Reconsidering nature and accountability: the possibilities of strategic postmodernism

Jane Andrew
University of Wollongong


This paper is posted at Research Online.
CHAPTER FOUR

STRATEGIC POSTMODERNISM AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Reflection on the postmodern condition and reflection on the environmental crisis have much in common. They both involve efforts to understand the culture of modern civilization and how it has come to its present state (Gare, 1995, p.1).

In the previous chapters I explored the broad implication and significance of inter-disciplinary research and indicated the value of alternative research methodologies to the development of knowledge, particularly in regard to the environment. I followed this with the development of a model for a reflexive discourse analysis that will be followed throughout the remainder of this thesis. In doing this, it was argued that environmental research requires a broader focus because at the heart of the project is a desire to demonstrate the connectedness of things. This is very much an ecological framework, and the importance of inter-dependencies is reinforced by the methodological choices associated with inter-disciplinary research, which in turn mimics the important ecological point. In this chapter I will consider the specific theoretical approach adopted in this work, namely strategic postmodernism. Although, I will argue that the world is an increasingly ruptured place, the philosophy that underpins ecology is not lost because these ruptures are not entirely disconnected from each other.

As postmodernism has been a significant focus of so much of contemporary intellectual and research debate, it is important to consider the implications of this for accounting and more particularly, notions of accountability. Can a postmodern accounting exist? What could strategic postmodernism say about accountability? Does strategic
postmodernism shed light on the way that accounting has dealt with environmental issues? What are the implications of environmental accountability? Can strategic postmodern environmentalism deal with some of the criticisms of postmodernism and aid in the development of a postmodern praxis? Can strategic postmodernism enable new and 'useful' ways of 'seeing' the cultural practice of accounting and broader desires for accountability? I argue for a strategic postmodernism that focuses on the contribution of theorists who utilise and develop postmodern ideas, as a way of destabilising the assumptions that have dominated modernity. This interpretation of postmodernism allows for an analysis of the presuppositions that dominate cultural practices, such as accounting, that exclude, silence and marginalise many other ways of seeing and producing knowledge. It also holds out that social change is possible and includes important contemplations of emerging ethical issues in relation to contemporary social, political and economic contexts.

I will also consider the ethical possibilities of strategic postmodernism as an emancipatory politic and an ethic of 'becoming'. I argue that environmental research has ethical content, and is motivated and formulated by a synthesis of the contexts in which it is produced. As such, environmental accounting researchers cannot shy away from the ethical implications and motivations of their work (Andrew, forthcoming). Traditionally ethics has been imagined as the actualisation of philosophy and it has been assumed that encoding, describing and taming ethical possibilities is an 'essential' element of the development of ethical perspectives and objectives (Bullock & Stallybrass, 1977). Utilising the tools of strategic postmodernism is an approach that is not 'without ethics', but contextualises ethics as a social process, constantly in a state of flux, changing and shifting as new ideas and experiences arise (Bauman, 1993).
I will show how strategic postmodernism encourages a shift away from an all-encompassing, generalisable 'ethic', towards ethics founded in the specificities and contexts in which they develop and change. Although postmodernism has been responsible for what some would describe as 'unadulterated individualism', I suggest that ethics and particularly environmental ethics, are not made redundant by the postmodern turn. Instead, the possibilities of ethics are opened and multiplicity is explored in the development of an ethical perspective, which may aid the development of ways to address environmental issues that face all of our communities and cultural practices. I will now consider the broader significance of 'postmodernism' and then explore the more specific interpretation used in this work.

1. POSTMODERNISM: "THE WORD HAS NO MEANING. USE IT AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE"1

Central to postmodernism is its critique of the claims that (scientific) knowledge is universal and can be justified in a noncontextual way. Postmodernists contend that standards of truth are context-dependent (Seidman & Wagner, 1992, p.6).

Many would suggest that it is an oxymoron to propose a definition of postmodernism (Easthope & Gowan, 1992; Barrett & Phillips, 1994; Gare, 1997) and there is much "confusion over the precise meaning of postmodernism, whose vagueness is part of its nature" (Cherry, 1998, p.20). This difficulty comes from what Dickens and Fontana described as its “inter-disciplinary applications” and its “diverse origins” (1994, 1 Gare (1995, p.4) used this definition to open his work on postmodernism and the environmental crisis. It is taken from the Modern Dictionary of Received Ideas.
p.1), its border crossing (Rryse, 1998), complex history² and the fact that it has been developed and applied to diverse focuses. The problem of definition is made even more difficult when there are mainstream ontological, epistemological and methodological expectations to 'define'. Easthope and Gowan clearly articulated the definitional difficulties associated with postmodernism, suggesting that

(at) the most basic level we might understand the mode of postmodernism as a heterogeneous interweaving of questions which escape any singular or unified answer (1992, p.181).

Smart (1993) claimed that there are multiple postmodern approaches and that there should be considerable differences in the way that researchers interpret this position. He wrote of

(postmodernity as a form of life, a form of reflection upon and response to the accumulating signs of the limits and limitations of modernity. Postmodernity as a way of living with the doubts, uncertainties and anxieties which seem increasingly to be a corollary of modernity, the inescapable price to be paid for the gains, the benefits and the pleasures, associated with modernity (Smart, 1993, p.12).

As this quote suggests, postmodernism is more of a way of 'becoming', rather than a rigid and concrete event willing to be defined. According to Smart it is a "contemporary social, cultural and political condition" (1993, p.12). Utilising the theoretical leniency advised by this position, it is possible to approach an understanding of postmodernism by considering the ways that others have negotiated these definitional

² It should be noted that postmodernism arose as a movement in art as a rejection of the exclusivity of high art (Seidman, 1994). It challenged the traditional categories that distinguished worthy from unworthy art, art for the elites and art for the masses. It was quickly taken up within architecture and its importance also began to arise within literary theory, sociological studies and anthropology. Jameson wrote that most postmodernism(s) emerged "as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery" (1984, p.111).
difficulties - avoiding 'absolutes' and 'universals' whilst attributing some 'meaning' (however fluid). It should be noted that these issues do not negate the possibility of contextualising aspects of postmodern theory that suit the focus of the work that is being undertaken (Bower, 1998; Williams, 1998). This is not entirely arbitrary, because to do so requires a broad familiarity with a range of different postmodern texts, and it also encourages respective authors to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the selections that they make in adopting a postmodern approach. This reinforces the reflexive approach adopted in this thesis as discussed extensively in chapter three.

Many authors have established this precedent (Sarup, 1993; Seidman, 1994; Yeatman, 1994; Kumar, 1995; Lemert, 1997) and have outlined some of the aims of the postmodern project from the perspective of that particular author or in order to pursue the aims of their research questions. Cherry argued that it is "possible to distinguish some characteristics of postmodern philosophy" (1998, p. 20) and it is certainly feasible to identify those aspects that will be used in a particular piece of work (Bauman 1993; Lemert, 1997; Cherry, 1998). Ahmed (1992), in his study of postmodernism and Islam, provided a good outline of the key points. I will summarise them here and explore them in more detail in the section on strategic postmodernism:

1. It presupposes a questioning of the project of modernity, a pluralistic approach, with a scepticism towards traditional orthodoxies. This encompasses a rejection of the world as a universal totality and the expectation of final solutions or complete answers.

2. It encompasses a philosophy of tolerance, the availability of choice, the accessibility of information, the democratisation of public life. It seeks to erode the exclusivity of certain social constructs, and destabilise the foundations of privilege. This is not possible without engaging with modernity, hence its definition in relation to it.
3. It encourages the mixing of diverse images, inter-disciplinary work and the juxtaposition of discourses. The high-brow is mixed with popular culture and the alienating is mixed with the accessible.

4. Language is considered to be an important device, requiring investigations into its role in the construction of social processes (Summarised from Ahmed, 1992, pp.10-28).

In other words, such an approach abandons any basis for certainty or “for appealing to universal standards of truth, goodness, or beauty” (Seidman, 1994, p.299). Ahmed (1992) also made it clear that the context in which a postmodern study arises will deeply effect the aspects that are chosen to explore, the ideas, issues, discourses, politics or physical sites to which they are applied. These of course vary, depending on the choices that are made in regard to our respective interpretations along the spectrum of possibilities like those suggested by Lemert (1997), which from his perspective includes radical postmodernism, strategic postmodernism and radical modernism.

1.1 There Isn’t a Singular Meaning But Postmodernism Can be Contextualised

As the previous section established there is no ‘correct’ definition, but postmodernism can be contextualised as some descriptions repeat themselves within the literature. The most obvious of which are discussions of the periodisation of postmodernity in relation to modernity. The very fact that post-modernism relates to the period after modernity says something about the inter-connections between these periods. According to Kumar (1995), postmodernism has not arisen in a vacuum, instead it has arisen as a response to the perceived failures of modernism and the inability for the project to handle the emerging post-war, post-industrial, post-humanist, post-white, post-male dominated world.
1.1.1 The Historical Context(s).

Dickens and Fontana (1994), in a discussion of the various contributions to postmodern thought, write that Marcus and Fisher (1986) defined this perspective in relation to the historical position in which it is placed, recognising quite specifically the fractured and problematic aspects associated with the contemporary associations with modernity.

They define postmodernism as a ‘crisis of representation’ where traditional standards no longer apply, implying both an epistemological and existential problematic in which present conditions of knowledge and experience are defined not so much in themselves as by what they come after, such as postindustrial, postnarrative or poststructural (Dickens and Fontana, 1994, p.2).

Although the roots of postmodernism can be linked to the avant-garde of the 1920's (Kumar, 1995), it is more commonly associated with the changes that have occurred after the Second World War. Such changes include mass access to radical technological inventions (for example, the car, television, washing machine, internet); the rapid expansion of ‘consumerism’ as the focus of societies (we are now largely categorised as consumers of goods and services, including such things as education and government benefits); the shift from physical labour to mental labour (often called the service economy, and also referred to as the post-industrial society); and the rapid changes in migration patterns and the rise of multi-cultural societies (shifts away from policies such as The White Australia Policy, the movement of people to places where labour was required to perform large projects such as the Snowy Mountain HydroElectric project, and within society there is an increasing expectation to be a mobile and flexible workforce wherein ties to family, place and history are less likely to be sustained).
These changes are not in themselves new, as change has been a dimension of all societies throughout history, but the change that denotes this period as postmodern is its peculiarly fractured nature, its lack of linearity, the fact that 'the masses' have participated in its emergence and have been more included in the 'knowledge' of our society than ever before (a story told in part by the rise of the mass media, but also the rise of universal education and increasing access to tertiary education, and the erosion of traditional categories of expert, like doctor, lawyer, artist) (Seidman, 1994; Kumar, 1995; Sarup, 1998). According to Bauman (1992), this is juxtaposed against the rise of the multi-national corporation, the erosion of the state, emerging challenges to the supremacy of the 'West', and a level of social and political apathy.

I will expand on some of the problems associated with this critique in a later section of this chapter, but it seems important to acknowledge that these things more easily describe the 'Western' world. It would be a mistake to assume that technology is evenly distributed globally (in other words there is no mass access to cars or the internet at a global level) and this access is not distributed evenly within communities (the inequities that exist in Australia or the United States are good examples of this). This is just a further example of the fractures that appear in any attempt to narrate on such a large scale, the point is that societies have undergone sweeping change that cannot be described through grand-narratives, there is no singular reason or driving force for such change.

1.1.2 Suspicion of the Grand Narrative

The most widely cited challenge to meta-discourse is provided by Lyotard (1984), who argued in *The Postmodern Condition*, that all the
attempts to structure or explain the human experience in terms of grand narratives had failed and lost credibility and have proven incapable of universality. These grand narratives include "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii). It is also often described as a perspective that acknowledges the 'crisis of representation' facing modernism because of our inability to be able to describe and know the world in which we live (Jameson, 1984; Dickens & Fontana, 1994). It is often suggested that all attempts at such description have failed. Arguments to pin point and represent the core motivations of social organisations have proven to be incomplete or misguided (Marx's historical determinism is often used as an example), and references to allegedly transcendental signifiers have proven to be contextual and culturally dependent (such as truth, morality or beauty) (Seidman, 1994; Gare, 1995). This draws into question the value of an attempt to try to use 'nature' as the fundamental referent by those of us who wish to be party to a renegotiation of human relationships with the non-human world. I will return to this idea in a later section of this work, but it is important to remember that grand-narratives have failed (at best bringing partial change, like that of the Russian revolution) and this raises a number of important issues for environmentalists.\footnote{This also raises important issues for postmodernists and indeed for all readers of this work. I do not think it is accurate to assume that grand-narratives have failed 'absolutely', however, the subject position of the 'reader' may view this differently. Perhaps some have failed and not others? It is also worthy to consider whether environmental grand narratives could be persuasive devices around which even the most radical postmodernist may rally?}

Jameson (1984) saw this 'crisis of representation' as being directly associated with the cultural logic of late capitalism. He articulated a tension between the creative forces within art, science and technology and the confusing issues associated with massive economic change, like increasing economic globalisation and the rise of multi-national
corporations (Gare, 1995 also deals with these issues using the 'environmental crisis' as a focus). Jameson (1984) recognised some of the specific complexities associated with the contemporary notions of 'reality', within increasingly hybrid cultures, economies and societies that are (inter)dependent, with many cultural, political, social, spiritual, class, and gender differences being subsumed and affected by contemporary structures of international economics.

This approach is often characterised by new histories and the telling of stories that have not garnered mainstream historical or contemporary visibility (Gare, 1995) and it is here that stories of 'nature' can be told within cultural practices that have traditionally excluded it (I will explore this in the following chapters). It places emphasis on the importance of local, contextualised and specific knowledge, as a way of exposing the exclusions that have been a necessary part of generalised, functionalist knowledge production and therefore it "rejects simplistic, restricting Eurocentric universals" (Murphy, 1997, p.41). It has been credited with "opening academia to a greater diversity of values and truths" and it attempts to "deconstruct the assumptions underlying truth claims, and it encourages openness to the points of view of those outside the mainstream" (Cherry, 1998, p.20).

In making this point, I do not wish to imply that postmodernism privileges repressed knowledge production over dominant knowledge production. It is here that the radical content of postmodernism lies (Fardon, 1995). Instead of merely reversing historical privileges and prejudices, it is an approach that encourages an exposure of the traces and exclusions of knowledge as a way of destabilising the absolutism and centrality of modernist modes of knowledge production. This predominantly hinges on the role of language as a mediator of lived experience and for much postmodern work "language is primary"
(Lemert, 1997, p. 22). This perspective does not seek to replace a dominant language with a marginalised one, but instead, it seeks to create a dialogue and expose the possibilities that lie within knowledge that has been absent from dominant discourse (such as the knowledge of herbal remedies, a casualty of the dominance of things such as modern medicine, science, doctors, pharmaceutical companies, socially constructed notions of the 'expert').

1.1.3 Postmodern Critiques of Power and Identity

There have been many attempts to consider the implications of postmodernism on feminist praxis and there has been quite considerable literature that has engaged with the limitations and possibilities of postmodernism, on issues of gender and corresponding issues of class and race (Barrett & Phillips, 1992). Walby (1992) considered that the fragmentation and fracturing of traditional power 'structures' (e.g. male dominated government and transnational corporations) to a more specific, heterogeneous notion of dispersed power holds many possibilities for gender studies. Walby (1992) suggested that postmodernism encourages us to move away from the assumption of easily identifiable, linear relations, events, peoples, histories, economies, to what are increasingly 'shattered sites of difference', denoted by complex and multi-dimensional discourses. As such, she claimed, groups that have often been marginalised can access a language that allows for, and recognises, the validity of difference and the important place in which this difference operates within the construction of identity, as these are “difference(s) that truly makes a difference” (Murphy, 1997, p.45; Gunew, 1993; Cherry, 1998).

Walby (1992) suggested that this has the capacity to expand notions of identity such that they do not commit the same sort of violence against
those that do not identify with the strict codes of dominance, an approach that is supported by a school of thought loosely described as 'the politics of difference' (Gunew & Yeatman, 1993). The corresponding or parallel issues associated with environmentalism and the violence that has been committed against it under the allegedly universal assumption of 'development', are obvious within the work of Walby (1992).

Postmodern arguments for the fragmentation of the concepts used in 'modernist' social theory have produced a tendency to shift the central theoretical concepts away from 'structure' to 'discourse' (Walby, 1992, p.48).

As such, power is increasingly seen as dispersed, rather than institutionalised, and there has been a significant move away from attempts to develop a 'grand' social theory and macro-social concepts (Fardon, 1997). This encouraged a movement towards debates and discourses located at dispersed sites of resistance and struggle, rather than the 'universal' generalisations that have dominated research orthodoxy (Shiva, 1989 explores these kinds of dispersed action in her work titled Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development). This is supported by Sarup (1993).

I think that postmodernism emphasizes diverse forms of the individual and social identity. It is now widely held that the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed with language. Instead of a coercive totality and a totalizing politics, modernity stresses a pluralistic open democracy (Sarup, 1993, p. 130).

As such, Sarup (1993) attributes a political dimension, one where 'total politic' gives way to a more complex politic(s), with a multitude of differing ambitions, identities and interests. She suggested that these
can no longer be neatly encased within the structured 'logic' of modernism, and that they should not be put aside in order to achieve an essential, unifying quality, amongst political possibilities, however well-intentioned they may be. Be this the liberation of a 'homogenous' working class, or emancipating a universal 'woman', or 'environmentalism' based on singular assumptions about its meaning, importance and role, these are all 'well-intentioned', yet totalising politics. In relation to this Sarup (1993) called for a move towards discovering a more plural politics, with a diversity of ideas, relieved of the pressure to speak in unison.

These differences in identity, beliefs, culture, gender, class, history and geography, that cannot adjust to the prevailing methods, and cannot be measured within the 'established' using 'validated' mechanisms, or are too complex and contradictory to be represented under mainstream assumptions, are now offered possibilities within postmodern discourse. At the very least environmental debates become contextualised and are complicated with the issues that have been ignored and dismissed throughout the period of modernity. Beyond this, it can be imagined as a politically enabling and emancipatory system of analysis, which when applied to contemporary issues, such as the environmental crisis, significant insight can be gleaned (Gare, 1995). For example, there is a need to consider how and why we decide what to preserve, how and why we decide something is natural, what tools we use to address this and who is allowed to speak on its behalf. This requires an analysis of both identity and power within environmental discourse.

To Bauman (1993), postmodernism is an opportunity to lift the veils and exclusions of the prevailing orthodoxy and it allows us to examine the margins and ignored corners of discourse.
'The postmodern perspective' to which this study refers means above all the tearing off of the mask of illusions; the recognition of certain pretences as false and certain objectives as neither attainable nor, for that matter, desirable (Bauman, 1993, p.3).

Having established that this perspective is open to interpretation and there is no absolute definition, I am also aware that in offering the label 'postmodernity' and the line between modernity and all that has come after it, is unclear (Lather, 1991, also expresses this problematic categorisation, specifically questioning the line between postmodernism and post-structuralism). Lather (1991) also struggled with the paradox between developing practical applications of postmodernism in a 'workable' manner, whilst not betraying its radical intent. She cautioned between an unnecessary desire to tame the definition, offering it false concreteness and alternatively, offering no 'workable' understanding that can translate into a 'meaningful' methodological and theoretical approach. Lather suggested that researchers who choose to utilise the insights of postmodern theory should offer a way "towards a definition" (Lather, 1991, p.5). In choosing to do this, there is an opportunity to displace the desire to understand 'absolutely' and to domesticate the meaning of postmodernism, whilst acknowledging the need to have an understanding of a central aspect of this research act. The desire articulated by Lather (1991) leads into the next section, which will attempt to bring into focus the postmodern peculiarities adopted in this work. I will move now to discuss Lemert's (1997) notion of strategic postmodernism.

1.2 'Strategic Postmodernism'

As modernity deceives us into ignoring painful differences, (strategic) postmodernism seeks to subvert these deceptions (Lemert, 1997, p.53).
This section will show that 'strategic postmodernism' enables a postmodern perspective that can create significant ways of seeing complex issues that face the cultural practices that formulate, mould and construct the societies in which we live. To some, the words strategic and postmodern would appear an oxymoron, but as Lemert (1997) argued, the description focuses on the strategies that may be manifested by postmodern researchers so as to understand social and environmental relationships and in order to offer suggestions for improvement. In this sense, it is an opportunity or lens through which environmental accounting researchers can discover new and relevant ways to view the discipline's response to the environmental challenges that currently exists and those that may develop in the future (this is explored in chapters six, seven, eight and nine). Although this thesis deals specifically with environmental issues, the approach adopted could prove enabling for other significant issues currently receiving attention within accounting research, such as race, culture, gender and class.

Before continuing with this discussion, I would like to follow the lead established by Lemert (1997) and create a distinction between three possible, 'postmodern' positions. Lemert argued that there are extreme and varied interpretations of contemporary theory and that there could even be

(s)tupid theory done in the name of postmodernism just as there is stupidity done in the name of social psychology or cultural studies or economics (1997, p. x).

In order to avoid such 'stupidity' it is important to clearly articulate where this work situates itself. As I mentioned earlier, Lemert (1997) distinguished between radical postmodernism, radical modernism, and
strategic postmodernism and the distinctions that he created between these enable a clearer understanding of where this work is situated⁴.

The social theorists Lemert (1997) described as radical postmodernists, are those that consider contemporary life, structures and systems to be marked, more by hyper-reality than reality, and its main contributors include the works of Baudrillard and Lyotard. As such, many 'postmodernists' are predominantly concerned with signs and symbols that denote an accelerated culture, including such things as technology such as the internet, or cinema. Traditional notions of reality are constantly under challenge by focusing on technologies that distract, tamper with, stretch and erase the concrete assumptions that have underpinned modernity. A good example of the radical postmodern perspective lies in interpretations of images from popular culture, like those produced within the magazine industry. This example raises some of the parallels between accounting and the (re)production of images within this industry and may divulge some interesting ways of seeing accounting 'images' (Young et al, 1996). For instance, airbrushing or photo-shopping images in magazines, so as to lead readers to believe that the person exists in 'real' life is common within the industry. However, the image (re)presents them in a way that is beyond the 'real' image of the model. They may have fewer wrinkles, enlarged breasts, smaller waists, more prominent hips and so on, as a result of computer 'enhanced' imaging. The reality of the image is fractured by technological adjustments to the photograph and it is further erased in the mediation of the image within the complex discourses of fashion, beauty and so on. Reality is further fractured when the image is interpreted and by the way that we integrate those fractured notions of

⁴ There are infinite possible interpretations of postmodernism, and although researchers who engage with its contents should accept this as a feature and an important device, it is useful to consider postmodernism within the three main approaches explored by Lemert (1997) within the literature.
'reality' into our lives. Notions of reality are even more contested as we seek to reject or accept the image knowing it not to be absolutely 'real', but unsure about which elements are absolute and which ones have been (re)presented.

Although accounting does not use the same techniques (to some extent it does, see Young et al's, 1996 for a discussion of image making in annual reports) it does make use of sophisticated tools to (re)present reality (Hines, 1988). Measuring the value of an asset, depreciation techniques, or the calculation of goodwill all effect the image of the firm using symbols to represent 'reality'.

This is a complex process, by which there are many intervening and complex contests associated with the representation of an image, and the way that we interpret that image and then further by the choices we make as a response to the image. This serves to unsettle the assumption that the representation is 'real', with much intervention making the reproduction 'more real' than the original, having an identity separate and different from the original. Notions of authenticity are obscured, truth is manipulated and playfully (re)imagined, and radical postmodernists explore this interaction, describing it oftentimes as 'hyper-real'. This is an approach that would be useful to an understanding of accounting, but its extremely ambiguous politics would require those engaging with environmental issues to proceed with considerable caution.

Lemert (1997) described radical modernism, as that group of theorists who strive to interrogate, yet still uphold the highest values of modernism. Although critical, they seek to improve and perfect the tools of modernity such that they may be emancipatory in order to further objectives of social justice. Critical theorists would include those who
have studied within, or formed part of, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, including scholars such as Habermas. Accounting researchers have been very interested in the contribution that these theories can make to the development of improved accounting practices, accounting pedagogy and also the philosophies of 'account-keeping' (Day, 1993). Adopting this theoretical position does not seek to destabilise modernity, rather it seeks to improve it, force it to concede and change its flaws and address its problems and limitations (Lodh & Gaffikin, 1997).

Although the contributions of these postmodern positions are acknowledged as making significant contributions to social theory and offering invaluable insights into the cultural practices that inform our complex, dynamic and changing world, they are not representative of the position that I have adopted in this work. This work is positioned within what Lemert (1997) would describe as strategic postmodernism, a position that does not focus on the notion of hyper-reality, although this may well be a consideration, and does not sustain faith in an external reality in the modernist tradition. Some of the main contributors that can be described as strategic postmodernists include contemporary theorists that draw on the work of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and feminist thinkers such as Irigaray and Cixous (others may call them post-structuralists, see Bauman, 1992; Kumar, 1995; Sarup, 1998). Lemert defined strategic postmodernism as a

(g)roup of social theories that seek to reconstruct the cultural, social and political history of modernity in order to expose the deceptions of the modern ages; neither hyper-realists nor realists (1997, p. 68).

As stated previously, this approach incorporates the work of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan. From this perspective the Derridean tools of deconstruction or the analysis available in the Foucaudian
Power/Knowledge framework, seek to challenge the assumptions that dominate Western philosophy. This 'postmodernism' emphasises the use of language and the construction of discourse, as important constituents in the way that social life is organised, maintained, constructed and mediated. The approach rejects work that attempts to construct an essential or universal language in which social and environmental life can be explained, or in which social and environmental thought and policy should be centred. From here on, when I discuss postmodernism in this thesis, I am specifically talking about 'strategic postmodernism'. I am concerned specifically with deconstructing discourses of accountability and environmentalism within the international debate on greenhouse gas emissions. In doing this, I am specifically concerned with language as a way of inscribing singular meanings and offering privilege to certain worldviews, and I wish to explore what these singular meanings disguise, manipulate and exclude in the process of constructing accountable relations with nature.

To strategic postmodernists, there are three important theoretical dimensions, including:

1. A commitment to challenging established traditions, and the incarceration of knowledge into neat categories;
2. A conviction that language and discourse plays a vital role in the construction of cultural practices;
3. A rejection of the ideal of a universal essence, totality or centre as a basis for knowledge (summarised from Lemert, 1997, p.43).

This differs from a radical perspective because of the approach adopted to the totalising dimensions of modernist essentialism, as strategic
postmodernists are less inclined to assume that the world has changed and are more likely to reconsider the fractures that should and are occurring in the modernist project. In this sense it may be described as a special type of critical theory. The most important distinction lies in the resistance created to the discovery of further meta-narratives to explain or replace the failed essentialism of modernity.

Strategic postmodernism does not deny the possibility of social change and it enables postmodernists to take action in order to pursue certain outcomes. This does not undermine the postmodern project, because these actions and suggestions will always be a site of contest, open to new negotiations and to the possibility that such suggestions may impose forms of dominance. It presents a challenge because it requires a kind of openness that may lead to further deconstruction, but does not dismiss the possibility of taking action to renegotiate less exploitative relationships with each other and nature. It is also a position that suggests change comes from within, and we cannot remove ourselves entirely from the operations of modernity. In this sense it engages modernity in order to overcome its denial of difference, and the assertions of privilege that have become entrenched in its operation.

To reiterate, strategic postmodernism emphasises the possibility of social and environmental change. It does not deny that social actors can make choices about how and what the world could or should become. In this sense it encourages recognition of subjectivities, reflexivity and the possibility that if these are explored and exposed, social negotiations can become more open. This requires our strategies to be conscious of the context in which they are developed. It is postmodern in that it seeks to avoid the essential claims of modernity and to subvert the exclusions and privileges that have enabled access to certain
knowledge at the exclusion of others. It is a position that is conscious of the possibility of asserting dominance, requiring reflexivity and an openness to further deconstruction and the possibility that there are multiple ways of coming to knowledge of the world and multiple ways of imagining how social and environmental relationships could manifest themselves.

I will now consider the role of ethics in the construction of a strategic postmodern approach to understanding contemporary social and environmental dilemmas.

2. AMBIGUOUS ETHICS: POSTMODERNISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETHICS

Ethics has not remained outside the clutches of the modernist pursuit towards closure and has been closely related to philosophical approaches to 'logic'. Fraser (1993) wrote that the legacy of modernism had inscribed ethics with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that had dominated the sciences. He claimed that an

(e)thics, like a logic or a physics, made sense only within the confines of the metaphysical tradition...it has been conceived in the Western tradition as the practical effectuation of the philosophical (Fraser, 1993, p.58, emphasis in original).

Although, strategic postmodernism deconstructs the necessity for and the presuppositions associated with the place of ethics within the development of Western metaphysics, it does not abandon the possibilities of 'ethics'. Instead of attempting to formulate ethical regulations and strict codes of moral behaviour, which has been a product of the Enlightenment, this approach opens up the possibility of
Chapter 4  Postmodern Environmentalism

multiplicity within ethics. This suggests that multiple ethical positions can exist at one point in time within one person and that there is no universally 'correct' ethical response to an issue. It is even possible that there are ethical responses that have not been explored within dominant discourse (Fraser, 1993). Huyssen suggested there is a need for

(a) cultural and adversarial postmodernism, a postmodernism of resistance (Huyssen, in Lather, 1991, p. 1).

As this thesis joins a growing body of literature that draws into view the role of discourse in the production of knowledge, it is important that I acknowledge my own subjectivity. I view myself as an advocate for the environment and am motivated by a desire to see the development of diverse and new ways of seeing nature, within cultural practices. To do this, a number of ethical issues arise. To get to the point where issues of 'nature' become an issue for the self requires some digestion of conflicting notions of ethics within a postmodern world. This goes back to the discussion of the environmental helix that took place in chapter one. Is there a transcendental nature for which we can act as an advocate? Is a volcano more natural than an oil refinery explosion? Am I natural or cultural? Then to seek to advocate for or about nature, requires even greater ethical consideration. This raises the issue as to whether living in a consumptive society and not being free of it myself, then what rights have I to speak on/for/about nature? In light of the reflexive approach taken by this work (discussed in detail in chapter three), it is important that I acknowledge the strong concerns I have about our (dis)connections with the environment and the impact that the totalising assumption of anthropocentric humanism has had on the construction of the environmental crisis. As such, this work is made up of a range of ethical choices and it is informed by environmental ethic(s) in a multiple sense, as the following section will indicate. Placing ethics
and postmodernism together in a sentence may raise concerns among those who are familiar with its (dis)contents, as 'ethics' has not been a central focus of the postmodern project. However, many writers are discovering the subtle ethical content of contemporary theory, and even within the works of radical postmodernists some ethical comment is made. Baudrillard (1976), who is perhaps one of the most renowned contributors to this theoretical perspective, wrote that

(m)y point of view is completely metaphysical. If anything, I'm a metaphysician, perhaps a moralist... (1987, p.84).

I offer this quote, as a way of emphasising the subtle intonations of postmodern discourse that have considered 'ethics' in a way that has gone relatively unnoticed by researchers drawing on this body of knowledge. I use Baudrillard as an explicit example of this, because his work has often been the target of much criticism and outrage about 'the point' of postmodernism. In this quote, he lets out a small indication that his work has a moral imperative, and is driven to some extent by ethical considerations. I will now discuss more directly the possibilities of postmodern ethics.

2.1 Ethics as a Process of 'Becoming'

Anyone familiar with postmodern writing and literature will notice that discussions of ethics are somewhat invisible. To some extent, we see interpretations of the possibilities of it as a liberating and potentially 'beneficial' site of inquiry for theorists, such as contemporary feminists like Alcoff (1988), Clough (1990), Farganis (1994), Fraser & Nicholson (1994), but many interpretations of this approach have been read as 'beyond' ethics. Although many would interpret postmodernity in this light, Bauman (1993) suggested that it is not 'beyond ethics' but rather
it is beyond 'meta-ethics', with its emancipatory potential lying in our capacity to (re)imagine ethics as contingent and contextual, introducing the ethical implications of marginal spaces, regions, peoples, cultures, languages, subjectivities, class, race or gender. This is in direct contrast to the modernist desire to encode ethics within the structures of society, political systems, religious teachings, in the judiciary and so on and rejects the privileges afforded 'absolute' ethical assumptions and the possibility of drawing closure on the development of ethical responses and positions.

Bauman (1993) suggested that a common assumption surrounding postmodern theory is that it leads to the demise of ethics. It was suggested that the drive towards 'concrete' ethics has dominated literature, even though it has been consistently elusive, the goal has remained rigid and unmoving until more contemporary theory began to deconstruct its contribution and effect. He wrote that

(t)he moral thought and practice of modernity was animated by the belief in the possibility of a non-ambivalent, non-aporetic ethical code. Perhaps such a code has not been found yet. But it surely waits round the next corner. Or the corner after next (Bauman, 1993, p. 9).

Traditionally, we have attempted to place ethical norms within a set of moral behaviours, that seek to bind wayward choice to the practice of 'the code' (journalists, accountants, doctors, lawyers, social workers and teachers are bound by 'the code'). Moral or ethical choice has been considered to be something that needed to be confined and rectified (Foucault, 1976a). This served to disembody and disempower the specificities of complex ethical choices within the competing images, moralities, cultures, geographies and representations, that denote expanded and multiple ethical possibilities (Said, 1994 explores this idea in relation to colonial history and literature).
This interpretation suggests that ridding humanity of ethical constraints is one of the desired outcomes of postmodern theory.

What has come to be associated with the notion of the postmodern approach to morality is all too often the celebration of the 'demise of the ethical', of the substitution of aesthetics for ethics, and of the 'ultimate emancipation' that follows. Ethics itself is denigrated or derided as one of the typically modern constraints now broken and destined for the dustbin of history; fetters once deemed necessary, now clearly superfluous: another illusion of the postmodern men and women can well do without (Bauman, 1993, p. 2).

For some, postmodernism can be read as a liberation from the shackles of obligation and duty and as emancipation from imposed morality (Seidman, 1994). It has been suggested that it releases the self from ethical constraints, allowing for the unadulterated pursuit of individualism (Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997). This is perhaps the most common interpretation of postmodernism's relationship with ethics and, from an environmental perspective, if this was the case the effect would be destructive. For example, it may be interpreted to mean that we are free to consume whatever we like because there is no point not to. However, this is not the only way to view the literature as postmodern environmental theory has suggested (Zimmerman, 1994; Gare, 1995; Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997). The significance of this approach resides in its potential to deal with the multiple realities of contemporary life without relegating all struggles into pointlessness.

Perhaps this concept of ethics could be read as an allowance for ethical freedom, which could lead to and explore the construction of ethic(s) that are not necessarily bounded by such things as the state, or by religious teachings, or the operations of patriarchy. Ethics, in a postmodern world, can be considered within the contexts of the
specificities of our location within society. It may allow us to consider the ethical illusions that have dominated much mainstream debate and the prevailing belief that there are ethical 'absolutes' that transcend historical, social, economics, gender, sexuality or class specificities (Fraser, 1993; Fardon, 1995). This does not have to mean an end to ethics, but it does mean a serious reconsideration of the role and construction of ethics and a move away from ethical absolutism, encoded in the practices of dominance, be this cultural, economic or social.

The view that postmodernism can be interpreted as playing an important role in (re)considering our treatment of ethics, rather than an absolute rejection of ethics itself is widely held within the literature (Lyotard, 1984; Bauman, 1993; Ahmed, 1995; Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997; Conley, 1997). The assumptions that surround the construction of ethics have been shown to change from culture to culture, and even vary within cultures (Said, 1993). What once appeared to be an ethical absolute comes under challenge, disorder, and is potentially destabilised if we explore the multitude of ethical responses that arise out of our different locations within our communities (Bauman, 1993; Lemert, 1997). Dickens and Fontana (1994) wrote that Lyotard celebrates

\[(t)he\ decline\ of\ traditional\ standards\ in\ contemporary\ societies,\ for\ this\ decline\ releases\ previously\ unimaginable\ possibilities\ for\ freedom\ and\ creativity\ in\ all\ spheres\ of\ life\ (1994,\ p.9).\]

The 'creativity' spoken of by Dickens and Fontana (1994) allows us to view ethics as a field of possibilities. Ethics is seen as becoming, transforming, changing and can only be considered to be in a state of transit or flux (Bauman, 1993; Gare, 1995). It is suggested that postmodernism destabilises attempts to 'perfect' our methods of
obtaining 'the truth' and thus manifests an 'ethic of emancipation' from the rigid and oppressive dominance of 'absolutism'. In doing so, the possibility of exposing the traces of Other knowledge and alternative ways of representing, interpreting and creating meaning comes into consideration and focus (Fardon, 1995). This, in turn, plays a role in considering the manifold complexity of 'realities', rather than representing the social and/or environmental world in its dissected simplicity. Following on from this idea, Ryan wrote that

\[(t)\text{o affirm the abyss deconstruction opens in the domain of knowledge is politically to affirm the permanent possibility of social change} \text{ (1984, p.8 quoted in Arrington and Francis, 1989, p.9)}\]

To extend this further, Derrida's deconstruction (1967; 1972; Madison, 1993) has made a large contribution to the development of a 'strategic postmodern' approach and the deconstructive strategies applied to dominant discourse, have formulated much of the contemporary criticisms of modernism, yet his work has often been encumbered with the accusation of nihilism. Derrida (1967; 1972) has also refused to state his position on ethics and emancipatory politics in any absolute terms. His work has changed and fluctuated according to the intonations of its content. As such, many have considered that it makes very little contribution to the project of social change and lacks content that could be applied to issues of social or environmental change emancipation, decolonisation or 'justice'. When Kearney (1993) asked Derrida about his approach to ethics and the criticisms advanced of postmodernism and the implications of deconstruction on moral nihilism he replied that

"deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness but an openness towards the other" (Dialogues, 124)...He went on to insist that deconstruction seeks not to abandon ethics but to resituate and reinscribe its key concepts of the self and other; and, so doing, to re-
evaluate the indispensable notion of responsibility" (ibid., 125) (Kearney, 1993, p.30-31).

As such, Derrida considered that 'strategic postmodernism' offers the possibility for the self to be re-imagined and re-inscribed with different and diverse notions of ethics. By destabilising the assumptions that underpin the ethical claims of modernism, new imaginations of ethics are encouraged. It is quite obvious from the above statement that Derrida believed this could have emancipatory outcomes, but that they would not be 'purely' emancipatory (as the outcomes would not be uni-dimensional) (Kearney, 1993; Madison, 1993). Those who have been excluded from the meta-ethical claims of modernism, could gain voice and visibility, as the absent ethical 'realities' of the Other are discovered, discussed and debated within knowledge production. This has important consequences for the development of environmental theory as the following section will indicate.

2.2 Introducing Postmodern Environmental Ethics

(The environment and the postmodern are not unitary and homogenous phenomena across class, gender and ethnicity but are deeply fractured sites of contestation for all three (Giblett, p.128).

As this thesis is concerned with the intersection of postmodern discourse, environmentalism and more specifically the accountability aspects of this relationship, it is important to deal directly with the ethical possibilities of postmodernism and environmentalism. Although

---

5 This is my description and certainly not Derrida's. His reluctance to categorise his work has been well documented, however, I have chosen to use this description as an enabling device in order to avoid some of the aspects of postmodern research that may inhibit its productive capacity. This is not without problems and as I have and will consider these issues within this work, I will not re-iterate them here.
this will be considered in detail in the following chapter. I will introduce the idea in conjunction with this broader discussion of postmodern ethics. Broadly, this approach assumes that the way that we speak of, and imagine 'the environment', plays a significant role in constructing our relationships and ethical attitudes towards it.

Specifically, in regard to postmodern environmental ethics, writers such as Cheney (1989); Zimmerman (1994); Gare (1995) and Conley (1997) have considered ways that environmental ethics can be (re)negotiated through the language of postmodernity to emphasise its emancipatory potential. These approaches to ethics suggest narratives of nature should be contextualised (Cheney, 1989), whereby an environmental ethic is constructed through relations with specificities (such as bioregional narratives or gender). One such suggestion was made by Cheney when he argued that

(n)arrative is the key then, but it is narrative grounded in geography rather than in a linear, essentializing narrative self. The narrative style required for situating ourselves without making essentializing or totalizing moves is an elaboration of relations which forgoes the coherence, continuity, and consistency insisted on by totalizing discourse. Our position, our location, is understood in the elaboration of relations in a nonessentializing narrative achieved through a grounding in the geography of our lives (Cheney, 1989, p. 126).

Raglon and Scholtmeijer (1996) have suggested that language gives us the potential to imagine and (re)fashion reality, allowing us to (re)consider the ways that we receive knowledge through the filters of multiple discourse. According to them, this is

(b)ecause the scientific metanarrative of nature continually reinforces our status as observers, the power of the postmodern story to pull the reader into narrative complications represents precisely the act needed for today's environmental ethics (1996, p.28).
The insights offered by these authors in relation to the environment and ethics, has enabling potential and allows for the use of a postmodern approach to the development of environmental ethics. To attempt to create a non-contingent environmental ethic that is applicable to all environmental situations, in all of our cultural practices, is a redundant experiment and the work of these researchers substantiates this statement (Cheney, 1987; Gare, 1995; Ebenreck, 1996; Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997; Conley, 1997). In recognising the complexities associated with ethical questions, new ways to view considerations such as the role of discourses of environmental accountability in public policy formulation on environmental matters are opened (this will be explored in the latter part of the thesis). To view these issues from this angle is to attribute them with complexities within which these decisions, choices and constructs operate.

Whether it is the effects of globalisation and multi-national capital arrangements that are considered (Gare, 1997); or technological change to mediums of communication (Benedetti & DeHart, 1996); or disparate economic wealth in post-industrial communities (Conley, 1997); the economic colonisation of nature as the 'Other' (Soule, 1995); the hyper-real representations of contested 'nature' imagery (Shephard, 1995); the manufacture of environmental 'realities' and fetishised nature (Wilson, 1994); a myriad of Other possibilities of what 'nature' is in a highly contested and contextual world (see Soule and Lease, 1995), we are faced with a paradoxical network of relationships.

Although, there may not be a transcendent environmental ethic, there is space for the consideration of environmental ethic(s), in multiple and dynamic form (informed by geography or imagination in the case of Cheney, 1989). In support of this, Gare argued that
(w)hat is clearly lacking are stories of sufficient power and complexity to orient people for effective action to overcome environmental problems, to relate multiplicity of social and cultural forms implicated in or affected by environmental destruction, to reveal what possibilities there are for transforming these and to reveal to people what role these play in this project. Environmental problems are global problems and their causes are global; it will be impossible for stories to effectively orient individuals for effective action to overcome these problems unless the stories pertaining to people's individual lives and to local problems can be integrated with broader narratives (1995, p.140).

This will be the focus of later chapters dealing with 'environmental accountability' in international greenhouse gas policy and debate and will also be the focus of the following chapter. I will now consider some of the limitations of postmodern theory, and how these can be negotiated in order to focus on the emancipatory potential outlined briefly in this section.

3. LIMITATIONS, CONTRADICTIONS, (DIS)JUNCTURES: POSTMODERN PROBLEMS

Postmodernism has been plagued with criticisms. As this perspective exposes the ambiguities that lie within traditional notions of valid knowledge, through various interpretations or applications of postmodern theory, and as such, this ambiguity is both necessary and messy. This diversity is a significant challenge to the traditional approach to knowledge production and provides a subversive potential to ambiguity. It seems important to acknowledge a significant theoretical and research tension, between allowing postmodernism to become too 'neat', or too wayward. As I discussed previously, Lemert (1997) divided postmodernism into three groups. This is not without problems, as boundaries are constructed and exclusions are developed,
but his reading of the literature led him to develop what are quite useful themes within contemporary theory. As this work invokes a 'strategic postmodern' approach, many of the criticisms of 'radical modernism' and 'radical postmodernism' do not apply to this work. However, there are still a number of issues that have been raised in association with all of these three approaches that need to be clarified and acknowledged within this work.

There are three main criticisms that are worthy of direct consideration. Firstly, postmodernism has been criticised because it is dominated by Western thinkers, and as its main contributors have come from Europe and The United States of America, the dominance of Western approaches to knowledge production is perpetuated. Secondly, many critics of postmodernism have asserted that it does not seem capable of manifesting tangible social or environmental change. Thirdly, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations that arise when attempting to consider the contribution that postmodern theory can make to issues of environmental (mis)use.

3.1 Postmodernism and Eurocentricism

The development and discussion of postmodernism has predominantly taken place within the West and has been led by intellectuals in The United States of America and Europe. As 'strategic postmodernism' attempts to expose the violence perpetrated against 'absent voices', it seems incongruous that an approach developed in the West can sufficiently deconstruct the eurocentric nature of knowledge production. It is also important to acknowledge that postmodernism is denoted by its historical position 'after' modernism and as such, it is inscribed with knowledge of, and it is informed by, a distinct period of Western philosophy. This could be seen as a grave drawback and arguments
have been mounted that the geo-historic-ethno specificities of postmodernism perpetuate the methodological and philosophical dominance associated with the West (Seidman, 1994).

Derrida (see Madison, 1993) dealt with this issue directly in his work, and he claimed that deconstruction could not come from without, but necessarily needed to occur and draw on the sites that it deconstructed. As such, deconstruction does not denote closure and the process can continue and continue, and each deconstructed text can be further deconstructed. It should be noted that

Derrida is acutely aware that we cannot speak or shake traditional ethical and political claims without at the same time also drawing upon these traditional claims. The very dichotomy of "inside-outside" is also deconstructed. We are never simply "inside" or "outside" metaphysics (Bernstein, 1993, p.215).

As this quote would suggest, the very concept of West/East is also open to deconstruction. The idea that you can somehow be separated from the very thing that you are applying the tools of strategic postmodernism to, is rejected by this statement. Having considered this for quite some time, it is quite accurate to acknowledge that the main proponents of this approach have been Western and, even more specifically they have been male, so perhaps the more accurate criticism is that it is euro-phallo-centric. Thus it may perpetuate the dominance of ideas produced by white, property owning men (Grosz, 1990).

On the other hand, a significant number of feminists and people from ‘non-western’ cultures have adopted and applied the ideas developed in

---

6 The notion of West/East, like global/local, centre/periphery, self/other, is contingent on the operations of each other for meaning. The notion of East and West is arbitrary, and reflects no physical or geographical reality, but is inscribed as a way of dividing the world between oneself and the Other.
postmodernism, to issues of gender, race, class and nature (Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997; Barrett & Phillips, 1992; Fardon, 1995). The influx of new ideas about ‘difference’ recently developed by researchers, have drawn quite considerably on postmodern thought, as a way of exposing and investigating Other ways of viewing the world that have been suffocated by modernity and the colonisation of knowledge by the West. In the words of Seidman;

Let me be absolutely clear. The discussion over postmodernism has to date transpired almost exclusively in the West. In other words, the announcement of a postmodern turn needs to be registered as part of recent Western history (1994, p.2).

I have chosen to highlight this criticism, to draw attention to the context in which this body of knowledge has developed. The fact that postmodernism has developed in ‘the West’ does not make it a redundant approach to deconstructing and considering the exclusions that have been a by-product of previous philosophical dominance.

3.2 Postmodernism and ‘Real’ Political Action

As everyone knows, politics is the real thing (Lemert, 1997, p.71).

At another level, postmodernism is often criticised by those who believe in the possibility of eternal claims to truth and the pursuit of the modernist project based on science, rationalism, functionalism and reason. The project of modernity is seriously threatened by postmodernism and many criticisms come from within the operations of modernist discourse. It has been said that the postmodernism project lacks depth, is nihilistic, anarchistic, and without point (Callinicos, 1989; Easthope & Gowan, 1992; Bricmont, 1998; Cherry, 1998). Bricmont, quoting Andeski, argued that postmodernism undermined
the capacity to challenge authority and have widespread political impact, because

as long as authority inspires awe, confusion and absurdity enhance conservative tendencies in society (Andeski, 1972, quoted by Bricmont, 1998, p.27).

Easthope and Gowan suggested that

(t)he arguable ‘depthlessness’ which postmodernism envisages is a focus of concern across a wide political spectrum. For those of the neo-conservative right it eclipses the supposedly unifying values which structure social order; for the liberal center it demolishes the autonomy of individual expression; and for the Marxist left it destroys the founding platform of unified struggle...(1992, p.182).

To a large extent the struggles of the margins (the environment, for example) have been encouraged by the loosening of the notion of ‘reality’ and ‘identity’ and have been engaged in a process of ‘micro-politics’ and a serious reconsideration of the locations of struggle. However, these ‘movements’ have often resisted the tools of postmodernism. Some writers specifically concerned with emancipatory and empowering politics, consider postmodernism to be a dead end for progressive thought (Callinicos, 1989). These writers express concerns about the fragmenting and erosion of ‘solid’, ‘unionised’ dissent, based on notions of solidarity and union, that have been traditionally imagined as necessary to create change (Callinicos, 1989; Norris, 1990; Epstein, 1995).

Traditionally, social change has been associated with collective action and the coming together of different groups in order to overthrow or

---

7 As Grosz (1990) suggested identity has been considered to be euro-phallo-logocentric, alternatively read as having a European-male presence.
change an oppressive structure or system. In order to do this, it is assumed that differences can be overcome and ignored in order to bring about the change required for the 'greater good'. Such a perspective has its roots in utilitarian philosophy, which is deeply entrenched within the broader metaphysical aims of the Enlightenment. The project seeks to efface difference in order to create a homogenous set of goals that encapsulate the essence of the changes demanded by that group or society.

It is quite obvious that postmodernism seeks out the traces of these effaced differences, and even in well-meaning emancipatory movements, the silencing of these differences is considered to be a violence against those things that did not identify with the 'greater project'. This does not reject the possibility of social or environmental change, but it (re)examines and (re)contextualises the differences that were severed, in order to achieve the meta-objectives of the change process. Social change is not made impossible as a result of postmodernity, but social change is not seen to be emancipatory if it requires the manifestation of 'different' silences within that process (Bauman, 1993).

Another point worthy of considering here, is that contemporary theory encourages a (re)imagination of the process of change, bringing in micro, corporeal, local and specific domain, and rejects the assumption that change is only 'real' when it is large scale, externally observable, describable and obvious to those that are experiencing this process. Again, I should re-iterate that strategic postmodernism does not seek to displace the global with the local, or the general with the specific, because to do so perpetuates a 'dominance', in such a position the privileged pole would be switched and replaced by the currently obscured pole (Fardon, 1995; Lemert, 1997). Instead, it calls for an introduction of the Other, such that the dominant pole (global, general,
universal theory) is encouraged to engage in dialogue with knowledge that has existed in the margins of debate. Parkin (1995) supported this point.

What postmodernists might most usefully have stressed is the misleading nature of the dichotomy of the universal and the particular, which can be glossed also as that of the global and the local...once we allocate our material to either end of the dichotomy, we presuppose an allocation of the rest to the other (Parkin, 1995, p. 144).

Along a similar line, many have criticised postmodernism as lacking rigour and suggest that the best way to create emancipatory change is to learn the tools of 'the enemy'. As such, some have called for an increase in methodological rigour and 'stronger' science, claiming the way out of oppressive 'realities' will be obtained through the mastery of these tools (see Flagel and Moore, 1993 for a discussion of this in regard to women and feminist politics). There has been some suggestion, that the tools of modernity, and the assumptions that underpin them, can be used to liberate silenced and marginal groups, such as women or 'nature'. For instance, it may be suggested that not enough scientific studies have been conducted into the functioning of the female body. Some feminist scholars have suggested that women need to become equipped with these tools in order to explore and articulate the silences in the body of scientific knowledge that specifically relate to women (Flagel & Moore, 1993). However, these scholars do not directly address science as a philosophy that embodies both emancipatory and oppressive potential. It is argued that imbalances in power that are a product of modernism can be addressed through the perfection of its tools, rather than the deconstruction of the epistemology and ontology that motivate and inform them. A parallel argument can be made of much environmental literature (particularly the sustainable
development, eco-efficiency, or ecological modernisation literature, see Everett & Neu, 1999).

Other, Marxist oriented scholars, have expressed concern about the consequences of fragmented resistance and what they perceive as a loss of hope in revolutionary potential for change. These scholars are concerned that this will seriously impede the possibility for the emancipation of excluded groups in our communities (see Callinicos, 1989, for a detailed discussion of these concerns). There are others who believe that the project has gone too far in deconstructing representations, arguing that although this is beneficial to some extent, there needs to be a compromise between some representation and possible deconstructive immobilisation (Cherry, 1998). Much of the criticism is focused on the inability of postmodernism to significantly affect policy (Jovchelovitch, 1996). Goldman and Papson succinctly state their concerns:

There is a shallow consensus that the postmodern encompasses a loss of unified meaning, a loss of certainty - the price of too much individuation, too much social construction of reality, and too much commodity hyperbole. In this conception of the postmodern sensibility, the loss of faith in the possibility of meaningful certainty elicits a cynical, jaded blank and blasé attitude (1994, p.224).

There have been a number of criticisms of applicability of contemporary theory to fields of study, from both within the literature of accounting (see Cooper, 1992 and Neimark, 1990) and in other 'disciplines' (Flagel & Moore, 1993; Callinicos, 1989; Fuchs, 1996; Jovchelovitch, 1996; Epstein, 1995). The sheer complexity of these applications, readings, and research means that there are inevitable problems. The ambiguous and 'floating' nature of postmodern approaches, allows for many interpretations of how to apply it to the site of inquiry. At times the contradictions that arise in this style of research allow for criticism and
what appear to be a lack of research rigour (Bricmont, 1998). On closer acquaintance with the literature, it is possible to see this as more representative of communities that are discontinuous, multidimensional, complex and contradictory in themselves (Bauman, 1994).

There is a reluctance to consider the possibility of difference and the exposure of 'fragments' as furthering the emancipatory aims of the Marxist, feminist or environmental project(s). 'Difference' also lacks recognition within social or environmental movements that rely on the operations of meta-narratives and universal realities in order to create solidarity and affect traditional notions of social or environmental change. Much of this literature also fails to locate the site of inquiry within the issues of contemporary 'accelerated' culture(s) that are marked by discursive 'difference' rather than the alleged totality of traditional epistemological and ontological assumptions (Benedetti & DeHart, 1996). This is indicative of a broader failure to acknowledge that within the Marxist movement there are multiple readings of Marx and within the feminist movement there are multiple experiences of the oppression of gender and within the environmental movement there are a myriad of motivations and concerns that provide the focus of environmental debate.

3.3 Postmodernism and Environmental Divergence and Convergence

As I have suggested previously postmodernism does not have to be read as a threat to emancipatory politics, instead it can be read as a new way of viewing emancipatory change at a more complex and contingent level, at a level that is also local and specific, as well as universal and general. These interpretations and approaches allow a consideration of the disjunctures and ruptures that create fragmented and disembodied selves, with unique and individual experiences of oppression and
privilege. It is in the recognition of the specificities of the human experience and the specificities of environmental 'imaginations' that may enable a consideration of new ways of viewing and empowering political and socio-environmental movement towards change.

The environmental agenda is an acute example of this, with very little ecological or environmental discourse drawing on contemporary theory in order to further or highlight their struggle. This has been attributed to the heavy emphasis on what is considered to be a 'real' political agenda, with 'real' emancipatory aims and the language, inconsistencies, subversions of post-modernism have been considered to undermine these projects (Seidman, 1994; Lease, 1995; Kellert, 1995). However, Jagtenberg and McKie (1997) suggested that we need to break from habits of thinking that have not had to 'directly' acknowledge global environmental decline and in making this comment they suggest a green postmodernism may be a way to do this. They argued that

(w)e are attempting to break away from habits of thought and patterns of analysis that have had no absolute necessity to account for global environmental decline (Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997, p.xii).

And further they quoted Penman to emphasise desire for, "communicatively constructing a more differentiated and less constraining environmental reality" (1994, p.37, in Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997, p.xiv).

Certainly, there have been criticisms from feminists, Marxists, environmentalists, and more broadly, those concerned with furthering a political agenda that has at its heart some idea of emancipatory political goals, that can translate into 'real' achievements. Postmodern environmental theorists have debated the possibility of language as a
significant site of analysis, when dealing with something as immanent as environmental issues. Hayles (1995) used a hypothetical reaction of students to explore the suggestion that ‘nature’ is a linguistic construct, and he wrote

(m) my friend espouses radical constructivism. He believes that everything we think we know, including “nature”, is a construction emerging from historically specific discursive, social, and cultural conditions. The environmentalists were upset with this claim...Moreover, they worried about the effect the claim would have on environmental movements. If nature is only a social and discursive construction, why fight hard to preserve it (1995, p.47)?

Perhaps such a perspective assumes a false unity between ‘environmentalists’ and does not reveal them to be the fractured and diverse ‘group’ that they are today. For instance, EarthFirst!, The Sierra Club, Greenpeace and The Wilderness Society are all utilising different notions of ‘environmentalism’. Environmentalism also does not occur purely within the structures of an environmental organisation, but can take many forms, like the use of energy saving devices, gardening, environmental product purchase, painting, writing, choices to utilise public transport and so on. This diversity complicates underlying assumptions, such that it is difficult to draw generalisable conclusions and perpetuate the cycle of ‘truths’ and foundational assumptions. This has both liberating and oppressive potential. The questions raised above by Hayles (1995), apart from the simplistic groupings that are implied are a significant challenge to postmodern environmentalism. Why is there any reason to work towards environmental justice if it is all a construction of language? I would suggest, like Jagtenberg & McKie (1997) that language has material consequences and that the way that these relations are constructed has a significant effect on the way that we interact with nature, legitimising or delegitimising environmental colonisation. As such, analysis of language and the construction of
discourse allow for a way of seeing the environmental crisis that has been overlooked from within the epistemological and ontological traditions of modernity (this will be explored in the following chapter).

Although postmodernism is still in 'process' and changes have occurred within many disciplines who have come under its influence, many have been critical about its potential to bring about the sorts of changes that are required to address social and environmental issues. As the environmental crisis is imminent, and to a large extent requires immediate 'action', postmodernism has been perceived to be ill equipped for this challenge. Like all applications of theory, there are points of convergence and divergence and the challenge that faces environmentalist(s) and environmental researchers needs to be considered in detail. Although I do not suggest that this work will deal with all these issues, I have chosen to place this work within postmodern theory. I have chosen to do this in order to contribute to a new and exciting body of literature that is attempting to theorise nature within an emerging world of contest, contradiction and disjunctures.

4. THIS IS NOT CLOSURE

This chapter has outlined some main issues that will be repeated and reappear within this thesis. Firstly, I have outlined my choice of strategic postmodern theory and have indicated how and where, this differs from the broader and more generic category of postmodernism. Secondly, I have outlined a way in which 'ethics', an integral part of environmental work, is dealt with from a postmodern perspective and how strategic postmodernism can accommodate it. In this undertaking, I consciously address the criticism that postmodernism is nihilistic and 'without point' and ways are suggested in which strategic postmodernism encourages an ethic(s) of process, and difference which
challenges traditional assumptions about the development of ethics in mainstream discourse. Fourthly, I introduced some of the postmodern environmental literature, and there will be a deeper analysis of this in the following chapters. Finally, I have raised a number of criticisms and dealt with the implications of these for the application of postmodern theory to issues of social and environmental misuse.

As has been suggested by many environmental accounting researchers, it is now undeniable that accounting impacts on the way that we perceive nature, the decisions that are made about its 'use', and historically it has not attempted to address these issues. Increasingly, accounting researchers are undertaking diverse research into the ways that accounting could be re-imagined in order to develop more environmentally sensitive and responsible accounting practices. As no environmental accounting research has attempted to contextualise accounting, within the influences, stresses and tensions of a 'postmodern world'. This is my aim. As can be seen from this chapter, this work is philosophical and theoretical, and it will be applied to a 'practical' situation in later chapters. Environmental accounting issues are contextualised and re-imagined through the application of strategic postmodern theory. I will now move to a detailed discussion of reflexivity and textual analysis, which are important postmodern methodological choices within this thesis.

In the following chapter I will explore discourses of 'nature', showing how the construction of such discourse is a function of context. These discourses are not benign and are revealed to be engaged in broader social struggles to delimit meaning.