

Frederic Jameson on Postmodernism*

Two Linked Tendencies in Postmodernism

1. Denial of various boundaries, e.g. high culture vs. mass (popular) culture. "Postmodernism...stage[s] itself as a kind of aesthetic populism..."
2. Reaction against High Modernism. "...the effacement...of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture..."

General Features of Jameson's Analysis

1. **Genealogy:** "[I]t seems to me essential to grasp postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features."
2. **Cultural Production, Originality, and Late Capitalism:** "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."
3. **Imperialism and Colonization ["Globalization"]:** "...this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world..."
4. **Engaging the Cultural Politics:** "[T]his has been the political spirit in which the following analysis was devised: to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm and its reproduction in order to reflect more adequately on the most effective forms of any radical cultural politics today."

Features of the Postmodern

1. Critique of the "Depth Model"

These oppositions

- a. essence/appearance
- b. latent/manifest content
- c. authenticity/inauthenticity
- d. signifier/signified

are replaced by the intertextual free play of signifiers, discourses, and practices on a level surface, i.e. **simulacra without depth** as part of "the waning of affect". "[C]oncepts such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in *The Scream*) are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern." (Van Gogh & Munch vs. Warhol)

The alienation of the subject is replaced by a fragmentation in which feeling is "free-floating and impersonal". All of this brings about a decentered, schizophrenic subject.

"The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego....But it means the end of much more -- the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction)."

2. "Death of the Subject" (End of Individualism)

- a. Modernism valorizes personal style. [Romanticism]
- b. This presupposes a unique individuality -- a private identity or self (subject) -- that generates its own style according to a personal vision.
- c. This individualism is put into question in High (or Late) Modernism. The concept of the individual, autonomous subject is looked upon as ideological.
- d. This presents us with an aesthetic problem: If there are no individual, creative subjects, and nothing new is possible, what is it that an artist does?
- e. What is left to the postmodern artist is the possibility of imitation - the recycling of images and forms, i.e. pastiche.
- f. With the "Death of the Subject" comes the notion that "the Past" is now unreachable. This adds a historical component to the aesthetic problem.

3. Pastiche vs. Parody

- a. Both involve imitation of other styles.
- b. Parody mocks the original and ridicules it as excessive or eccentric, i.e. outside the norm. Thus, parody presupposes a norm relative to which the original can be measured.
- c. Pastiche does not presuppose a basis or norm relative to which mockery (or value judgments in general) can occur. Thus, pastiche is a value neutral imitation, without laughter, guilt or blame.

4. Schizophrenia (Postmodern Temporality)

Lacanian (structuralist) analysis of language and its role in the experience of time.

- a. **Signifier, Signified, Referent:** There is no unmediated (direct) access to reality. Thus, the referent drops out of the analysis and we are left with the sign and its two remaining aspects.
- b. **Meaning (Signification)** is not a one-to-one relation between a word and its meaning. Meaning emerges from a larger relationship, e.g. the sentence. This places the signifier in the context of other signifiers. Thus, meaning (the signified) emerges from the signifier/signifier relations.
- c. "**Schizophrenia** is the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers." That's because the experience of temporality itself depends on language. The sense of personal identity, i.e. a self that endures through time, is an effect of language. In fact, it is the very persistence of language over time that makes it possible for us to have an experience of time and, hence, of a continuous personal identity.
- d. In the schizophrenic, the language function is impaired and doesn't allow for this sense of temporal duration and continuity.

Consequently, the schizophrenic has a more **intense experience of the present moment** since one's focus of attention is not distributed over the larger, related activities of one's life. (Non-schizophrenics conceive of themselves as involved in "projects", i.e. larger purposes and plans within which the present moment is situated. The extreme schizophrenic has no sense of personal continuous identity, nor a sense of involvement in a project.)

This intensification is experienced as a **loss of reality**. This loss can be thought of as a signifier in isolation from other signifiers and, hence, cutoff from the possibility of meaning. One's immediate perceptions become even more "material" and literal, i.e. it becomes impossible to

"see through the materiality of the language" (e.g. the voice of a person who is speaking, the speaker's accent, the sounds of the wind or birds, the ink on the page, etc.) This all confronts one as brute, material objectness, unrelated and without meaning.

Cf. "China", photorealism, etc. (Signifier/signifier relations with the signified absent.)

This "postmodern schizophrenia" is related to a larger kind of "historical amnesia" or loss of history in consumer society.

Conclusion

The Postmodern Sublime

"[S]omething else...tend[s] to emerge in the most energetic post-modernist texts, and this is the sense that beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a **postmodern or technological sublime**, whose power or authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us."

"[O]ur faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day **multinational capitalism**."

We must "make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as **catastrophe and progress all together**."

Implications of the Loss of Autonomy in Culture

"[W]e must...affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life -- from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself -- can be said to have become 'cultural' in some original and yet untheorized sense."

The Possibility of Political Art

"[T]he new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object -- the world space of multinational capital -- at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion."

T. R. Quigley, 2002

* *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.