Fredric Jameson's Critique of Postmodern Culture

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If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life.
Fredric Jameson

Over the past thirty years, Fredric Jameson has been regarded as the most influential Marxist literary critic in the United States. He has published a large number of works analyzing literary and cultural texts and developing his own "neo-Marxist" position. Throughout his career, Jameson has assimilated a variety of theoretical approaches into his project. Martin Dongougho, Jameson's biographer, calls him "without dispute the leading Marxist critic and literary theorist of his generation in North America" (1988:177, see also, Eagleton, (1986), p. 57). He is described as "the most important cultural critic writing in English today" (MacCabe, 1992, p. xi). He is also seen as "the foremost Marxist theorist writing on postmodernism and one of the influential contemporary cultural critics" (Homer, WWW, 2003).

Jameson's career can be roughly periodized into two stages: a minor or short one, or what could be called the pre-Marxist era, in which he wrote his Ph.D. thesis on Jean-Paul Sartre. During his research on

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Sartre, he became acquainted with Marxist theorists and thoughts. This period led to a drastic change in his thinking and prepared the way for the second stage of his career, namely, the Marxist phase, which in Jameson work can be sub-categorized into two parts: during the first part he was primarily preoccupied with literary criticism, which includes the writing of his four well-known books: *Marxism and Form (1971), The Prison-House of Language (1972), Fables of Aggression (1979) and The Political Unconscious(1981).*

During the eighties, Jameson became more preoccupied with cultural criticism, dealing with issues of the politics of culture, post-colonial theory, modernism, postmodernism, the culture of globalization, and third world literature. He is particularly engaged in the description of postmodern culture, attempting to define and analyze its features in a series of books such as *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), Anti-Aesthetic (1883), Signatures of the Visible (1992), The Seeds of Time (1994*), and *The Cultural Turn (1998).*

This paper focuses on Jameson's critique of postmodern culture. It deals with his conception of postmodernism, his views on the relations between capitalism and the production of culture and the issue of globalization as the "cultural product of capitalism." Finally, there is an evaluation of Jameson's achievement as a cultural critic. Nevertheless, it is quite necessary to give a rapid overview of Jameson's earlier work as they form an important background or introduction to his later work. Such earlier works reflect many of his Marxist thoughts and concepts,

which form the basis of his later work. Thus, it would be unintelligible to appreciate Jameson's recent work on postmodernism without grasping the main thoughts of his early work, which constitute the initial force of his project. Indeed, Jameson's studies on postmodernism are a logical resultant of his theoretical project. In spite of this rough periodization, however, Jameson's work as a whole is generally seen as "turning against the literary establishment, against the dominant modes of literary criticism. All Jameson's work constitute critical interventions against the hegemonic forms of literary criticism and modes of thought regnant in the Anglo-American world" (Kellner, 2003, WWW). Hence, Jameson's work should be read as a series of attempts to provide a Marxian method of interpretation and aesthetic theory.

II

In his work on Sartre, Jameson focused on Sartre's style, narrative structures, values, and vision of the world, characteristic of Jameson's later work. However, the real significance of that work is that it enabled Jameson to discover Marxism. Through reading Sartre's work, Jameson encountered frequent references to Marxist terminology and points of view, which Sartre took for granted that his readers would understand, but that seemed quite exotic to an American reader in the late 1950s (See Donougho 179-180).

This was a significant turning point in Jameson's career. Following his work on Sartre, he shifted his interest and became preoccupied with Marxist thought.

His second book, *Marxism and Form* (1972, hereafter *MF*), is largely devoted to introducing some of the major European Marxist thinkers to the American Academic circles. It is widely regarded as a pioneering account of such figures as Georg Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse (the last three are among the leading figures of the Frankfurt School). Nevertheless, the real significance of that book does not lie in the mere introduction of those European intellectuals, but indeed, it lies in introducing their mode of dialectical thinking that was the very antithesis of Anglo-American New Criticism.

In the preface, Jameson asserts that in order to deal theoretically with the unique questions raised by monopoly capitalism in the West, "we have to go to the kind of Marxism that evokes Hegel's philosophy." In particular he focuses on certain issues of discourse such as "the relationship of parts to whole," "the concept of totality," and "the dialectic of appearance and essence" (p.xix). These themes constitute the principles of his critical approach to literature, which he calls "dialectical criticism" (*MF, p.* 306). The central idea of this criticism is to study the literary work and its author in a wider context: a given work is a part of some particular literary movement or tradition while the individual as thinker is embedded in a specific historical situation. Without taking the historical context into consideration, a "monographic study of an individual writer - no matter how adroitly pursued- imposes an inevitable falsification through its very structure, an optical illusion of totality projected by what is in reality only an artificial isolation" (*MF, p.* 315). Put another way, the isolated study of an individual work entails the

univocalization of the meaning of its text. To open up all possible perspectives, dialectical thought requires informed reading in context. In this regard, Jameson attacks the New Critics' objective theory and formalistic approach (See *MF*, pp.332-333). Dialectical criticism emerges from Jameson's book as a radical alternative to the humanistic thinking common in the English-speaking academy.

Throughout his work, Jameson adopts Marxism as the most comprehensive theoretical framework, within which other methods function as auxiliary tools. From the outset, Jameson gives priority to political interpretation. In *The Political Unconscious* (hereafter, *PU),* he points out:

> This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today – the psycho-analytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural – but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation (p.17)

Jameson argues for the primacy of Marxism on the ground that its horizon – history and the socio-economic totality – provides a comprehensive framework in which gender, race, class, myth, symbol, allegory, among other concerns, can be explored and interpreted. Consequently, his work as a whole should be read as a series of attempts to provide a Marxist method of interpretation and aesthetic theory. The main premise in Jameson's approach is that cultural artifacts are indirect

representations of their historical circumstances, whose concrete social contradictions they variously distort, repress, and transform through the abstraction of aesthetic form. The principal responsibility of the critic is not to enhance our appreciation of the work's aesthetic qualities but to lay bare its roots in political and economic conditions and to explain how and why these roots have been obscured (Kellner, 1989, pp.2-3).

Jameson's Marxism is, however, far from conventional. He appropriates a wide range of theoretical positions ranging from structuralism to postsrtucturalism, and from psychoanalysis to Semiotics into his theory, producing an original brand of Marxian literary and cultural theory. Indeed, he does not want to discredit the insights of other approaches of criticism, but rather to place them within a broader Marxist framework, which is the essence of his dialectical criticism. Dialectical criticism for Jameson involves the attempt to synthesize competing positions and methods into a more comprehensive theory as he does in *The Prison House of language*, where he incorporates elements of French Structuralism and Semiotics as well as Russian Formalism. In *The Political Unconscious,* too, Jameson's vision is one that is capable of "gobbling everything in its path, ingesting structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, correcting their errors while preserving their valuable insights in seemingly unstoppable, ever-onward dialectical movement of synthesis and transcendence " (Bennett, 1990, p. 28).

This incorporation of different critical approaches is seen to have a negative impact upon his dialectical method. He is repeatedly attacked for trying to devise a totalizing theory of interpretation. It is argued that he

contradicts himself with this project. Marcial Gonzales, for instance, points out that " the incorporation of postmodern theory into [Jameson's] work has debilitated the critical power of his dialectical method" ("Arrested Dialectic", www, 1999). Jameson, however, is quite aware of such criticism; he argues that Marxism does not reduce culture to economics, it is consistent with textualism or formalism, nor is it a simple theory of productivism. On the contrary, Jameson points out, Marxism is necessary to literary interpretation and wholly capable of benefiting from genuine non-Marxist advances. In this regard, Jameson adopts Lukacs's concept of "totality," that is, the sum of all the relations among people, culture, and the material world of a given time and space. Economic activity and cultural activities such as religion and the arts are related within the totality, although not in the mechanistic "base-superstructure'' way found in conventional Marxist views. (See, *PU*, pp.50-56). In this sense, Jameson posits Marxism as the totalizing horizon of literary criticism, where ample space is left for more formalist methods of interpretation.

Under the totality of Marxist theory, which encompasses other critical approaches to literature, particularly the psychoanalytic approach, Jameson proposes in *The Political Unconscious*, a three-part strategy, or "distinct semantic horizons" of interpretation: "the political," "the social" and the third is what he terms as "the mode of production." These horizons:

> Mark a widening out of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history...then of society ... and, ultimately, of

> history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations. (PU, 75)

Each of those strategies or horizons is designed to dismantle the work's aesthetic unity and then rewrite its content in different ways. In the first or the political strategy Jameson focuses on the "study of forms." He argues that works of literature or any other symbolic configuration grow out of changing social pressures as an attempt to solve the contradictions enacted in social relations. He assumes that artists are not always aware of the ways their works attempt to imagine solutions to real social problems. The eruption of these problems into the process of creating artistic works or symbolic constructions is, for Jameson, a sort of return of a collective repressed – our repressed awareness of the crimes we commit against each other via social injustice – and this is the political unconscious that literature expresses. (Notice here the obvious psychological reference or implication). (*PU*, pp.67-79)

The second aspect of Jameson's strategy of interpretation is the social, which he calls the "study of ideologies." Such study views any particular text as an utterance in the discourse of a particular social class, which is seen in certain fixed relations to other social classes. Hence the social problems to which the symbolic work responds are seen as conditioned by the producer's social class position- they are not just a matter of individual experience. In other words, the language and themes of the work of art are connected to the dialogue between classes; thus, they appear as

"ideologemes" or "collective characters" in class conflict.

The third aspect of Jameson's strategy of analysis, the mode of production, is the most inclusive. It resituates the work within its general social formation, rereading it for the contradictory massages that arise in it from competing economic systems. Jameson maintains that the "mode of production" emerges as we come to realize that the discourse of one social class exerts ideological control or "hegemony" over other discourses through a process of struggle. Works of art, then, take part in this struggle (*PU*, pp. 84-85).

III

Starting from the early 1980s, Jameson has widened the horizon of his critical project to include not only issues of literature and literary criticism, but also issues of culture. Indeed, his recent work could be viewed as part of the movement toward cultural studies that is replacing the emphasis on canonical literary studies. He is engaged in the description of postmodern culture, which he has played a significant part in defining for the academy in a series of essays now collected in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991, hereafter, Postmodernism.)*

As a Marxist, Jameson views postmodernism from a socio-economic perspective. Adopting the Marxist belief that art reflects the material realities of the day, he regards postmodernist culture as the product of "late capitalism." Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jameson views postmodernism as a periodizing

concept; it is neither a narrowly cultural category designating specific features which distinguish postmodernism from modernism, nor a global category designating a new epoch and a radical break with the past. Rather the term postmodernism, for Jameson, serves to link the appearance of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order.

Jameson begins *Postmodernism* with these words: "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). In other words, to find the real meaning of the postmodern present we should relate it to the past. We should view the present as one episode in the ongoing story of human civilization. If we can understand how the historical changes of the past have led to the present, we may gain more understanding of where we are going, and where we ought to go, in the future.

Jameson connects the trajectory of capitalism with the artistic movements of realism, modernism, and postmodernism through a discussion that would explain postmodernism as a new cultural logic. He periodizes the history of capitalism by linking different cultural styles to different stages of capitalist development. He contends that modernism and postmodernism are cultural formations, which accompany particular stages of capitalism. Jameson outlines three phases of capitalism, which result in particular cultural practices, including what kind of art and literature is produced. The first is market capitalism, which occurred in the eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries in Western Europe, England and the United States. This

first phase is associated with particular technological developments, namely, the steam driven motor, and with particular kind of aesthetics, namely realism.

The second phase occurred from the late nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century or about the end of World War II; in this phase, monopoly or imperial capitalism, the mode of production in most parts of the world was based on monopoly capitalism. In each nation, a few big companies controlled most of the economy, and the governments kept this system going. Governments used their military force to conquer other lands that provided raw materials and markets for the big companies; Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a very illuminating example in this respect.

In monopoly capitalism, powerful countries competed for control of smaller countries, creating "spheres of interest." It was the age of colonialism, imperialism, and world wars. The dominant technology was the electrically powered machine. This was the economic and political "base structure" of modernization. The cultural "superstructure" of that phase was modernism in arts and literature. The dialectical relation between that base and superstructures was hostile. Jameson points out that "modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like" (Jameson, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, p.125). This opposition or rejection is expressed in the sense of alienation, fragmentation, and the dilemma of human being in an age where man became, to use Louis Mckniece's phrase "a cog in a machine." Modernism tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history –

Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* are two illuminating examples – but presents such fragmentation as something tragic, something to be lamented as a loss. Modernist literature upholds the idea that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, and meaning which have been lost in modern life.

The third phase, we are in now, is multinational or consumer capitalism, in which the emphasis is mainly on marketing, selling, and consuming commodities, not on producing them, associated with nuclear and electronic technologies, and correlated with postmodernism. Multinational or consumer capitalism leads to three significant changes in the mode of production. First, there is a tremendous expansion of multinational corporations. Most big companies make plans to expand into foreign countries (*Postmodernism*, p. xix). Second, European style colonialism turns out to be insufficient for this new multinational economy. The multinational corporations make money when rich native elites get political control over their own countries, since the native elites generally cooperated with the big industrial powers. The United States, now the world's dominant power, led the way to recognizing the "free world" along with these new principles. Jameson contends that "this whole global, yet American postmodern culture in the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" (*Postmodernism*, p.5). Third, the age of electricity powered machines gave way to the age of computers, mass media, and information processing. Rather than producing products, machines are now used to produce

images (words, pictures, graphs etc.) that contain data. Data, not products, have become the most valuable property that the big corporations control. The "know-how," and the "high-tech software", now even more important than new weapons, are the new tools of domination and control and hegemony. As Patricia Waugh (1992) points out:

> Knowledge now determines the shape of the world; knowledge is the key commodity displacing categories like capital and labour. The production, distribution and consumption of knowledge now organises the world and, unlike material goods, it cannot be used up and exhausted: it is infinitely reproducible, without origin, unstable and indeterminate in its effects. (p.46)

These three changes together marked the transition from monopoly capitalism to multinational or "late" capitalism (Jameson, 1983, pp.113-115).

Thus, postmodernism, according to Jameson, does not represent a break with the past, but a purer form of capitalism, a further intensification of the logic of capitalism, of commodification and reification. Indeed, argues Jameson, postmodernism does not refuse its status as a commodity; on the contrary, it celebrates it. Postmodernism, for Jameson, marks the final and complete incorporation of culture into the commodity system. In other words, modernism was the culture on monopoly capitalism. Postmodernism is the culture of multinational late capitalism (*Postmodernism,* pp.35-36). Nevertheless, while modernism presents fragmentation as something tragic, postmodernism, in

contrast, does not lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality and incoherence, but rather celebrates them.

IV

Jameson argues that the economic base of multinational capitalism has a fundamental relation to the cultural object of the superstructure, yet the relation between these two is not to be found in the object itself. The economic base does not generate effects within the object but affects society in its production and reception of the object. The economic base is found reflectively within the cultural object as a reflection within the creator or receiver's psyche. In other words, every person that works towards the creation of a cultural object, and the audience receiving the cultural object, have what Jameson calls a "Political Unconscious." This political unconscious denotes each person's political hopes and desires as represented within the cultural object. According to Jameson, the political unconscious acts as a mediation which enables the economic primacy of the Marxist doctrine to coexist along with a cultural analysis that studies the differences of the multiple, heterogeneous word of cultural objects. The cultural object becomes the locus of class-consciousness as political possibility within Jameson's thought (Clark, 2003,WWW). Jameson attributes the prevalence of pastiche, simulacra and schizophrenia in postmodern culture and aesthetics to the absence of a sense of history in postmodernism. The change from the temporal to the spatial is the most dangerous effect of postmodernism.

Fredric Jameson contends that with the advent of multinational capitalism the "critical distance," by which the cultural object retains a specific amount of immunity to economic forces has disappeared, because the commodity form has swallowed up every sector of society, including the cultural. With the loss of autonomy in the cultural sphere, Jameson argues, late capitalism designates everything as cultural. He points out that the "moment of truth" in post-modernism comes in the realization of "this extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space" (*Postmodernism*, p. 49).

Culture is, more than ever before, dominated by the things that we buy and use. The concern about meaning and history has been overwhelmed by a flood of commodities. Even "high culture" (the fine arts, literature, etc.) is filled with references to the products of everyday life. However, everyday life is also filled with "high culture." The line between "high" and "mass" culture is quickly disappearing. Culture is marketed just like any other commodity. Therefore, the line between culture and commodity consumption is disappearing too.

This is not a new phenomenon. Capitalism has gradually been turning more and more aspects of life into commodities to be purchased. In late capitalism, every cultural artifact is merely another commodity to be bought and sold in the market. "The market" here means the sum total of all the production and consumption processes taking place in the world. When market and culture are fused, life becomes one great marketplace. Works of great writers are published by companies that are subsidiaries of giant multinational

conglomerates (Chernus, WWW). Commercial success, thus, is one of the important criteria by which writers are estimated as "great." The memoirs of a politician or the biography of a movie star or even a football player can make "best sellers" more than a literary masterpiece.

Late capitalism, based on the dominance of multinational corporations, has made the whole world a single marketplace. American commodity culture has spread rapidly around the world, taking American-style capitalism along with it. For Jameson, this is the new imperialism. The U.S. and the other highly industrialized nations still spread their economic domination by military force when all else fails. But they find it cheaper and more efficient to use the lure of commodity culture. Many people in rural areas around the world have their lives totally transformed by the first transistor radio that someone brings back from the city. They learn about new products, new music, and new ideas that they cannot forget—and they have to go back to the city to buy new batteries. From then on their desires, and the fulfillment of those desires, depend on being part of the global network of multinational capitalism. If they want the products that capitalism offers, they have to do the kind of work and live the kind of life that capitalism requires. They have to become postmodern people, which means becoming urbanized people. City culture is now so pervasive that no one escapes it. It is questionable whether we should even speak about a distinctly rural culture any more (Chernus, 2003,WWW.).

Jameson argues that everywhere in the world, culture and the market meet in the act of consuming. The market is now dominated by consumption rather

than production. Culture (both "high" and "popular") is made up mainly of acts of consumption or images related to acts of consumption. Moreover, the process of consuming commodities is, above all, a process of consuming the images of culture. When we buy a product, we are buying the signs that go into its production and come out of it. The product itself is also a sign. We do not value commodities primarily for their practical ability to meet our needs. Rather, we value them as signs, as images that are satisfying in themselves, bearing no necessary relationship to anything else in our lives. In other words, we do not consume the commodity; we consume the cultural image of the commodity. We consume signs. However, every time we consume a sign we are also consuming the culture that produced it. In addition, the culture now consists essentially of the process of consuming its own signs. Therefore, every commodity-sign refers to the entire process of consumption. Whenever we consume a commodity, we are consuming a sign of the process of consumption. But the entire process is contained within every sign. Therefore, our main role as consumers—which is to say our main role in society—is to consume the process of consumption itself.

V

Fredric Jameson specifies a number of significant manifestations that characterize the move from modernism into postmodernism; all of which Jameson is highly skeptical and explicitly critical. First postmodernism emerged as a specific reaction against the dominant high modernism, which prevailed in the university, the museum, the art gallery and almost all

cultural foundations in the Western, particularly American, society. He refers in particular to the revolution against some modernist styles or what he calls "subversive and embattled styles" in literature, arts and music. He points out that:

> The great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot or Wallace Stevens...[or works of] Joyce, Proust and Mann- [which] felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandparents are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy- dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to anything new. (The Anti-Aesthetic, p. 111)

Jameson argues that what makes a great work of high modernism like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* different from the novels of contemporary postmodern writers is not so much its content but how the novel takes its place against the culture of its time. Works of the artists and writers of modernism were part of an oppositional movement that attacked bourgeois culture. Today, the modernist movement has become a canon of "dead classics," and postmodern art has lost the oppositional stance that distinguished modernism. Jameson charges that postmodern artists have become part of a general production of commodities for consumers that expect "fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods...at ever greater rates of turnover," and thus postmodern culture "assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation." (*Postmodernism*, pp. 4-5).

The second feature of postmodernism, according to Jameson, is "the erosion of the old distinctions between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (*The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 111). Jameson regards this erosion of boundaries as most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which traditionally has a keen interest in "preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism of TV series and Readers Digest culture." He further explains that:

> the newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel (Postmodernism, p.2).

Jameson ascribes the erosion of boundary between "high" and "low" or mass culture to the reshuffling of class division caused by late capitalism, with the new corporate affluents, attached to popular culture, at the top and segmented, weakened workers at the bottom, in the United States and worldwide. Populist postmodern style, carried by commodification, became dominant, shared by all classes.

Other critics observe the erosion of the difference between high culture and mass culture. Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler and Harry Levin define the postmodern as a distinctly new literary form, which erodes the fixed boundaries between the popular and modern, between

popular culture and modernist sensibility. They refer to the novels of J.D. Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye*, Norman Mailer *The Deer Park*, and Jack Kerouac *On The Road* as depicting a social world, which appears increasingly shapeless and full of ambiguity. The old stable assumptions of fiction no longer seem relevant, and in responding to the realities of modern mass society, the postmodern writers reject realist "portraiture" in favour of fable, prophecy, nostalgia and the picaresque mode. The postmodern anti-hero supplants the problematic hero of modernism, rootless and alienated. Irving Howe points out that the early postmodern writers tended to an uncritical, largely passive acceptance of the new, amorphous mass society. Society, Howe argues, is now one in which "the population, grows passive, indifferent and atomized; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve entirely... in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, diversions and values that he absorbs." (See Swingewood,1998, pp.162-63)

The third feature, highly characteristic of postmodernism, is the pervasion of "poststructuralist French theory.'' The rise of poststructuralism, particularly inspired by Jacque Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacque Lacan, Michael Foucault and Julia Krestiva, brought postmodernism into the academy. At first, these French theorists were not associated with postmodernism, but the application of Francois Lyotard' *Postmodern Condition* (1979) made the two – postmodernism and French literary theory- nearly synonymous. Loytard emphasizes the anti-foundational and anti-holistic aspects of French theory, as well as its

hostility to eternal, metaphysical truths or realities and to grand narratives. Jameson attacks Lyotard's celebration of postmodernism. His debate focuses on the social and political consequences of French theory. He laments the postmodern theory's rejection of modernist assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject. Jameson also criticizes the lack of distance between postmodern art and theory and the late capitalist society that generates it. He argues that we need an art capable of representing the complex realities of global economic order that exploits the vast majority.

Like post-structuralism, postmodernism builds upon the disruption of the assumed correspondence between the sign and a single material entity. Jameson also refers to the previously discussed disruption as "a breakdown in the signifying chain" (*Postmodernism*, pp. 71–72). Jameson identifies the absence of a tangible connection to authentic experience, specifically history, as a primary characteristic of postmodernism. Consequently, verbal meaning is no longer the product of a direct connection between sign and experience. Instead, any connection to experience is lost, as meaning becomes the outcome of a relationship between signs or other representations of experience, not actual experience itself. Thus, instead of the sign referring to an object or experience, it merely refers to another text or symbol. Jameson asserts that this produces the effect of a "mirage" of representation (*Postmodernism,* p.72), where representation replaces experience. The metaphor

of a mirage is particularly appropriate for describing the postmodern culture where representations such as film, television, and the Internet, in many cases, constitute life experiences. Thus, experiences through media become more real than the experiences encountered in day-to-day life. Jameson (1990) asserts that in the increasingly image-driven postmodern society, " we consume less the thing itself, than its abstract idea, open to all libidinal investments ingeniously arrayed for us by advertising." (p.12). The differences between postmodernism and postsrtucturalism lie primarily in the domains in which the two theories are applied. Post-structuralism has been applied primarily in the areas of language and philosophy, while postmodernism, beginning in the field of architecture, has been applied to art and social experience.

The fourth manifestation of postmodernism, which contrasts it with modernism, is the postmodernist view of what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "Grand Narrative," or a "Master Narrative." Jameson laments the collapse of all notions of totality and "Grand Narrative," that steered modernist society and its culture. A master narrative is any theory, tradition or system that gives a totalizing meaning of life. Marxism, Democracy, Capitalism, psychological theories or religious traditions are but examples of that master narrative. A master narrative is very much like a master key that opens up the meaning of everything and interprets all phenomena of life. Postmodernism rejects all sorts of master or grand narratives because they serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice. A master narrative must explain everything. Therefore, it ignores or twists the facts to fit its story. It values wholeness and totality

above truth. Therefore, it easily leads to an "us against them" mentality. A master narrative can stifle diversity and enforce conformity. Lyotard rejects the idea of master narrative because, for him, it is a form of totality, which has been lost. In his influential book *The Postmodern Condition* (1989), Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards meta-narratives"(p.xxiv). Such metanarratives are rooted in a nostalgic yearning for organic unity, wholeness, and harmony. But there is no collective, universal subject seeking emancipation and freedom. The concept of the whole is totalitarian in that it seeks to exclude others from participating in its idealized community. Metanarratives always appeal to the interests of particular communities with their basis in homogeneity and common purpose. Postmodernists argue that the loss of totality is a good thing. They say that the unity of modern or pre-modern people claim to have experienced was simply an illusion. The truth is that the pieces of world and self never fit together. Therefore, once we forget about seeking unity and totality we are ready to face reality and live honestly. Therefore, Lyotard declares, "Let us wage a war on totality." (p.315).

The impact of post-structuralist French theories is quite ostensible. Such ideas of rejecting totality, and grand narratives could be ascribed to those theories, which claim the death of the subject, and the priority given to language and language games in the construction of reality. Derrida's views about deferment of meaning and Barthes views of the death of the author could be felt here.

Jameson acknowledges that postmodernism tends to condemn all totalizing concepts. He assumes that this condemnation may arise not so much from actual arguments that disprove or discredit totalizing concepts, as from the increasing complexities of contemporary life that make the application of totalizing concepts increasingly difficult. As he puts it, "our dissatisfaction of totality is not a thought in its own right but rather a significant symptom, a function of the increasing difficulties in thinking of such a set of interrelationships in a complicated society" (*Postmodernism*, p. 50). One might argue here that the postmodern rejection of totality is both a symptom and a cause of contemporary fragmentation. That is to say, because of its fragmentation, postmodern society rejects all totalizing concepts, and such rejection leads to more and more fragmentation.

VI

Another periodizing feature for Jameson is the end of the great modernist individual styles that have been replaced by postmodern codes. The result is that postmodernism is no longer capable of achieving the critical distance necessary for parody and ends up previously articulated styles. The result is pastiche, which is

> like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter (Jameson, 1983, p. 114).

Jameson's concept of "pastiche" is usefully contrasted to Linda Hutcheon's understanding of postmodern parody (See Hutcheon, 1991, pp.22-36). Whereas Hutcheon sees much to value in postmodern literature's stance of parodic self-reflexivity, seeing an implicit political critique and historical awareness in such parodic works, Jameson characterizes postmodern parody as "blank parody" without any political bite. According to Jameson, parody has, in the postmodern age, been replaced by pastiche. Jameson sees this turn to "blank parody" as a falling off from modernism, where individual authors were particularly characterized by their individual, "inimitable" styles:

> [T]he Faulknerian long sentence, for example, with its breathless gerundives; Lawrentian nature imagery punctuated by testy colloquialism; Wallace Stevens's inveterate hypostasis of non-substantive parts of speech ('the intricate evasions of as') etc. (*Postmodernism, p.16).*

In postmodern pastiche, by contrast, "[m]odernist styles... become postmodernist codes", leaving us with nothing but "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (*Postmodernism, p.17).* Postmodern cultural productions, therefore, amount to "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the 'neo'" (*Postmodernism, p. 18*). Thus, Pastiche is the moment when " energetic artists who now lack both forms and content cannibalize the museum and wear the masks of extinct mannerism." (*Signature of the Visible*, p. 83). In other words, pastiche is the reemergence and

perpetuation of past modern cultural styles to the point of stagnation and death of style. This repetition of modern styles does not constitute a style of its own. Pastiche as a repetitive imitation is founded upon a copy or imitation of an original and not itself grounded in an original. In other words, the first copy is the original and "modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes."(*Postmodernism*, p. 17). Not only is there no prototype for postmodern culture, but there is no identifiable, individual artist to whom the audience may connect the art. With the destruction of the ideology of modern style, the artist has nowhere to turn but reflexively back upon the institution of modern styles thus losing himself/herself with the continual circulation of simulated impersonation.

Pastiche is itself the effect of what Jameson calls "the transformation from a society with a historical sensibility to one that can only play with a degraded historicism." (*Postmodernism*, p.18) Historicism is that name Jameson assigns to what he sees as an aestheticization of historical styles devoid of political contradictions that those styles embodied at their particular moment. Pastiche is the "empty and superficial imitation of styles, the transformation of work into pure images. This constant replay of lapsed styles renders the nature of a particular historicism important in the emergence of postmodernity" (*Postmodernism*, p.18).

For Fredric Jameson, pastiche is the result of the death of the modern autonomous self, which carries significant implications in regards to the "emergence of a new kind of depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" in the

postmodern culture and aesthetic. He points out that "[t]he disappearance of individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today to what may be called pastiche" (*Postmodernism*, p. 17).

Jameson points to a number of examples from different postmodern cultural artifacts: architecture, films and historical novels. Postmodern architecture, Jameson points out, "randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in over stimulating ensembles" (*Postmodernism, p.19).* The way nostalgia film or *la mode rétro* represents the past for us in hyperstylized ways (the 50s in George Lucas's *American Griffitti*; the Italian 1930s in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*); in such works we approach "the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion" (*Postmodernism, p.19).* The "history of aesthetic styles" thus "displaces 'real' history" (*Postmodernism, p.20).* Jameson sees this situation as a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (*Postmodernism, p.21).* The way postmodern historical novels - which are characterized by Linda Hutcheon (1991) as "historiographic metafiction"- represent the past through "pop images" of the past. Jameson gives E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as a perfect example: "This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once

becomes 'pop history')" (*postmodernism, p.25).* In such works, according to Jameson, "we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (*postmodernism, p.25).*

In such a world of pastiche, we lose our connection to history, which turns into a series of styles and superceded genres, or simulacra. In such a situation, "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (*Postmodernism.* 18). We can no longer understand the past except as a repository of genres, styles, and codes ready for commodification.

Jameson also suggests that traditional methods of orienting oneself before the work of art are no longer available in postmodernism. It is no longer possible to view a work of art as the production of a particular artist because the selves of artists are just as decentered as everyone else's. There is no secure authorial identity to be named as the point of origin and reference for a work of art.

According to Jameson's analysis of postmodernism, it is no longer possible to get a handle on the symbolic work by associating it with a particular historical period or cultural tradition. This follows from the loss of historicity described above, added to which, Jameson notes, the collapse of distinctions between "high" and "popular" art that once allowed people to see themselves as part of a particular kind of audience. When "high" and "popular" are collapsed, then there is no way to be part of an elite audience, one that is privy to knowledge inaccessible to the mass of experiencers. As Jameson says, "complexity and ambiguity of

language, irony, the concrete universal, and the construction of elaborate symbol systems," all of which appeal to an elite audience "in the know," all are absent in postmodern literary art ("Regarding Postmodernism," 1989, p. 44). It follows, too, that art loses its power to be oppositional, to express social protest, since there is no privileged audience to perceive the violations of convention that signal the protest—and, indeed, no sense of conventions to be violated. If postmodern art shocks, the shock, it seems, must be purely visceral, the kind of shock you get when someone pulls a punch at you a few inches from your eyes.

Another very apparent feature of postmodernism, according to Jameson, is the depthlessness in the works of art. He sums up the following constitutive features of postmodernism:

> A new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary "theory" and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity; both in our relationship to public history and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose "schizophrenic" structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax and syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts (postmodernism, p.16).

The "depthlessness" in the "culture of the image or the simulacrum" describes what could be called "culture in a blender." It is the jumbling together of material from different regions, time periods, etc., where the

consumer's goal is not to understand the images' inter-relationships or to identify the provenance of each, but rather merely to react to the barrage of the array. The "depth" of an image's history or contemporary location is lost. The effect is to become unresponsive to such effects as incongruity or anachronism.

Such a culture leads to a "weakening of historicity" (*Postmodernism,* p.6) since any sense of time line or tradition is lost in the jumble. And without historicity, it is hard to locate one's self in any meaningful way, that is, we lose a sense both of our personal histories (hence a "schizophrenic'" "private temporality") and of the histories of our communities (a weakened "relationship to public History"). Lacan's schizophrenic loses a sense of any connection between succeeding events, becoming isolated in the experience of the present moment. Not surprisingly, then, the postmodern self is decentered; individualism is impossible where no continuous individual identity can be named; and emotional life becomes simplified to a kind of digital off/on ("intensities'") of vague anxiety or euphoria (*Postmodernism*, pp.26-27).

Jameson also observes "historical deafness" as one of the symptoms of postmodernism, which includes "a series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation (*Postmodernism*, p.x). Jameson sees postmodern theory itself as a desperate attempt to make sense of the age but in a way that refuses the traditional forms of understanding (narrative, history, the reality obscured by ideology). For postmodernists, there is no outside of ideology or textuality. Indeed, postmodern theory questions any claim to "truth" outside of culture; Jameson sees this situation as itself a symptom of the age, which in turn plays right into the

hands of capitalism: "postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order... but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself" (*Postmodernism* p. xii). Jameson calls instead for the return of history; hence, his slogan is: "always historicize." Jameson detects a weakening of historicity "both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose 'schizophrenic' structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts" (*Postmodernism*, p. 6). As Jameson explains, the schizophrenic suffers from a "breakdown of the signifying chain" in his/her use of language until he/she " is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" *Postmodernism*, p. 27). The loss of historicity, according to Jameson, most resembles such a schizophrenic position. Jameson attributes the prevalence of pastiche, simulacra and schizophrenia in postmodern culture and aesthetics to the absence of a sense of history in postmodernism. He sees the change from the temporal to the spatial is the most dangerous effect of postmodernism:

> If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life (Postmodernism, p. 27).

Postmodern people thus seem to be floating collections of fragments, whose everyday life is organized by consumerism, or the instant gratification of an

increasing array of desires. Consumerism can be seen as fitting into the "depthless" culture of the simulacrum in that consumerism offers substitutes for the real thing, substitutes that do not satisfy desire but rather create an unending desire for more.

Jameson maintains that postmodernism differs from other cultural forms by its emphasis on fragmentation. He specially emphasizes on the term "fragmentation." For Jameson, the fragmentation of the subject replaces the alienation of the subject, which characterized modernism. Postmodernism, he argues, always deals with the surface, not substance. There is no center; rather everything tends to be decentralized in Postmodernism. Individuals, according to Jameson, are no longer anomic and anxious, because there is nothing from which an individual could cut his or her ties. The liberation from anxiety that characterized anomie may also mean liberation from other kinds of feeling as well. This is not to say that the cultural products of postmodernism are devoid of feeling, but rather such feelings are now free-floating and impersonal (*postmodernism*, pp. 16-17).

Jameson points out that there is a radical shift in the surrounding material world and the ways in which it works. He refers to an architectural example, Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, a postmodern building symbolic of the multinational world space which people function in daily. He asserts that the human subjects who occupy this new space have not kept pace with the evolution which produced it. There has been a mutation in the object, yet we do not possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace. Therein lies the source of fragmentation as individuals.

VII

Jameson work on postmodernism is a thought-provoking series of themes, written from a Marxist perspective. The ideological stance is quite evident in his explanation of the relation between postmodernism as dominant cultural form and late capitalist age.

Right from the beginning, he points out that his approach to postmodernism is historical rather than stylistic. He explains the term as a "periodizing" concept correlating cultural developments with the social and economic order of "late capitalism." However, after establishing the historical evidence that correlates postmodernism to late capitalism, he is engaged in giving a number of stylistic features, focusing on different aspects of postmodernist culture. He refers to the work of poets, novelists, architects, painters, and filmmakers. He does this in straightforward prose, rather than in complicated prose referring primarily to writings of other theorists.

Jameson's attitude towards postmodernist culture is rather pessimistic; his evaluation is on the whole negative. He views postmodernist culture as marked by the cultural dominants of a depthless subjectivity, a waning sense of historicity, and an end of unique styles, as opposed to a modernist interior or deep subject who desperately needs an individual voice to separate him/herself from a dehumanizing society

In particular, he laments its depthless and dehistoricized surfaces. It is characterized not by parody, which has a critical ulterior motive, but by pastiche, which is a kind of neutral or "blank parody", the imitation of dead styles, pure '*simulacrum*' or

identical copy without source. Above all, it abolishes critical distance and expels political content.

Jameson sees postmodern literature as a result of this new view of the world, and argues that it is nothing but a collage of previously written texts, without any critical view of either itself or its creational process. For him, the postmodern narrative is "ahistorical" (and, this way, politically dangerous), playing only with a pastiche of images and aesthetics that produce a degraded historicism.

For Jameson, postmodernity marks the break of late capitalism. He bemoans Postmodernist claim that the subject is dead and that, in an age of global communication and mass technology, culture has been fragmented, creating schizophrenic societies unable to connect to anything but the present. Whereas modernity had a strong link to the past and the future, postmodernity faces the disappearance of the past, which in turn, makes the future unforeseeable.

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