underestimate the role played by those multitudinous and influential props of university life: academic journals devoted, at least ostensibly, to the arts and the humanities. *Diacritics, Critical Inquiry, Tel Quel, New Literary History, Representations, Yale French Studies*: these are a few of the more influential academic organs peddling politicized obscurantism. It is in the pages of such journals that the latest personalities, chic theories, and critical vocabularies are auditioned and, if found acceptable, are trotted out over and over again until they become verbal tics, part of the atmosphere of academic exchange and requisite equipment for any graduate student or assistant professor with his eye on the grail of tenure. Lacan, Benjamin, Derrida, de Man, Bataille, Jameson, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault—these and a few other names from the current pantheon are scattered like confetti through their pages; “logocentric,” “phallocentric,” “imperialist,” “aura,” “strategy,” “marginalization,” “text,” “signifier”—these are some of the more attractive terms that one finds repeated *ad nauseam*.

This is not to suggest that these journals—and their number, be assured, is legion—are all of a piece. Each has its own identifying wrinkle, its distinctive editorial “personality.” Yet while none is in any sense popular or widely read, some few have emerged as peculiarly influential and representative of the spirit of politicized obscurantism under which our cultural life currently labors. Of these representative few, none is more political, more opaque, or more influential in certain “advanced” circles than the quarterly *October*. So consummately does *October* epitomize these qualities, and so successful has it been in combining fashionable academic jargon with radical political ideology, that one is tempted to single it out as a specimen case. The publication last year of *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986* provides a good opportunity to consider the magazine in some detail, to catalogue its salient features, and to discuss some of its recurrent themes. The more closely one examines its contribution to current intellectual and artistic debate, the more one is tempted to regard *October* not simply as a magazine but as a syndrome, as a peculiar set of symptoms that typifies a somewhat amorphous but nonetheless unmistakably prevalent malaise.

Started in the spring of 1976, October soon established itself as a cynosure of approved opinions in the confusing firmament of advanced literary and artistic taste. In many respects, the October syndrome was already in full flower in the inaugural issue. Here readers were treated to a tortuous lead essay by the much revered Michel Foucault on Magritte’s famous drawing “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (surrealism and semiotics: a perfect combination with which to begin *October*). Among other delicacies included in that first issue was an essay by Rosalind Krauss on the video “art” of Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis, and others—sample sentence: “One could say that if the reflexiveness of modernist art is a *dédoublement* or doubling back in order to locate the object (and thus the objective conditions of one’s experience), the mirror-reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object.” One also found some notes on filmmaking by Hollis
October’s influence and distinctive character owe much to two of its founding editors: Rosalind Krauss, the well-known art critic and Distinguished Professor of Art History at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, and Annette Michelson, the veteran critic and professor of “cinema studies” at New York University. (The other founding editor, the critic and painter Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, left the magazine after three issues.) In the introductory note to their first issue, the editors reveal that the journal was named partly in “celebration” of the heyday of the Russian avant-garde that was inaugurated by the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, partly in commemoration of Sergei Eisenstein’s 1928 film October (better known as Ten Days That Shook the World), which itself was made to commemorate that wonderful event. Indeed, in bringing October to the world, they hoped to replicate and abet for our own time that fusion of avant-garde art and revolutionary politics that has been one of the abiding dreams of certain Utopian Marxists for much of this century. Despite a promise to include work that is “at times idealist” as well as work that is “materialist,” they frankly acknowledged that October was inspired by a commitment to the Marxist dictum that art and culture are essentially reflections of economic processes. “October’s strong theoretical emphasis will be mediated by its consideration of present artistic practice,” the editors assured us. “It is our conviction that this is possible only within a sustained awareness of the economic and social bases of that practice, of the material conditions of its origins and processes, and of their intensely problematic nature at this particular time.”

The October syndrome not only involves a loving embrace of cultural Marxism, but also, as a kind of corollary, a violent attack on middle-class culture and society, especially in its American varieties. The phrase “intensely problematic at this particular time” already points in that direction, for what the editors mean to imply is that contemporary artistic practice in America is crippled by being insufficiently “aware” of its “social and economic bases.” And that’s only the beginning. It is a prominent feature of the October syndrome that, whenever possible, the discussion of art or ideas is extended to include an indictment of Western capitalist society. Again, the editors’ introductory note provides a preliminary taste of the procedure. ” ‘October,’’” they write,

is a reference which remains, for us, more than exemplary; it is instructive. For us, the argument regarding Socialist Realism is nonexistent. Art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions. We
will not contribute to that social critique which, swamped by its own disingenuousness, gives credence to such an object of repression as a mural about the war in Vietnam, painted by a white liberal resident in New York, a war fought for the most part by ghetto residents commanded by elements drawn from the southern lower-middle-class.

The contention that “art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions” is something we shall have occasion to consider more closely below; it, too, is an essential feature of the October syndrome. (As indeed is the description of a work of art as “an object of repression” and the blithe rejection of the controversy over Socialist Realism, as if that Stalinist interdiction of art were some negligible disturbance in an otherwise glorious cultural and social renaissance.) But the editors’ concluding observation is one especially worth pausing over. “Elements drawn from the southern lower-middle-class”? One wonders what these connoisseurs of contempt would have said had they discovered such snobbery and class prejudice in, say, the writings of other white liberal residents of New York.

In any event, October: The First Decade provides an even more splendid showcase for the October syndrome. The opacity, the radical pronouncements, the obsession with violence and perverse sexuality, the assumption that art should be primarily a form of political activism: it’s all vividly displayed in this collection of two dozen pieces. Consisting of essays, mostly, October: The First Decade also includes interviews, portfolios of photographs, translations of cultural documents, and a translation of a long poem about sex and language by the German writer Peter Handke. Its contents are arranged under six categories: The Index, Historical Materialism, Critique of Institutions, Psychoanalysis, Rhetoric, and The Body. Something of the tenor of the volume can be gleaned by sampling the titles of its contributions: “The Index of the Absent Stain (Monograph on a Stain),” “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” “From Faktura to Factography,” “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” and “On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy.” Speaking of “The Index,” one could have wished that the editors or the MIT Press had seen fit to provide the book with one—and that they had provided some identifying material on the contributors to this volume.

Before turning to the particular works anthologized here, however, we must linger over the volume’s prefatory remarks. Alluding once again to Eisenstein’s film October and the revolutionary ethos of the Russian avant-garde after 1917 as the magazine’s inspiration, the editors declare that “October is emblematic for us of a specific historical moment in which artistic practice joined with critical theory in the project of social construction.” In other words—though of course they never put it like this—the term “October” commended itself because of its association with a moment in which art was enlisted in the service of Communist ideology and propaganda. In this context—the context of an “artistic practice” joining with “critical theory in the project of social construction”—they note that the legend appearing on the cover of every issue of the magazine, “Art/Theory/Criticism/Politics,” expresses the “conjunction” they seek to realize in the material
they publish. But a more truthful advertisement for the contents of *October* would be “Art = Theory = Criticism = Politics.”

Like so many people affected by the October syndrome these days, the editors of *October* look especially to Russian Constructivism for a model in their struggle against the depredations and superficialities of contemporary Western culture. The deliberate blurring of the boundary between aesthetics and politics, the intoxication of succumbing to vanguard revolutionary sentiment, the rejection of cultural activities not amenable to the cause of the socialist renovation of society: all this recommended the *ethos* of Constructivism to the editors of *October*. Unfortunately, that golden revolutionary moment was difficult to sustain. After one of their frequent assurances that their fondness for post-revolutionary Russia is not colored by “nostalgia” (a prime bourgeois vice, nostalgia), they explain that “we wished to claim that the unfinished, analytic project of constructivism—aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, distorted by the recuperation of the Soviet avant-garde into the mainstream of Western idealist aesthetics—was required for a consideration of the aesthetic practices of our own time.” Please note the argument: Constructivism was both “aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy” as well as “distorted” by being assimilated “into the mainstream of Western idealist aesthetics.” Let’s leave to one side the dubious claim that the achievement of Russian Constructivism—think only of artists like Malevich and Rodchenko—can be said to have been “distorted” by being assimilated to the idealist tradition of Western art. For our understanding of the *October* syndrome, the important thing is the principle that any criticism of Stalinism or totalitarianism must be ritually followed up with a criticism of the United States or Western culture or capitalist (actually, I believe the required phrase is “late capitalist”) society.

One of the central appeals of the *October* syndrome, the feature that perhaps more than any other assures its great contemporary relevance, is its contention that the art and activist politics of the 1960s and early 1970s marked an exuberant reflooding of the kind of revolutionary spirit that enlivened the Constructivist movement in the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution. “The 1960s,” we are told, “had witnessed . . . extraordinary developments in the visual and temporal arts: in painting, sculpture, dance, performance, and film.” But in order to understand and perpetuate these “extraordinary developments,” we are now urged to resuscitate “the kind of critical theory” that burgeoned in the Soviet Union sixty or seventy years ago. Precisely this is the task that the editors of *October* set for themselves.

Continuing “the unfinished project of the 1960s” has not, one gathers, been an easy task. For one thing, just when the “extraordinary developments” of the Sixties and Seventies were beginning to get going, bang, a period of reaction set in. Then, too, the dazzling, promiscuous display of new styles and pseudo-styles that marked the period has been misunderstood by others. “We did not see this juncture as that of the vaunted ‘death of the avant-garde’ and a new ‘pluralism.’ We saw it rather as that of late capitalism, a time of continued struggle to radicalize cultural practices, and of the marginalization of those attempts through the revival of traditional artistic and discursive
tendencies.” In the face of this nefarious attempt to exclude (“marginalize”) certain artistic practices and to revive “traditional artistic and discursive tendencies”—such “tendencies,” be it noted, as easel painting, figure drawing, and writing intelligible prose—the editors of October considered their work on the magazine to be “the necessary response to what was once again a consolidation of reactionary forces within both the political and cultural spheres” (my emphasis). “Once again”? The previous “consolidation of reactionary forces,” remember, referred to Stalinism; this time it refers to . . . well, to American society under the leadership of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

In order to appreciate just how bad things are under the jackboot of American democracy in the late twentieth century, one need only hearken to the plaintive cry of the editors’ peroration. It brings together so many of the political features of the October syndrome that it is worth quoting at some length:

We in New York saw our community forced out of the SoHo they had helped to create, forced in turn to collaborate in the eviction of even more marginal populations from the Lower East Side, as the creation of a new art district was conscripted as a wedge for realestate development .... We saw, at the same time, the very artistic experimentation that we had associated with the SoHo community abandoned in favor of the production of luxury objects for consumption and investment, often now by multinational corporations .... [W]e watched in dismay as art institutions resurrected the claims of disinterestedness ....

Our attention also had to be directed toward the operations within these institutions [the artist’s studio, the gallery and museum, the corporate patron, the discipline of art history] of a system of privilege that rewarded the masculine and ignored the rest, that addressed itself to a male subject that it took as adequate indicator of the universal. A radical ignorance with respect to sexual difference had to be confronted. Women had to be written into
historical and contemporary cultural practices as producers and as addressees. This task would entail, however, more than a simple retrieval of women from neglected historical archives or the support of contemporary women’s work. It would also entail a reconception of the scotoma that kept women from sight not as an impediment to be removed but as a process of vision itself.

is one of the most beautiful living places in New York. Its beauty has a dark, forceful, willful character. Each piece of furniture and every object of use or decoration has evidently had to pass a severe test before being admitted into this disdainfully interesting room—a long, mildly begloomed rectangle with tall windows at either end, a sachlich white kitchen area in the center, a study, and a sleeping balcony. An arrangement of geometric dark-blue armchairs around a coffee table forms the loft’s sitting room, also furnished with, among other rarities, an antique armchair on splayed, carved feet and upholstered in a dark William Morris fabric; an assertive all-black Minimalist shaped-felt piece; a strange black-and-white photograph of ocean water; and a gold owl-shaped Art Deco clock . . .

I think it can be said that Miss Krauss, at least, knows her way around the beleaguered SoHo art community.

Unfortunately, a full appreciation of the October syndrome requires that one consider more than the editors’ rather programmatic statements about October’s inspirations and aspirations. One must also examine some of its chief arguments, recurrent themes, and stylistic habits. Perhaps the single most important contention advanced by the October set is the idea that “art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions.” No doubt this statement is susceptible to a variety of interpretations, but when considered as part of the October syndrome, it means that our chief interest in art should not be in the art itself—in whatever special perception of beauty or sudden insight it might be capable of communicating—but rather in the “strategies” (to use another favorite term) that the art employs to question its own formal and social presuppositions. In this
sense, art becomes a kind of meta-art, art whose chief concern is with its social, economic, and conceptual presuppositions, just as criticism becomes meta-criticism, criticism that is concerned more with its own methodology than with the aesthetic substance of art.

Douglas Crimp provides a sterling example of one aspect of this transformation in his essay “The Art of Exhibition.” Discussing the Documenta Exhibition of 1982, Mr. Crimp expresses his outrage that credence is given to an idealizing view of art, a view of art that values art for its aesthetic or even its spiritual qualities. (As Miss Krauss once put it in another October essay, one not included in this volume, “by now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence.”) For his part, Mr. Crimp combats the idealization of art by reminding his readers of the large number of homeless people in New York City and the large number of rats found in a lot next to his apartment building. This provides an occasion to castigate Mayor Koch (“the most reactionary mayor in New York’s recent history,” etc.) and, of course, President Reagan, and to praise artists like Christy Rupp, who specializes in producing images of attacking rats, and Jenny Holzer, whose “art” consists of slogans pasted on city walls, engraved on stone benches, or immortalized in the flashing lights of electronic signboards. Both artists, Mr. Crimp assures us, stand outside the nasty, inequitable system of established galleries and museums, and both produce “works manufactured cheap and sold cheap, quite unlike the paintings and sculptures within museum buildings.” Well, Mr. Crimp is surely correct that their works are “quite unlike” the paintings and sculptures one used to find in museums. I wonder, though, if he has been following Miss Holzer’s career lately— since, for example, she was selected by a panel of distinguished museum directors and curators to represent the United States at the 1990 Venice Biennale (the first woman so honored), since her picture appeared on the front page of The New York Times, since her electronic signboards have been fetching (at last count) between $30,000 and $50,000 apiece? “Protect Me From What I Want,” “Abuse of Power Should Come as No Surprise”: these are some of the artistic masterpieces that have made Miss Holzer famous. She calls them “mock clichês,” but I believe she is altogether too modest: they are the real thing, and one only wonders how well she—or her champion Mr. Crimp—feels she is doing at resisting the depredations of museums “whose real but disguised condition is that of the international market for art, dominated increasingly by corporate speculation.”

As it happens, there is a good deal about “corporate speculation” and real estate in the October reader. Instead of an examination of the art of New York’s Lower East Side, for example, we find an essay about the social and economic effects of the gentrification of the area. And instead of an examination of the artist’s studio as a place where art is made, we find a dissection of the studio as the material presupposition of art “production.” In “The Function of the Studio” we learn that “analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on in terms of the studio as the unique space of production and the museum as the unique space of exposition. Both must be investigated as customs, the ossifying customs of art.” Why, you might ask, are the customs (presumably, the author means “conventions”) of art necessarily “ossifying”? We are never told, but we do discover that “the studio is a place of multiple activities: production, storage, and finally, if all
goes well, distribution. It is a kind of commercial depot.”

The large-scale shift away from a concern with the aesthetic substance of art helps explain a number of salient features of the October syndrome, not least its obsession with photography and film. (There are more pieces devoted to photography and film in October: The First Decade than to any other media.) The favored place accorded to photography and film in certain critical and artistic circles today is itself a symptomatic development. What is it about those activities that renders them particularly attractive to a culture at once cynical about the claims of traditional art and infatuated with the exhibitionism and surface glitter of “performance art”? For the October set, at any rate, the appeal of photography has little to do with any aesthetic claims it might be thought to exert. On the contrary, perhaps the chief reason photography is so highly regarded is that its “mechanical reproducibility” (to adapt a phrase from Walter Benjamin’s adored 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) promises to demystify both the work of art as a uniquely valuable object and the artist as a uniquely talented, individual sensibility. In other words, photography and film are so highly touted by the October set because they promise to reduce art and artistic creation to the status of a rote, impersonal process. As Miss Krauss puts it near the end of “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” photography “demands that the work be viewed as a deliberate short-circuiting of issues of style. Countermanding the artist’s possible formal intervention in creating the work is the overwhelming physical presence of the original object.”

A similar set of concerns motivate Benjamin H. D. Buchloh’s lugubrious essay “From Faktura to Factography.” Mr. Buchloh begins by criticizing the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, for being blind to the true revolutionary content of Soviet avant-garde “production,” especially photography.[2] (This, by the way, is another tic that the October syndrome has inherited from the rhetoric of Marxism and Russian Constructivism: instead of speaking of making or, heaven for-fend, of creating art, one speaks of artistic or cultural “production.”) Never mind that Alfred Barr did more than any other single individual to bring the art of the Soviet avant-garde, including the art of photomontage that Mr. Buchloh so admires, to the attention of the American public: his unforgivable mistake was to view it as . . . yes, as art, not as a form of political propaganda. In Mr. Buchloh’s view, the real value of the avant-garde photography that emerged from Constructivism was that it “had deliberately and systematically disassociated itself” from the framework of modernism “in order to lay the foundations of an art production that would correspond to the needs of a newly industrialized collective society.” In other words, what’s so wonderful about a certain species of avant-garde photography is that it allows one to forget about art and get on with the business of “social production.”

Mr. Buchloh’s essay is also useful as yet another example of how the October syndrome requires that every mention of totalitarianism implicate Western capitalism and the United States in the general infamy. He begins by lamenting that El Lissitzky and Walter Benjamin’s “media optimism” “prevented them from recognizing that the attempts to create conditions of a
simultaneous collective reception for the new audiences of the industrialized state would very soon issue into the preparation of an arsenal of totalitarian, Stalinist propaganda in the Soviet Union. What is worse,” Mr. Buchloh continues,

it would deliver the aesthetics and technology of propaganda to the Italian Fascist and German Nazi regimes. And only a little later we see the immediate consequences of Lissitzky’s new montage and photofrescoes in their successful adaptation for the ideological needs of American politics and the campaigns for the acceleration of capitalist development through consumption. Thus, what in Lissitzky’s hands had been a tool of instruction, political education, and the raising of consciousness was rapidly transformed into an instrument for prescribing the silence of conformity and obedience [my emphasis].

That is, the adoption of montage and kindred techniques in America has been used to prescribe "the silence of conformity and obedience.” And if the message was not clear enough the first time around, Mr. Buchloh recapitulates his main point in his concluding sentence: “at the cross-section of politically emancipatory productivist aesthetics and the transformation of modernist montage aesthetics into an instrument of mass education and enlightenment, we find not only its imminent transformation into totalitarian propaganda, but also its successful adaptation for the needs of the ideological apparatus of the culture industry of Western capitalism.” No doubt we must be grateful to the courageous Mr. Buchloh for breaking the silence and conformity prescribed by the "needs of the ideological apparatus of the culture industry of Western capitalism.” But then shouldn’t he and his colleagues at October be grateful to such organs of “the ideological apparatus of the culture industry” as the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, both of which have been longtime supporters of October? Perhaps a future issue of the magazine will be devoted to explaining why October deigns to avail itself of funds from government agencies representing a political system they consistently vilify.

The contributions of Messrs. Crimp, Buchloh, et alia, provide good examples of one side—what we might call the old-time anti-capitalist side—of the October syndrome. But while that certainly helps account for October’s cachet in the academy and among “advanced” artistic circles, it is by no means the whole story of its charms. Equally important is the more “philosophical” and “cultural” side of the October syndrome, a side for which Miss Krauss sets the tone but which has been well served by a number of able imitators.[3]

Of course no such collection as this would be complete without a large measure of feminist rhetoric. One finds it scattered throughout the volume, but the most amusing—though perhaps also the most frightening—instance is provided by Mary Ann Doane in her essay on feminist filmmaking, “Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” Complaining that “Cinematic images of woman [note the singular] have been so consistently oppressive and repressive that the very idea of a feminist filmmaking practice seems an impossibility,” Miss Doane proceeds to explore the ways in which a self-respecting feminist might go about the business of making films. It’s a tough job. For one thing, since in Miss Doane’s view “the essence of femininity is most frequently
attached to the natural body as an immediate indicator of sexual difference, it is this body which must be refused.” Yes, it is difficult to film women—or Woman—with a body. Or is it? Miss Doane assures us that “the body is always a function of discourse,” so perhaps one could fill up the screen with “signifiers”? But the real problem, one gathers, is that the inescapably mechanical process of making films is a threat to a woman’s sexuality. As Miss Doane explains, “A machine for the production of images and sounds, the cinema generates and guarantees pleasure by a corroboration of the spectator’s identity. Because that identity is bound up with that of the voyeur and fetishist, because it requires for its support the attributes of the ‘noncastrated,’ the potential for illusory mastery of the signifier, it is not accessible to the female spectator, who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex.” Miss Doane notwithstanding, it does seem odd that a journal that has, shall we say, “fetishized” photography and film should publish an essay denouncing a trip to the movies as something fraught with ideological danger.

The cultural side of the October syndrome is not confined to feminism, however. For sheer pretension, one of my favorite pieces was Georges Didi-Huberman’s essay on the Shroud of Turin, “Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain).” “What we need,” muses Mr. Didi-Huberman, is a concept of figurative Aufhebung. We would have to consider the dichotomy of its field and its means, and how they deploy a dialectical mimesis as imitation of absolute knowledge; how it attempts to transform sensible space and to begin a movement (Hegel would have said automovement) in the direction of certitude, figural certitude. An absolute seeing that would transcend the scansion of seeing and of knowing; an absolutely reflexive representation .... We have to look at this stain again, but this time with the “foresight” of such figural certainty in mind, or its “phantasm,” its phantasia in the Hegelian sense; for Hegel considered Phantasie an Aufhebung, and spoke of the movement of truth as a delirium of absolute translucidity.

Lest the reader be puzzled, Mr. Didi-Huberman supplies an explanatory reference: “Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit.” The translator and publication data are listed, but no page number. Students of Hegel will perhaps hazard that Mr. Didi-Huberman had in mind the passage from the preface to the Phenomenology where Hegel speaks of “the true” being “the bacchanalian whirl in which no member is not drunk.” But who knows? He at least is never troubled to say.

This sort of thing is standard practice in the pages of October. As in so much contemporary academic writing, arcane references and wild generalizations are thrown around wholesale. One soon realizes that the footnote to Lacan, the invocation of Foucault, of Freud, of Benjamin, the entire (dare one say it?) superstructure of “scholarship” erected in these essays is intended not to further knowledge but to dazzle the reader. Why, for example, does Joel Fineman feel called upon to parade the first line of The Iliad, unidentified and untranslated, as an epigraph to his essay on “The Structure of Allegorical Desire”? How many of his readers will be able to read the Greek?
Not many, of course, but that is perhaps just as well since the line is slightly miscited, as indeed are several of the Greek words with which Mr. Fineman decorates his essay.

Or consider, as a final example, Homi Bhabha’s “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” an essay that, we are told, was first presented in 1983 at a meeting of the Modern Language Association. Warming up with some reasonably benign reflections on “the discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism,” and so on, Mr. Bhabha quickly gets down to business: “Within the conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination—the demand for identity, stasis—and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history—change, difference—mimicry represents an ironic compromise. If I may adapt Samuel Weber’s formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration . . .”—but, no, let’s leave that formulation to one side and continue with some of Mr. Bhabha’s concluding remarks.

In the ambivalent world of the “not quite/not white,” on the margins of metropolitan desire, the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objets trouvés of the colonial discourse—the part-objects of presence. It is then that the body and the book lose their representational authority. Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.

There is something terribly pathetic about this sort of display, composed as it is of nothing but clichés and phrases echoing the likes of Melanie Klein, Edward Said, and Roland Barthes—though whether Mr. Bhabha is fully aware of his sources is unclear. The cruelly ironical thing about this essay on mimicry and colonialism is that it is itself nothing but a second-rate mimicry of the clotted academic rhetoric that passes for scholarship in our universities and journals. That this rubbish should be presented as a “paper” at the Modern Language Association is a somber reminder of how far that venerable organization has degenerated.

There is a good deal that I have had to leave out of account here: Georges Bataille’s jolly discussion of the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, for instance (“Death, for the Aztecs, was nothing,” Bataille tells us), and Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi’s meditations on the murder of the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, where we learn that “the death of the opposition sexualizes intensely the life of an entire society, from the dark bowels of fascism to the violence whose language is expressed ... by the deadly call to aphasia. Is the social link paranoiac?” Who can say?

I have also unfortunately had to leave out any consideration of the more recent manifestations of the October syndrome. In the Winter 1987 issue of the magazine, for example, the conflation of culture and politics takes a further step in a large special number devoted entirely to AIDS. The example it provides of how even a disease may be politicized and recruited to serve the cause of radical politics merits careful attention. Once again, Mr. Crimp, who edited the issue, manages to produce one of the more extraordinary comments when he argues, in a discussion of “safe sex,”
that “they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact it is our promiscuity that will save us” (his emphasis). How exactly this salvation is to be effected through promiscuity is difficult to say, but Mr. Crimp obviously has great faith in “gay male promiscuity ... as a positive model of how sexual pleasures might be pursued by and granted to everyone if those pleasures were not confined within the narrow limits of institutionalized sexuality.”

Clearly, though *October* is often opaque and unintelligible, it is not utterly bereft of sense. If one has sufficient patience, something resembling a consecutive argument can often be wrested from the tangled, jargon-ridden prose favored by most of its contributors. And on political matters—matters, I mean, involving elected officials, government policies, and the like (since everything is regarded as political by the *October* set, the distinction is important)—the essays included here obviously tend to be about as direct, but also about as unconvincing, as the harangues of a soapbox preacher. Reading through so many pages of *October* brought to mind a remark made years ago by the great intellectual historian Basil Willey. Discussing the work of Sir Thomas Browne, Willey observed that Browne’s literary style “was the incarnation of his sensibility.” Style, indeed, is often the incarnation of sensibility. And reflecting on the style of the *October* syndrome—on its opacity, its humorlessness, its pretension, its utter disregard for common sense—one cannot help concluding that it is a sensibility for which art and culture exist and have value only as appendages to political ideology. *October* began by promising to revitalize art and culture by instituting a new level of critical analysis and receptivity. After more than ten years of publication, it has demonstrated that it is only one more example of politicized academic arrogance illegitimately claiming to speak for the artistic avant-garde.


2. It is worth noting that *October* devoted a large part of its Winter 1978 issue to the diary Barr kept while traveling in the Soviet Union in 1927 and 1928. Thus, while *October* is prepared to honor Barr as a kind of pilgrim to the anointed land, in the end they criticize him for failing to understand the cultural and political significance of his own experience. Go back to the text.

3. For a more detailed account of Miss Krauss’s recent work, see my review of *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, her 1985 collection of essays, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1987), pp. 144-148. Go back to the text.