Deconstruction as
Second-Order Observing

During my work on this paper I had the opportunity to see a television report on the admission of homosexuals into the army. What I saw (and I may well have seen things that were not shown) may serve as an introduction to the rather difficult and, if I may say so, postconceptual topic of deconstruction and second-order observing.

The report showed discussions in the United States Senate and individual interviews with privates and officers of the army. A lot of distinctions came into the foreground. The main questions were as simple as they were difficult, namely whether or not the admission of homosexuals would weaken the strength of the army and how strong would objections and resistance be on the side of the army. The issue was introduced for political reasons in the electoral campaign of Mr. Clinton, but it seemed to get out of hand. There were legal distinctions showing up from time to time, for instance whether or not the present practice was in conformity with the constitution (constitutional/unconstitutional) and whether or not the law would be able to control illegal behavior such as sexual harassment or violence against homosexuals in the army (effectiveness/ineffectiveness of the law), but behind all of this was the undisputed distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Such a situation gives an occasion to open the deconstruction kit and see what would happen if we applied the instrument. We would have to deconstruct the distinction heterosexual/homosexual. This, of course, would destroy the presupposition of a "hierarchical opposition" in the sense of an inherent or "natural" primacy of heterosexuality. At least we would see, if not effectively destroy, what Louis Dumont would call l'englobement du contraire— that is, the inclusion of oppositions in a hierarchical structure of preferred lifestyles.

But this can be said in the terminology of "prejudices" and without using the ambitious and transconceptual operation of deconstruction. And Derrida himself explicitly warns against such a strategic and political use of deconstruction. His aims are more far-reaching—and less specific. Deconstruction draws attention to the fact that differences are only distinctions and change their use value when we use them at different times and in different contexts. The difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals is not always the same; it is subject to différence.

No objection. But what if we asked the question: Who (that is, which system) is using the distinction as a frame (or scheme) of observations; or, Who is the observer? What does he invest in making this distinction, and what will he lose in maintaining it?

Then immediately a variety of observing systems appear: the political system, the interaction of a session of the United States Senate, the army, individual privates and officers, rejected homosexuals, females and males, and we at our television sets. The illusion to be deconstructed is the assumption that all these systems designate the same object when they use the distinction heterosexuals/homosexuals. The stereotypicality of the distinction leads to the assumption that all these systems observe the same thing, whereas observing these observers shows that this is not the case. Each of them operates within its own network; each of them has a different past and a different future. While the distinction suggests a tight coupling of observations and reality, and implies that there is only one observer observing "the same thing" and making true or false statements, a second-order observer observing these observers would see only loose coupling and lack of complete integration.

But this is not the end of the story. We forgot the most important observer—most important at least for this case—the body. It also makes its own distinctions and decides whether or not to be sexually attracted. Observing this observer leads us to ask whether or not it dutifully follows cultural imperatives, or whether there is an unavoidable akrasia (lack of self-
control), as the Greeks would have said, a lack of potestas in se ipsum (self-control) in humans and in social systems.

If this akraia is taken for granted, can a soldier know how his body would observe the situation if it included homosexuals without the protection of privacy—under the shower or in sleeping quarters or in a lot of similar situations? Even if society and the military prefer heterosexuality, and even if the mind of an individual accepts this definition for himself and for his body, could he or she be sure that his or her body plays the same game?

The television interviews report that the soldiers, these strong and healthy, well-nourished young men with oversized arms, legs, and bodies, confessed to being afraid of having homosexuals around them. But this would be (assuming that the law effectively prevents sexual harassment) completely harmless. Could it then be that the soldiers are worried about the possibility of their bodies reacting as observers on their own and that others would see that? It may be a very small chance of surprise, but a possibility amplified by uncertainty.

If this is true—and it is indirectly confirmed by the fact that female soldiers are much less concerned about the possibility of having lesbian comrades because their bodily reaction would be less distinct and more easy to conceal—the whole definition of the problem changes. When the Greeks spoke about akraia and the Middle Ages about potestas in se ipsum, the frame for observations was defined by the distinction between reason and passions, and reason was the position of an observer who was supposed to be created by God to observe His creation in one and only one way. Deconstruction destroys this “one observer—one nature—one world” assumption. Identities, then, have to be constructed. But by whom?

The problem of admitting homosexuals into the military is the problem of how to protect the fragile and eventually self-deceiving constructions of individuals; it is the risk (not untypical for soldiers anyway) of wearing badly fitting garments. It is not a problem, as many would like to see it, of protecting hypocrisy. It is not a problem of the freedom of the individual, either. The United States Senate would probably never call on experts in deconstruction or second-order observing, and these experts would not offer a political solution. However, could the political system, blinded by its own rhetoric, ignore that a more complex definition of the problem is available?

The American discussion about deconstruction has reached its stage of exhaustion. By now deconstruction looks like an old-fashioned fashion. There was a time when one thought to use deconstruction as a method to analyze literary or legal texts, replacing older, more formal methods of revealing the immanent meaning of a text. At the same time, hermeneutics lost its stronghold in subjectivity and became a method of creating circularity and of putting meaning into a text in order to be able to find it there; it taught how to construct something new by reading old texts. However, hermeneutics retained the idea that interpretation had to penetrate the surface of an object (that is, a text) or a subject (in other words, a mind) to reach its internal depths where truth was to be found. It therefore retained the traditional idea of a boundary between the external and the internal that only Derrida dared to deconstruct. There were also available the Hegelian version of dialectical method and Peirce’s semiotics, both of which aimed at transcending distinctions in the direction of a third position. Deconstruction, however, was designed, if it was designed at all, to be none of these. Deconstruction seems to recommend the reading of forms as differences, to look at distinctions without the hope of regaining unity at a higher (or later) level, or without even assuming the position of an “interpretant” in the sense of Peirce. Deconstruction seems to be adequate for an intellectual climate heading toward cultural diversity. But are there any firm rules and any hope for results in the deconstruction business—that is, are there any framings that are not themselves deconstructible? Or would applying deconstruction lead only to reflexivity, recursivity, and self-reference resulting in stable meanings, objects, or what mathematicians call eigenvalues? It seems that there is only différence.

Derrida himself reacted to this discussion with well-studied amazement. In his “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” he explains, “What deconstruction is not? Everything of course! What is deconstruction? Nothing of course!” commenting thereby on the presupposition of traditional ontological metaphysics and its logic according to which everything must either be or not be. Deconstruction, then, is deconstruction of the “is” and the “is not.” Deconstruction deconstructs the assumption of presence, of any stable relation between presence and absence, or even of the very distinction between presence and absence. It is an unstable concept subject to an
ongoing difference of any difference it makes. It changes places and dances together with other unstable indicators such as différence, trace, écriture, supplément, blanc, and marge around a center that can no longer be characterized as either present or absent. It is like dancing around the golden calf while knowing that an unqualifiable god has already been invented. Or, in systems terms, is deconstruction the self-organization of this dance, complaining about a lost tradition and becoming, by this very complaint, dependent upon this tradition, so that it cannot decide and need not decide whether such a center is or is not present? It may be sufficient for maintaining the dance to be aware of the "trace de l'effacement de la trace" ("trace of the erasure of the trace").

Looking at this discussion of deconstructionists and their critics, the most remarkable fact may well be the narrowness of its span of attention. It is almost a one-word discussion, or a text/context discussion, where deconstruction is the text and the history and the usages of the word the context. It seems as if hermeneutics takes its revenge by interpreting deconstruction. But if the concept really catches some elements of the "spirit of our times," of the intellectual climate at the end of this century, there will be other similar attempts in other corners. And there are of course other "postmetaphysical" theories that start and end with differences and focus on paradoxes and their unfoldings. These theories use time as the main formal medium of shifting connections. They rely on self-reference and recursivity to fix entities (as fictions) in systems of operations, mathematical or empirical, that maintain themselves in dynamic stability.

Given the narrowness of academic citation circles, there are many possibilities of cross-fertilization that remain unused. We may leave them to future "historians of simultaneity." But to some extent we could explore these possibilities ourselves.

An alternative concept of knowledge, starting and ending with difference, emerged in the late 1960s from very different sources. Gregory Bateson, to begin with him, defines information as a difference that makes a difference. On this basis, information processing has to be conceived of as transforming differences into differences. A system has to be irritated by a difference to be able to bring itself into a different state. But the two differences can match only if they are constructed by the same system. Other systems, other information.

George Spencer Brown assumes that any mathematical calculus has to begin by drawing a distinction to indicate one and not the other side of it. Such drawing has to establish (and thereby to cross) the boundary between the unmarked and the marked state. Then the distinction can be observed as form. It can be marked, and the processing of the mark may lead to forms of higher complexity—not only arithmetic but also algebraic forms, for example. The mark (indicating one and not the other side of the form) can be observed as the observer who makes the distinction. In other words, any kind of observing system, whatever its material reality (be it biological or neurophysiological or psychological or sociological), can be described as determined by the distinction it uses. In the case of autopoietic (that is, self-reproducing) systems, this would mean that an observer has to focus on the self-determined and self-determining distinctions a system uses to frame its own observations.

This has led Heinz von Foerster to explore the possibilities of second-order cybernetics or second-order observations. On this level one has to observe not simple objects but observing systems—that is, to distinguish them in the first place. One has to know which distinctions guide the observations of the observed observer and to find out whether any stable objects emerge when these observations are recursively applied to their own results. Objects are therefore nothing but the eigenbehaviors of observing systems that result from using and reusing their previous distinctions.

One should also mention Gotthard Günther's concept of transjunctional operations. These are neither conjunctions nor disjunctions but positive/negative distinctions at a higher level. If you find such distinctions being applied by a system (say, a moral code of good and evil, specified by a set of criteria or programs), you can, at the level of transjunctional operations, either accept or reject this frame. Then you may reject this very choice and may look for another form, such as legally right and legally wrong. Transjunctional operations become unavoidable as soon as a system shifts from first-order to second-order observations or, in Günther's terminology, to polycontextual observations. This comes very close to Derrida's attempt to transcend the limitations of a metaphysical frame that allows for only two states: being and nonbeing. It comes close to a rejection of logoscentrism. But it does not imply a rejection of logics or of formalisms. Günther is not satisfied with the fuzziness of verbal acoustics and paradoxical
formulations and tries, whether successfully or not, to find logical structures of higher complexity, capable of fixing new levels for the integration of ontology (for more than one subject) and logics (with more than two values).

II

There are some important lessons that could be drawn from this research on second-order observing systems for reformulating the intent of deconstruction. It is not our task, however, to try to clarify what Derrida possibly means. Derrida himself distinguishes le sens de sens ("the meaning of meaning") and signalisation, which could mean "making and deferring distinctions" on the one hand and "indications" on the other. His writings are écriture in his own sense (that is, "inscriptions"). It remains open what they indicate. They have to be self-deconstructive to show how it works. And this is a form that exactly fits its philosophical intentions. But this does not mean that there can be no further steps. Derrida does his best to keep out of sight the presuppositions of using distinctions. But also one can pursue the contrary objective of making the architecture of theories as clear as possible so that an observer may decide whether to follow their suggestions or choose at certain points an alternative path.

One interesting convergence is already visible. A famous dictum of Humberto Maturana (within the context of his biological theory of cognition) says: Everything that is said (including this proposition) is said by an observer. The Derridean interpretation of Joseph Margolis leads to a very similar result: "Everything we say is and cannot but be deconstructive and deconstructible." For language use itself is the choice of a system that leaves something unsaid. Or, as Spencer Brown would say, drawing a distinction severs an unmarked space to construct a form with a marked and unmarked side. It may go too far to say that language use as such is deconstructive. But observing an observer who uses language certainly is. For on this level one can use transjunctional operations and reject (or accept) the distinctions that frame the observations of the observed observer. At the level of second-order observing, everything becomes contingent, including the second-order observing itself.

But what do we gain by this transition from deconstruction to second-order observing? What do we gain by avoiding the deconstruction of deconstruction and taking into account some of the results of more recent research on observing systems? There are several points to be mentioned:

1. Observations are asymmetric (or symmetry-breaking) operations. They use distinctions as forms and take forms as boundaries, separating an inner side (the Gestalt) and an outer side. The inner side is the indicated side, the marked side. From here one has to start the next operation. The inner side has connective value. For example, it is the immanent (and not the transcendent), the being (and not the nonbeing), or the having property (and not the not-having). The inner side is where the problem is—the problem of finding a suitable next operation. In the formal language of Günther, it has a positive (designative) but not a negative (reflective) value. Nevertheless, all observations have to presuppose both sides of the form they use as distinction or "frame." They cannot but operate (live, perceive, think, act, communicate) within the world. This means that something always has to be left unsaid, thereby providing a position from which to deconstruct what has been said.

2. If one tries to observe both sides of the distinction one uses at the same time, one sees a paradox—that is to say, an entity without connective value. The different is the same, the same is different. So what?

First of all, this means that all knowledge and all action have to be founded on paradoxes and not on principles; on the self-referential unity of the positive and the negative—that is, on an ontologically unqualifiable world. And if one splits the world into two marked and unmarked parts to be able to observe something, its unity becomes unobservable. The paradox is the visible indicator of invisibility. And since it represents the unity of the distinction required for the operation called observation, the operation itself remains invisible—for itself and for the time being.

This leads to the conclusion that parts of the world (or for that matter of any unity) have higher reflective potential than the unity itself (which may have none). This is definitely not a "holistic" approach. It is not a dialectical theory in the Hegelian sense, which ends with the "absolute spirit" that itself is nothing but a paradox, namely an entity excluding only exclusion. But it is in a sense a reconstruction of deconstruction.

It is the wisdom of Greek and Roman rhetorics, flourishing again in the sixteenth century, that grants paradoxes the function of stimulating further thought. The normal "doxa" is questioned by a para-doxa, and then
you have to make a decision. Whereas the medieval techniques of quæsi-
tiones disputatae (points of disputation) relied on authority to decide be-
tween opposed opinions, with Ockham, and then with the printing press,
authority itself became questionable. The opposed opinions were refor-
mulated as paradoxes, and the issue was left open. Finally, religion was
divided at its institutional level, and the wars about truth began.

Today logicians say that tautologies and paradoxes need unfolding—that is, they have to be replaced with stable identities. In one way or an-
other one has to find distinctions that protect from the error of identifying what cannot be identified. But distinctions again become visible as par-
doxes as soon as one tries to observe their unity. Unfoldments, then, are the
result of unasking this question. This means that one has to observe the ob-
server to see when and why he takes the risk of an unfolding—of a de-
constructible unfoldment.

3. This may suggest, and correctly so, that the distinction between a
paradox and its unfoldment is itself a paradox. (We keep in mind that de-
construction itself can be deconstructed.) Given this dead end, only time
can help. Time can teach us that there is no end; everything goes on, and sys-
tems continue to operate as long as they are not destroyed. Spencer Brown’s
calculus of forms is strictly temporal, is a time-consuming program of
building up complexity. In his terms, one can cross the boundary of any
form (= distinction) and reach the other side. But this requires a next op-
eration. If the other side is the unmarked space, you can do nothing but re-
turn. But thereby you obey the law of cancellation. If you come back, it is
as if nothing has happened. But if, crossing the boundary, you try to find
something specific, the other side will again be a distinction severing the
unmarked space, reproducing the world as an unobservable entity. You
defer the problem, and that seems to be what Derrida means by difference. If
we start with the form of nature and cross its boundary with a specific inten-
t, what do we find? Perhaps grace, which presupposes new distinctions,
such as grace/work, grace/justice, grace / creation of order. The other side
may be civilization; it may be technology; and we will feel the need for fur-
ther distinctions such as civilization/culture, or tight coupling (technology)
and loose coupling. The other side can be specified in several distinct ways.
One can choose, at certain times, a religious or a secular context. Such pos-
sibilities of antonym substitution may be used to adapt the semantical struc-
tures of a society to changes in social structures.

4. Within the theory of empirical systems, we can observe a similar
trend to “temporalize” problems of identity and stability, and to replace
theories of structural stability with theories of dynamic stability. Structural-
ism presupposed that systems need structures to limit the range of pos-
sible changes. Structures, then, seem to differentiate between fast changes
(short waves), slow changes (long waves), and destructive changes (cata-
nstrophes). But contrary to a hidden assumption of structuralism, the only
component of a system that can change is its structure. So if we focus on
the form (= distinction), what is the other side of this form?

On the other side we find events or the operations of the system. Events
(and this includes operations) cannot change because they have no
time for change: they disappear as soon as they appear, they vanish in the
very process of emerging. So again, one of these cheerful paradoxes: the
only unchangeable components of systems are inherently unstable.

Systems, therefore, have to use their operations to be able to continue
to use their operations to be able, et cetera. This is, roughly, what has been
called, following Humberto Maturana, autopoiesis. Autopoietic systems
are the products of their own operations. They have properties such as dy-
namic stability and operational closure. They are not goal-oriented sys-
tems. They maintain their autopoietic organization of self-reproduction as
long as it is possible to do so. Their problem is to find operations that can
be connected to the present state of the system. In this sense they are what
Heinz von Foerster would call nontrivial machines or historical machines.
They use self-referential operations to refer to their present state to decide
what to do next. They are unreliable machines, to be distinguished from
trivial machines that use fixed programs to transform inputs into outputs.
Autopoietic systems rely not on tight coupling but on loose coupling to
move from one state to the next, and this makes it possible for them to
evolve into different structural types according to random links between
the system and its environment. They do not use cognition as a technique
for adaptation and survival. Their environment is much too complex and
nontransparent. But they develop, by evolution and learning, cognitive ca-
pacities for temporary adaptation to temporary states of the environment.
And this makes it possible for them to have memory, which is the capacity
to delay the repetitive use of forms.

5. A system that can observe may have the capacity to observe itself.
To observe itself it has to distinguish itself from everything else, that is,
from its environment. The recursively interconnected operations of the system draw a boundary and thereby differentiate system and environment. The operation of self-observation requires a reentry (in Spencer Brown’s sense) of this difference into itself, namely the operation of distinguishing a system and environment within the system. (This is another way of saying that a part of an entity may have higher reflective capacities than the entity itself.) In this sense, all conscious systems and all social systems use the distinction between self-reference and external reference as an invariable structure of their own observations. This is a well-known assumption of the classical theory of the (conscious) subject that knows that it does the knowing in all its operations. But the same holds true for all communicating systems and in particular for the societal system. Communication requires the concomitant distinction between information and utterance, between constative and performative aspects of its operation. And understanding means nothing but observing the unity of this distinction.

But a reentry is a paradoxical operation. The distinction between “before” and “after” the reentry is the same and not the same. This shows that time (that is, the temporal distinction of an observer) is used to dissolve the paradox. And it shows also that a theory of the mind (the conscious subject) and a theory of society ultimately have to be founded on an unfolded paradox.

III

Who, then, is the observer, the constructing and therefore deconstructible observer? Nobody, of course, might be the answer in Derrida’s style. Or everybody. The problem lies in the copula “is,” used to formulate the question. But we can easily avoid its ontological implication (that there is an observer) by using the second-level observation. The question then becomes: Who is to be observed and by whom and for what reasons? This means: an observer has to declare (or even justify) his preferences for choosing and indicating a specific observer to be observed—that one and not another one. At the level of transjunctural operations any observer can accept or reject this choice. He can share the observer’s preferences in focusing on this one (and not another) observer, or he can refuse to follow and, using third-level observation, describe the second-level observer as a specific system with specific preferences for selecting specific observers to be observed—say, as a family therapist with an interest in the intricacies of reciprocal observations of observations in families that so easily take a pathological path; or as a philosopher with an interest in deconstructing the distinguishing forms of distinction used in ontological metaphysics.

There is, in other words, no logical, ontological, or even natural primacy involved in using the distinction being/nonbeing. An observer may continue to use this distinction and thereby become visible as somebody who continues the distinct observational mode of our metaphysical tradition. Or he may reject this focus and become visible as entangled in all the difficulties of observing without using the distinction being/nonbeing—blurring, for example, its boundary without trying to replace it with other observational instruments.

A sociologist can find a relatively comfortable place in this game of observing systems. He may, for good reasons, focus on the societal system as the most important observer to be observed. Conscious systems (minds, individuals, subjects) are uninteresting for the simple reason that there are too many of them and it would be difficult to justify choosing one out of five billion or more. And other social systems—science, for instance—are only subsystems of the societal system with a very specific (albeit universal) mode of observing. The preference for observing the observer society remains a selection, remains contingent on specific observational interests. But it would be difficult to deny that in our present historical circumstances we are very concerned about not simply what modern society is but how it observes and describes itself and its environment.

Taking the society as an observer and even as the most important observer needs, of course, theoretical preparations. Some of these have been explained in section II. We have to define the concept of observation abstractly so that it can be applied to psychic and to social operations, to perception and thinking and to communication as well. Observation is nothing but making a distinction to indicate one side and not the other, regardless of the material basis of the operation that does the job, and regardless of the boundaries that close a system (brain, mind, social system) so that it becomes an autopoietic system, reproduced by the network of its own operations, and eventually irritated but never determined by its environment.

Accordingly, we have to redefine the concept of society. Conceived as an observing system, society cannot be described as a collection of differ-
ent, somehow interrelated items such as human beings, or actions, structures and processes, elements and relations—or whatever our traditional frames suggest. In this way, the unity of such “collections” becomes incoherent, and as we already know, this ambiguity protects the underlying paradox that cannot be permitted to appear. However, recent developments in systems theory suggest frames and more promising unfoldings of the underlying paradox. We can think of society as the all-encompassing system of communication with clear, self-drawn boundaries that includes all connectable communication and excludes everything else. Hence, the society is a self-reproducing system, based on one, and only one, highly specific type of operation, namely communication. It excludes other types of operationally closed systems—cells, neurons, brains, minds. All this, and much more, is of course presupposed in the very process of communication. It is presupposed in the sense of a necessary environment (and we remember: the form of a system is the difference of system and environment). Living systems and conscious systems can produce only their own reproduction, replacing states of awareness by and with other states of awareness. They can never, by their own mode of operation, communicate. For communication requires the production of an emergent unity that has the capacity to integrate and disintegrate the internal states of more than one operationally closed system.

Operational closure seems to be the necessary empirical condition of observations. Without closure, the system would continually mix up its own operations with those of its environment, conscious states with external states or words with things. It could not make the (reentering) distinction between self-reference and external reference. It could not even match external and internal states. It could not separate the observer from the observed. It could not produce cognition. What we know from brain research is also true for communication. The lack of operational access to the environment is a necessary condition for cognition. And therefore, all constructions remain deconstructible by other observers. They can do it—if they can.

How, then, does society observe and describe the world by using itself as a system-reference, by developing the higher reflection capacities of a system, and by using the distinction between system and environment (between words and things) to dissolve the paradox of the world as a frameless, undistinguishable totality that cannot be observed?

IV

Conceived as an operationally closed system, modern society is world society.31 Its function systems could never agree on regional, national, or cultural boundaries. The system of science, the economic system, the system of mass media operate and observe clearly on a worldwide level. But the political system nowadays, too, is a world system, segmented into “states” to achieve a better fit between political power and changing conditions of public consensus. States, in their phase of dissolution into ethnic groups or economic congregations, remain the prime address of political communication—national and above all international. But this does not mean that the society ends and begins at political boundaries—say, between the United States and Mexico, or between Germany and Austria. Tourists enjoy (to some extent) legal protection and the staged authenticity of customs and traditions all over the world. We can intermarry, whatever our national origins. Conversion from one religion to another is possible, if religions care at all for an exclusive identity and membership. But in spite of all this, the global system or modern society seems not to be able to produce one and only one self-description.

This leads to the question of how the world society can observe and describe itself and its environmental conditions given the enormous variety of living conditions, of cultural traditions, of political regimes, of religious orientations, of the impact (or lack of impact) of law as a constraint in daily life, of class structures, of career structures, of corruption, and of the degree of exclusion of large parts of the population from any participation in function systems in a very unequal distribution over the regions of the world?

The answer is surprisingly simple. This observing and describing is done by the mass media. What we know about the world we know from books, from newspapers, from movies, from television—be it German reunification or the living conditions of the pandas, the size of the universe or the increase of violence in Rio de Janeiro or in Los Angeles. To a large extent, mass media create the illusion that we are first-order observers, whereas in fact this is already second-order observing. All three main sectors of mass-media operations—that is, news and reports, advertisements, and entertainment—cooperate in producing a rather coherent image of the world.
we are living in. We know that this is preselected information, but we do not and cannot in everyday life reflect upon and control the selectivity of this selection. To see the contingency of the result, we need a more reflective second-order observing to see not what but how mass media select.

This selective presentation is not, as most people would be inclined to think, a distortion of reality. It is a construction of reality. For from the point of view of a postontological theory of observing systems, there is no distinct reality out there (who, then, would make these distinctions?), but instead all distinctions (indications, identities, classifications, and so forth) are made by an observer. And there is, at least in our society, no privileged observer—be it the highest class, the citizen (distinguished from countrymen), the clergy, the literati. The last semantic construction claiming to be in this position has been the “transcendental subject.” But there is no transcendental subject. We have to rely on the system of mass media that construct our reality—transforming the artificial into the natural, the contingencies of their constructions into a mix of necessities, impossibilities, and freedom (or rather freedoms).

If there is no choice in accepting these observations, because there is no equally powerful alternative available, we have at least the possibility of deconstructing the presentations of the mass media, their presentations of the present. At this point, it again becomes important to replace deconstruction with second-order observing. We can very well observe their observing. There is already a lot of empirical research with well-known results. Mass media prefer discontinuity over continuity because they have to produce information. They prefer conflict over peace, disensus over consensus, drama over normal and dull life. They prefer stories of local interest. The mass media like quantities that need no further explanation because they are distinctions themselves. They prefer bad news over good news, but good advertisement over bad advertisement. In their entertainment section, they draw clear moral distinctions, although the good guy sometimes has to cut corners to bring the story to a good end. They prefer morality and action. This means that we may overestimate the importance of decisions and of the influence of decisions (and individuals) on decisions, and that we will translate the uncertainty of the future into a risk of decision making. We will insist on responsibility and will evaluate decision makers accordingly, knowing very well that the future remains unknown and that values and criteria are and remain an object of controversy. Decisions do not come about without situational influences; quantities do not translate easily into developments; and discontinuities disconnect what we know from the past from what we may expect from the future.

This overall tendency to emphasize discontinuity, surprise, conflict, agency, decision, and moral evaluation seems not to lead to a unified worldview, replacing the old cosmology of substances and essences (hypokeimenon, subjectum, ousia, essentia) with a new one. What has become visible after some centuries of impact of the printing press and after a hundred and more years of mass media is a much more complicated, some say hypercomplex, description of complexity—hypercomplex in the sense that within the complex system of society there are many competing descriptions of this complexity. The unity of the complexity becomes unobservable. Intellectuals occupy themselves and others with describing description, philosophers become experts on philosophical texts—and literary criticism takes over, nicknaming “theory” something that we suppose has been done elsewhere.32

In comparison with what has become by now our old European tradition, this state of affairs appears very unsatisfactory. But do we have to compare? It could well be that our society is the outcome of a structural and semantical catastrophe in the sense meant by René Thom—that is, the result of a fundamental change in the form of stability that gives meaning to states and events. If this is so, the deconstruction of our metaphysical tradition is indeed something that we can do now. But if so, it would be worthwhile to choose the instruments of deconstruction with sufficient care so that by using them we could gain some information about our postmetaphysical, postontological, postconventional, postmodern—that is, postcatastrophic condition.

V

Ever since history became a narrative, and certainly since the invention of the novel and of historicism reflecting upon itself—that is, since the eighteenth century—describing history has been a semantical device presenting the unity of the past as a guarantee of the unity of the present. One could almost say the unity of the past had to compensate for the lost unity of the present. The unity of the past had to be presented as a coher-
ent sequence of events, as a unity of diversity, a unity of some agency, such as the hero of the novel or the world spirit who is using history as a movement with the preordained end of self-realization. The German Historische Schule (historical school) did compensate for the lost Reich and for the not-yet-achieved national unity. Ever since, national and regional education programs have been focusing on the past to create unity within a present, glossing over different historical roots and cultural diversity.

But how did historical societies observe their world and themselves within their world? Raising this question dissolves the unquestioned value of history in forming identities. To return to history, then, means to return to diversity. The common heritage, the canonical texts, the “classics” all require a new reading. The deconstruction of our metaphysical tradition pursued by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida can be seen as a part of a much larger movement that loosens the binding force of tradition and re-places unity with diversity. The deconstruction of the ontological presuppositions of metaphysics uproots our historical semantics in a most radical way. This seems to correspond to what I have called the catastrophe of modernity, the transition from one form of stability to another.

Sociologists, then, have to look for the structural conditions and limitations that frame the frames within which observations and descriptions can operate. In other words, a sociological theory would have to formulate correlations between social structures and semantics. It is well known that Marx used the concept of class structures for this purpose and constructed a typology of changing modes of production that generated historical ideologies. We could enlarge this framework by substituting forms of differentiation for class. This opens the classical sociology of knowledge for more structural complexity and gives us the possibility of using the sophisticated framework of systems theory to elaborate on forms of differentiation. Differentiation becomes system differentiation; system differentiation becomes a reentry of system-building within systems, new boundaries within already bounded systems, forms within forms, observers within observers.

Developed societies of the past were differentiated according to social strata (nobility/commoners) or center/periphery (city/country) distinctions. Families (and therefore individuals) had to live on the one or the other side of this internal boundary. They found themselves placed by the social structure. This had the advantage that society provided privileged positions for observing and describing itself and the surrounding world. The highest strata or the center, the polis, had undisputed authority for observing and describing, for producing ontology. Critique could focus on bad moral behavior. Ethics and virtue were prominent devices to cope with the negative, in China, in the Greek city, in Rome, and in the Middle Ages. The moral worked as a protest-absorbing mechanism. There was no lack of authority for stating the truth. The world—be it the universitas rerum (world of things) or hic mundus (this world) in its religious, rather negative sense—contains the society of heroes and sinners, of exemplary modes of living. It framed and supported its structures. Words such as environment, environnement, and Umwelt are neologisms of the nineteenth century.

This is “the world we have lost,” the world of ontological metaphysics, the world of “being or not being,” the world of the two-value logic that presupposed one (and only one) observer who could make up his mind simply by looking at what is the case. Cognition, but also passion such as love, was a passive reaction to a reality out there, a “being impressed,” and errors in cognition or passion could be corrected by reason.

The breakdown of what we may call (following Otto Brunner) old-European semantics became inevitable when society changed its primary form of differentiation, when it shifted from the very elaborate order of hierarchical stratification, conceived of as “the order,” to the primacy of functional differentiation. With this move, function systems became independent of stratification, organizing their own boundaries, their own modes of inclusion and exclusion of persons, their own ways to transform equality into inequality and freedom into restraint. Society could proclaim equality and freedom for everybody since its function systems generated the contrary state—a quite new form of unfolding the paradox. Morality could no longer absorb protests but became a device for an enduring self-irritation of the society; it became individualistic and in need of reasoned elaboration—the new Bentham/Kant sense of ethics.

As lately as the last decades of the eighteenth century, European society became aware that the old order was gone. This has nothing to do with the so-called Industrial Revolution or the French Revolution, which became important only because society was prepared to see and to interpret a new order. Around 1800, a new semantics of modernity (the modern world, the modern states, and so forth) tried to catch up with the changes. The future was projected as open for improvements (more freedom, more equality, the constitutional question, more education, and, above all, eman-
The problem of God became the problem of religion. During the nineteenth century, a series of new distinctions emerged, such as state and society, individual and collectivity, community and society, but the "and" of these dualities was left uninterpreted; that is, the unity of the distinction (= the paradox) remained invisible. Obviously the modern society was yet unable to observe itself, to identify the observer. Special problems such as "the social question" and national imperialism became controversial issues, but framing them in terms of problems and problem solutions could not contribute much to a self-description of the society. Only the mass media succeeded in serving this function.

Are we, at the end of this century, in a different position? Do we have other choices that could be made?

It can and has been said that the semantics of modernity has been a transitional semantics. But the concept of postmodernity does not provide us with further information; it simply repeats this insight. Reflexivity may be the predicament of the philosophy of this century. But what does this mean, projected into a societal context? Entwueigung, difference, lack of unity, destruction of all canonical certainties—these were already the complaint of the nineteenth century, and we are only intellectually better prepared to accept them as inevitable. Finally, deconstruction seems to be the key word, suggesting that we could do this. This may appeal to the pragmatic sense of Americans. But the question remains: Should we do it? and why? or why not?

From a historical point of view deconstruction seems to be the end of history, history consuming itself. At the same time it can go on, it can never be completed, it never can reach the plenitude of nonbeing. It is and remains writing, constructing, and deferring differences. Given these unlimited prospects, understanding deconstruction as observing observers reduces its complexity. The only possible object of deconstruction would be observing systems. But observing means using a distinction for indicating one side and not the other. We then can distinguish (being observable in doing so) different observers. So by reducing complexity we gain complexity and therefore the structured complexity of self-observing systems. We do not lose the individual, the mind, the body as an observable observer. But we can also focus on society as a self-observing, self-describing system. Seen in this way, deconstruction will survive its deconstruction as the most pertinent description of the self-description of modern society.

4. Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing

This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the Commonwealth Center seminar "Cultural Change and Environmental Issues."

3. The sociocultural influence on sexual inclinations of bodies is, of course, a well-known fact. See Schelsky 1955.
4. For a recent discussion see Rorty 1980.
5. Recent feminist readings of Freud suggest indeed that women have a less imposing and more complex sexuality, that they are less in need of maintaining a visible superiority — and therefore less in danger of deconstruction. See Mitchell 1975; Kofman 1980; and also Cixous 1975 for a Derridean approach that finds the solution in the unconstructible bisexuality of women. Feminist observers might even go on, by différence, and insinuate that the protection against homosexual stimulation is needed for maintaining the hierarchical opposition of male and female.
6. But see also the purely technical advice given by Hogarth 1955 to reconstruct the "inner eye" of an object by surface lines (preferring serpentine-like lines) and to match the internal surface and the external surface. See Glanville 1988, a collection of papers originally published in English but available only in book form in German.
9. Derrida 1972a, 77; here and elsewhere, unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.
10. See Gumbrecht 1997.
13. As deconstruction has to do as well, "depuis un certain dehors, par elle inqualifiable, innommable" ("from a certain outside, unqualifiable and nameless in itself"), referring to philosophy by distinguishing it from what it has dissimulated. See Derrida 1972b, 15. See also Derrida's remarks on the possible future of a non-phonetic mathematical notation, published originally in 1968, which could almost be read as a prognosis of Spencer Brown's Laws of Form (1979), originally published in 1969: "Le progrès effectif de la notation mathématique va donc de pair avec la déconstruction de la métaphysique" ("the effective progress of mathematical notation goes together with the deconstruction of metaphysics") (Derrida 1972b, 47–48).
14. For the possibility of improving on Derrida by using the ideas of Spencer Brown, see Roberts 1992.
15. Some of the papers in question, and more recent papers, are available in German translation. See von Foerster 1993c.
17. In deconstruction theory, this reads as follows: "An opposition that is deconstructed is not destroyed or abandoned but reinscribed." See Culler 1982, 133.
20. See Margolis 1985, 146.
23. See Erasmus, In Praise of Folly, or Thomas More, Utopia; or then Ortenia Lando, John Donne, and many others. A monographical account is given by Colie 1966.
25. The time-length of an event in the sense of its specious present remains, of course, an open question. But this has to be decided by an observer or by observing the observer. If the observer concedes enough time for changes (e.g., observing the German reunification), he is in fact observing not an event but a structure (which includes a structured process).
26. See the collection of papers published in German in Maturana 1982, and also Maturana and Varela 1984.
27. This comes very close to an unorthodox theory of decision making, proposed by Shackleton 1979.
28. We presuppose here without further ado that "the human being" (in the singular) has been deconstructed anyway.
29. The combination specific/universal refers to the pattern variable of the action theory of Talcott Parsons, and shows up, within this theory, as a distinctly modern type of framing of observations. See Parsons 1960.
30. I underline empirical to insist that it is not a transcendental a priori in Kant's sense, based on the distinction (always distinctions!) between the empirical and the transcendental, the realm of causality and the realm of freedom. But it is a condition of possibility in Kant's sense, a condition of the possibility of observations.
31. See Luhmann 1990a, 175–90.
32. See Culler 1982, 8; and Culler 1988, 15.