



Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction

Joseph Conte

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Design and Debris discusses the relationship between order and disorder in the works of John Hawkes, Harry Mathews, John Barth, Gilbert Sorrentino, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo. In analyzing their work, Joseph Conte brings to bear a unique approach adapted from scientific thought: chaos theory. His chief concern is illuminating those works whose narrative structures locate order hidden in disorder (whose authors Conte terms "proceduralists"), and those whose structures reflect the opposite, disorder emerging from states of order (whose authors Conte calls "disruptors"). Documenting the paradigm shift from modernism, in which artists attempted to impose order on a disordered world, to postmodernism, in which the artist portrays the process of "orderly disorder," Conte shows how the shift has led to postmodern artists' embrace of science in their treatment of complex ideas. Detailing how chaos theory interpenetrates disciplines as varied as economics, politics, biology, and cognitive science, he suggests a second paradigm shift: from modernist specialization to postmodern pluralism. In such a pluralistic world, the novel is freed from the purely literary and engages in a greater degree of interactivity - between literature and science, and between author and reader. Thus, Conte concludes, contemporary literature is a literature of flux and flexibility.

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