

## Review

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Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*. Verso, 1998. 206pp. ISBN 1-85984-182-1



Fredric Jameson

Over the past twenty years, Fredric Jameson has been one of only a handful of Marxists who have employed the language of "postmodernism" while at the same time attempting to provide a materialist account of its "cultural logic." In Jameson's view, moralistic dismissals of postmodernism are useless; much more important is the task of furnishing a theoretical understanding of 'the postmodern moment' within the totality of capitalist social, political and cultural relations. The essays in this volume trace the lineaments of Jameson's thinking on the transition from modernism to postmodernism, from his earliest essays written during the Reagan era up to the late 1990s.

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," originally published in 1982, Jameson sets out his analysis of the major tropes of postmodern culture -- the substitution of pastiche for the satirical impulse of parody; the predilection for nostalgia and the flight from history as embodied in new forms of populist architecture; and the closing off of alternatives to capitalism through a fixation on the "perpetual present." "Theories of the Postmodern" sets out the various positions on postmodernity prior to his own intervention while "Marxism and Postmodernism" represents Jameson's reply to critics who claimed that he had gone soft on postmodernism. "The Antinomies of Postmodernity" rehearses

and deepens the arguments developed in the earlier essays through an examination of the spatio-temporal dimensions of contemporary capitalism. The relentless turnover of fashion and consumption cycles, Jameson argues, gives rise to the paradox "that nothing can change any longer." Meanwhile, the intensification of commodification has obliterated the last vestiges of non-capitalized space. And yet, in this very process, "homogeneity has become heterogeneity" as utopian and libidinal energies are diverted into "individual hyper-consumption." Thus, at the same time as "postmodern capitalism naturalizes its own frenetic oscillations, it does so in the form of a bogus dialectic in which "difference" emerges out of "identity" only to collapse once more into a monochrome sameness; a kind of 'eternal recurrence' of the commodity form.

The final four chapters, mark what Perry Anderson in his introduction terms "a critical new phase" in Jameson's work. At the heart of these studies is an attempt to provide a more nuanced account of the transition from modernity to postmodernity than was evident in some earlier formulations. "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?" sets out a novel rereading of Hegel's aesthetics. Hegel, Jameson contends, could not have been more mistaken in seeing Romanticism as the moment in which Art had exhausted its possibilities. Far from representing the "end of art" the nineteenth century heralded the beginning of one of the most productive periods in the history of art -- namely, modernism. Modernism, in Jameson's view, was the true art of the sublime. For it was the goal of modernist art to go beyond art by dissolving itself, not into philosophy, but into life itself: "[It is] an art that in its very inner movement seeks to transcend itself as art." The paradox of modernism is that the abstract aesthetic through which it sought its own dissolution was itself an expression of the new social forms of abstraction peculiar to capitalism. With the rise of the money-form, as Marx and later Simmel recognized, concrete forms of life had become increasingly abstracted. In the sphere of production, concrete labours were now expressed as quantities of human labour in the abstract; money became the universal equivalent and bearer of abstract social labour. The universalization of the money-form thus expresses and mediates a whole range of social abstractions. For instance, only under a system of generalized commodity-exchange does the notion of abstract universal rights become thinkable.<sup>1</sup> Jameson's point is that abstraction also became the dominant "way of seeing" and representing the world aesthetically. Just as money, in Marx's words, became "the god of all commodities," infinitely exchangeable and yet empty of any specific content, the modernist image similarly directs our attention elsewhere; abstract form becomes, as in much conceptual art, a stand in for something beyond itself.

If modernism was the offspring of the age of money, postmodernism is the product of a new era of "the intensification of the forces of reification." In the age of global capitalism, the utopian sublime of modernism has indeed been dissolved, but not in the way originally intended; the anxieties and voids of modernism have been filled to overflowing by the postmodern cultural logic of consumption. With the universalization of capitalism, the distinction between culture and economics has collapsed. With the "dedifferentiation of fields" culture now seeps into everything and everything is subject to the logic of commodification. Postmodernity "makes the cultural economic at the same time that it turns the economic into so many forms of culture."

Marx referred to finance capital as an "automatic fetish" because interest-bearing capital appears to generate value from its own operations. "Culture and Finance Capital" argues that the fetishistic character of finance capital has been greatly intensified through the de-materialization of money and de-territorialization of contemporary forms of global finance. At the level of culture, this has produced a "new ontological and free-floating state." If modernism was the moment of contingency and fragmentation of both image and idea, postmodernism has, in Jameson's words, "renarrativized" these fragments such that what "was once incomprehensible without the narrative context as a whole, has now become capable of emitting a complete narrative message in its own right." What is being suggested here is that just as finance capital appears to have slipped its anchor in production, postmodern culture has taken on an increasingly spectral aspect as well, "suggesting a new cultural realm or dimension which is independent of the former real world."

What this free-floating world of postmodern culture licenses is the reintroduction of a whole host of archaic notions, neatly shorn of any political content. In "Transformation of the Image in Postmodernity" Jameson singles out the return of Beauty in the visual arts as particularly reprehensible: "all beauty today is meretricious and the appeal to it by contemporary pseudo-aestheticism is an ideological manoeuvre and not a creative resource." If it was possible in the nineteenth century for William Morris to see Beauty as an integral to the fight for socialism, today it is merely another ruse of commodification.

This claim may have merit when it comes to the bobbles and bricabrac that often adorn "postmodern" architecture or nostalgia films of the Merchant-Ivory variety. But to claim that *all* beauty is meretricious runs against the grain of recent attempts to reclaim the aesthetic for historical materialism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is arguable that Jameson's own definition of the modernist sublime implicates a notion of the aesthetic that is inherently political. The desire to dissolve art into life helps to explain why artistic avant-gardes were so often attracted to various political vanguards in the early decades of the twentieth century. Modernist abstraction was not simply a passive reflection of the money-form; it could just as easily be deployed against capitalism. Blasting apart the visual and conceptual categories of bourgeois society was, for the surrealists, necessary to unleash the repressed libidinal energies of the working class. Art and life could be reunited through the intoxicating surge of revolution.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the aspiration to reclaim the aesthetic as an inherent dimension of human experience is also to affirm what Terry Eagleton has called "the political critique implicit in our species being . . ."<sup>4</sup> Practically speaking, the desire to dissolve art into life necessarily implicates the ethical and political claims of socialism.

Finding a place for the political in his account of postmodernism has proven a considerable difficulty for Jameson. As Perry Anderson notes, "by the positioning of the postmodern between aesthetics and economics" Jameson misses "a sense of culture as a battlefield, that divides protagonists. That is the plane of politics understood as a space in its own right."<sup>5</sup> In a recent article, Jameson has attempted to make good this lacuna by focussing on the question of political strategy in the age of globalization.<sup>6</sup> There, he recommends a "Gaullist spirit" of resistance against various forms of cultural imperialism

and the 'protectionist' defense of the welfare state against the depredations of globalization. Recognizing the dangers of nationalism, he adds that such struggles "cannot be successfully prosecuted to a conclusion in completely national or nationalist terms. . . ." Nevertheless, he concludes, that even though "pre-existing forms of social cohesion are not enough in themselves" they remain indispensable "for any great collective endeavour."

All of this seems a bit tepid from a thinker as bold and original as Jameson. The idea that great social upheavals are as much about conserving "ways of life" as they are about transforming them is not a new one. Moreover, while Jameson clearly recognizes the limitations of communal and religiously inspired forms of anti-imperialism, he is not particularly sanguine about recent political mobilizations against the WTO and globalization. Without recourse to "gaullist" sentiments of some sort, Jameson appears to feel that this new spirit of internationalism may be destined to failure. Surely, this is to expect too much of culture and too little of politics. The power of nationalism or religion does not lie solely in the "imagined communities" or the spiritual "other worldliness" they inspire, but in their capacity to link absolute values with daily life. Internationalist politics was once capable of bringing its own set of universal values to bear on the concrete conditions of life as well. In the early decades of the last century many thousands of people were to inspired astonishing acts of sacrifice for people they did not know, to free them from exploitation and oppression. Closer to our own time, one of the great successes of the environmental movement has been its capacity to combine the universal and the particular, the global and the local. Rather than downgrading the power of politics as a source of inspiration and mobilisation, socialists would do well to relearn some of these elementary lessons of the past and present.

Jameson's great strength, amply evident in the essays which make up *The Cultural Turn*, has been to provide a sustained and sophisticated Marxist account of "postmodern" capitalism. If he has not yet succeeded in integrating "the plane of politics" comfortably into his larger theoretical project, we can only welcome this new "turn" in his work.

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### Notes

1 The same holds for other universal categories. It would make no sense in pre-capitalist societies, where concrete forms of labour predominate, to speak of "professional" peasants. On this point see, Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000) pp. 104-105.

2 See for instance, John Roberts (ed.) *Art Has No History: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art* (London: Verso 1994) pp. 30-33.

[3](#) For an interesting discussion of Walter Benjamin's debate with the surrealists see, David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor, and Liberation* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001) pp. 178-188.

[4](#) Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) p.100.

[5](#) Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998) p. 134.

[6](#) Fredric Jameson, "Globalization and Political Strategy," *New Left Review*, 4 (July-August, 2000).