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Book Reviews

Postmodern Temptations

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Pp. xxii, 438. \$34.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Robert Post

*Pereat mundus, fiat philosophia, fiat philosophus, fiam!*¹

Fredric Jameson has long been among our most sophisticated and influential cultural critics. Combining Marxism² and structuralism,³ Jameson's persistent effort has been to locate and fix the social dimensions of structural cultural patterns.⁴ In his most recent book, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson applies this perspective to the important phenomenon of postmodern-

1. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *ON THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS* (Francis Golffing trans., 1956) 243.

2. FREDRIC JAMESON, *MARXISM AND FORM: TWENTIETH-CENTURY DIALECTICAL THEORIES OF LITERATURE* (1971); FREDRIC JAMESON, *LATE MARXISM: ADORNO, OR, THE PERSISTENCE OF THE DIALECTIC* (1990).

3. FREDRIC JAMESON, *THE PRISON-HOUSE OF LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL ACCOUNT OF STRUCTURALISM AND RUSSIAN FORMALISM* (1972).

4. FREDRIC JAMESON, *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS: NARRATIVE AS A SOCIALLY SYMBOLIC ACT* (1981).

ism.⁵ The book ought to be required reading for the many legal academics who have greeted the advent of postmodernism with unrestrained enthusiasm. Jameson, through close attention to the actual cultural manifestations of postmodernism, tells a far darker tale.

Postmodernism, Jameson tells us, expresses “an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that.”⁶ The postmodern condition defines itself through its interrogation of the great movements of the past, especially of modernism. It is thus a particular way of organizing experience and most specifically of structuring time. In the postmodern moment the great upward march of history seems suddenly to have culminated and ceased. As Jameson explains, “[i]t 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.”⁷

This loss of history, and its resulting “structure of feeling,”⁸ is the theme of Jameson’s *Postmodernism*. His earlier influential essays on this subject compose the beginning of the book, which then goes on comprehensively and vigorously to explore the postmodern condition in contemporary architecture, video, painting, sculpture, photography, fiction, and cultural theory. Jameson’s analyses of Paul de Man and Walter Benn Michaels, his readings of Robert Gober’s “Untitled Installation” and the Frank Gehry House in Santa Monica, his assessments of the video work *AlienNATION* and Claude Simon’s *Les Corps conducteurs*, to mention only a few, are deeply intelligent and, given the intrinsic difficulty of the terrain, surprisingly illuminating.

Taken together, these encounters sustain a convincing portrait of the generic characteristics of postmodern sensibility. These characteristics may be conceptualized as concentric circles of deprivation. There is, first, the loss of time as a dimension of social meaning and the substitution of synchronic for diachronic forms of explanation. The dominant metaphors of postmodernism are spatial rather than temporal. They evoke systemic interrelationships, a “logic of difference or differentiation”⁹ instead of narrative continuity. Jameson brilliantly illustrates the point through his analysis of contemporary videowork, which continually defeats the instinctive effort to attain interpretive clarity by confronting the viewer with “a constant stream, or ‘total flow,’ of multiple materials, each of which can be seen as something like a shorthand signal

5. FREDRIC JAMESON, *POSTMODERNISM, OR, THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF LATE CAPITALISM* (1991) (hereinafter *POSTMODERNISM*).

6. *Id.* at 1.

7. *Id.* at ix.

8. *Id.* at xiv.

9. *Id.* at 342.

for a distinct type of narrative or a specific narrative process."¹⁰ The viewer is thus forced to search for "synchronic" interconnections among a "ceaseless" barrage of images.

Synchronic analysis, however, requires that experience be abstracted and flattened so as to fit into whatever system (or "discourse" or "code" or "structure") is deemed relevant. The result is a second loss, that of "depth," which is everywhere "replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces."¹¹ Exemplary is the replacement of

the older language of the 'work'—the work of art, the masterwork . . . by the rather different language of the 'text,' of texts and textuality—a language from which the achievement of organic or monumental form is strategically excluded. Everything can now be a text in that sense (daily life, the body, political representations), while objects that were formerly 'works' can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by the way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments.¹²

Even the past is deprived of its specifically historical character and transformed into that unidimensional collection of "visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts"¹³ which has become the signature of postmodern architecture and contemporary nostalgia films.

This textualization of the world is made possible by yet a third loss, that of nature. Jameson writes that postmodernism corresponds to "the effacement of Nature,"¹⁴ which occurs because we have so dominated and reconstructed our human environment that the only reliable referents for reality have become those of our own culture. Jameson compares Van Gogh's "A Pair of Boots" to Andy Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes," and demonstrates how the tension between humanity and nature that sustains the former has entirely disappeared from the latter. He keenly observes the extent to which postmodern painting generally "reinvents the 'referent' in the form of . . . collective cultural fantasies."¹⁵ While this etiolation of nature may sometimes be experienced as emancipatory, as for example in postmodern legal feminism, its ultimate effect is to undermine resistance to the proliferating codes and discourses that have so successfully colonized our world. As a result, "the pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism"¹⁶ proceeds unimpeded, for "reality" itself has been transmuted into a cultural construction.

10. *Id.* at 86.

11. *Id.* at 12.

12. *Id.* at 77.

13. *Id.* at 46.

14. *Id.* at 366.

15. *Id.* at 179.

16. *Id.* at 96.

Faced with such staggering deprivations, postmoderns can make a virtue of necessity and celebrate “the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory”¹⁷ through such familiar techniques as irony and pastiche. But when, lacking this confidence and tired of whistling in the dark, they attempt seriously to make sense of these “heaps of fragments,”¹⁸ they betray a distinctive sensibility that Jameson aptly labels “schizophrenic nominalism.”¹⁹ The sensibility is nominalist because it radically distrusts abstraction and intellectualization; it is schizophrenic because it is consequently unable to locate any stable or useful meaning in the world.

Schizophrenic nominalism is most evident in the writings of postmodern academics. Jameson illustrates the point by reference to Paul de Man’s implacable commitment to exposing “the *artificial* emergence of metaphoric abstraction and of the conceptual universal from the real of particularity and heterogeneity.”²⁰ Such a perspective, when generalized, creates the present condition of postmodern theory, where “the mission of theoretical discourse . . . becomes a kind of search-and-destroy operation in which linguistic misconceptions are remorselessly identified and stigmatized, in the hopes that a theoretical discourse negative and critical enough will not itself become the target of such linguistic mystification in its turn.”²¹ Jameson dryly notes that the “hope is, of course, vain,” so that postmodern intellectual life has truly become “a *bellum omnium contra omnes*.”²²

Like so many of the specific cultural perceptions in *Postmodernism*, the observation rings true. Jameson’s great virtue lies in his capacious and relentless ability to identify and weave together symptoms of the postmodern. What emerges is a striking and instantly recognizable depiction of postmodern sensibility, a depiction that ought to provide a reasonably secure frame of reference for future analysis. This is no small feat, enabled in part by the intensity of Jameson’s Marxism, which provides him with a useful critical distance from postmodernism.

This distance functions in two dimensions. Marxism inhabits a millenarian temporality, oriented toward a future of progressive political achievement and fulfillment. Jameson is therefore unsympathetic to postmodernism’s repudiation of time; he views it with considerable suspicion as “the sequel, continuation, and fulfillment of the old fifties ‘end of ideology’ episode.”²³ Marxism also focuses on the relationship between objective social conditions and ideological cultural formations. From the

17. *Id.* at 25.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* at 360.

20. *Id.* at 236 (emphasis added).

21. *Id.* at 392-93.

22. *Id.* at 393.

23. *Id.* at 263.

outset, therefore, Jameson is hostile to postmodernism's evisceration of nature and its tendency toward schizophrenic nominalism. His distrust is conveyed in the continual reversion of his prose toward tropes of history, depth, and reality. Jameson's ambition is truly to explain the emergence of the phenomenon of postmodernism itself.

While Jameson's diagnosis of postmodernism is sharp and penetrating, the premises of his own Marxism are left vague and unexamined. So, for example, Jameson's concern to retain Marxism's traditional emphasis on the continued possibility of Utopian (socialist) redemption are the weakest aspects of his book. His reiterated references to socialism seem primarily theological. His evidence of Utopian possibility goes no further than to adduce momentary oppositions to "the dominant poster-and-decorative culture,"²⁴ residual resistances to the discursive colonization of the world in the name of an alien and unknowable nature. Jameson thus concludes that "Utopian thought and even Utopian critique" are recognizable chiefly in their demonstration of "the *impossibility* of imagining Utopia."²⁵ Precisely by revealing the inescapable extent of the "systemic restrictions and repressions" that bind us, Utopian thought gestures toward "the desperate attempt to imagine something else."²⁶ Utopia, so starkly diminished, seems scarcely worth the candle.

Jameson is most successful in illuminating the historical predicates of postmodernism when he explores the social tensions that inform particular texts. His exegesis of Kafka's *The Trial*, for example, reveals the impact of the uneven pace of modernization within the Hapsburg empire; the interpretation is both exciting and memorable. But Jameson's style of theoretical Marxism will not let him remain content with such concrete observations, and prompts him instead to assay historical hypotheses of far broader sweep. He thus proposes that "the stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism" correspond to the three forms of capitalism identified by Ernst Mandel as market capitalism, monopoly (or imperialist) capitalism, and multinational (or late) capitalism.²⁷

The formula is manifestly important to Jameson, for he often repeats it. Quite apart from its manic simplification, however, the formula is almost entirely vacuous. Late capitalism is never analytically or empirically defined in any useful way, and it functions throughout the book merely as a placeholder for whatever various social conditions Jameson deems relevant for understanding postmodernism. It serves little other purpose than to mark Jameson's account as politically progressive.

In fact Jameson's appeal to an undifferentiated and totalizing concept like "late capitalism" hinders his effort to perform a Marxist analysis, for

24. *Id.* at 171.

25. *Id.* at 208.

26. *Id.* at 208.

27. *Id.* at 35-36.

it obscures what would otherwise be obvious, that postmodernism affects only certain segments of contemporary life. There is, for example, no postmodern physics, although there are postmodern accounts of physics. There is no postmodern medicine, although there are postmodern histories of medicine. There is no postmodern law, although there are postmodern commentaries on law. These comparisons suggest that postmodernism is not the result of anything so global as “the world space of multinational capital,”²⁸ but is rather connected to discrete and local positions within that space.

Physics, medicine, and law are all successful social practices. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has convincingly demonstrated how such practices depend upon “standards of excellence and obedience to rules,” so that engaging in a practice involves internalizing “the authority of those standards.”²⁹ Jameson establishes, however, that the schizophrenic nominalism of postmodernism fundamentally repudiates the authority necessary to define and apply such standards. From a sociological perspective, therefore, postmodernism entails not so much an attack on coherence, as a full-scale assault on the authority required to make coherence meaningful.

We can thus expect a social practice to remain untouched by postmodernism if its participants retain a healthy respect for the authority of the relevant standards of the practice. Physics, medicine, and law will remain impervious to postmodernism so long as practicing physicists generally agree on the standards for the evaluation of theoretical logic and experimental design, so long as practicing doctors generally agree on the principles for assessing the success of therapeutic interventions, and so long as the institutional policing mechanisms of law retain general legitimacy among practicing lawyers and judges.³⁰ Academic accounts of these practices, however, display their postmodernism most precisely in their generic repudiation of the authority for these various standards. It is in this way that such accounts situate themselves as “academic” and outside of these practices.

An explanation of the social origins of postmodernism thus requires a sensitive topography of the patterns of contemporary authority. We need to understand, for example, why practices retain their vitality and legitimacy, which is no doubt related to their ability to accomplish social functions that are perceived to be important. Conversely, we need to inquire into the conditions under which social authority dissipates and ceases to order human action. In this regard Jameson usefully identifies

28. *Id.* at 54.

29. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *AFTER VIRTUE* 177 (1981).

30. MacIntyre is clear that acceptance of the standards of a practice does not mean that the standards are “themselves immune from criticism,” *id.*, but rather that such criticism must occur from within a more general context of agreement. For a general discussion of how this can occur, see MICHAEL WALZER, *INTERPRETATION AND SOCIAL CRITICISM* (1987).

the sensibility of the consumer in a mass market as a particular locus for postmodernism. Jameson shrewdly notes that postmodernism evokes a condition of "consumerism." It theorizes commodification from the point of view of a consumer shut out by a product "even from a sympathetic participation, by imagination, in its production. [The product] comes before us, no questions asked, as something we could not begin to imagine doing for ourselves."³¹

The essence of consumerism lies in the apotheosis of preference, and for this reason consumerism rejects independent standards and authority; it thus cannot function as a practice. From the angle of our preferences, products appear designed for our appropriation; they have no independent integrity apart from that appearance. The world of the consumer, therefore, lacks history, depth, and nature. One can easily discern the roots of schizophrenic nominalism in the sovereign prerogative that sustains our power to choose among competing products.

It would be a mistake, of course, to identify late capitalism merely with consumerism. Capitalism engenders not merely consumers, but also those who, through the application of instrumental reason, create and distribute the products and services that are consumed. David Lodge's recent novel, *Nice Work*, neatly makes this point by chronicling the improbable relationship between a postmodern literary academic and the managing director of a manufacturing plant; the two inhabit starkly different ideological worlds.³² It would even be a mistake to identify consumerism with the generic act of consumption itself, for one can imagine forms of consumption, like connoisseurship, which are quite different. The question, therefore, is why postmodernism seeks culturally to privilege the particular kind of consumption that it does.

The answer to that question is no doubt complex and nuanced. It is not enough to adduce, as does Jameson, the extent and dominion of the market. One would want to know why the consumer's perspective on the market attains general cultural hegemony, which perhaps might entail an investigation of such issues as the nature of modern work, the division of labor, and the prevalence and structure of social practices. Such investigations would likely be local in scope. So, for example, an explanation of the recent explosion of academic postmodernism, and in particular its transformation of "works" into "texts," ought to begin with the collapse of the practice of aesthetic judgment and the consequent transfiguration of literary academics into consumers of the written word. Similarly, the attempt to explain the tendency of recent art to explore a condition of consumerism ought to begin with a detailed examination of the particular circumstances of contemporary artistic authority and production.

31. POSTMODERNISM, *supra* note 5, at 317.

32. DAVID LODGE, *NICE WORK* (1989).

One ought to keep in mind, moreover, the distinction between thematizing a particular structure of experience and exemplifying (or enacting) that structure. To the extent that academics and artists continue to engage in serious intellectual and aesthetic practices, practices that solicit and submit to standards of excellence and evaluation, their work cannot in an important sense be said to exemplify a condition of consumerism, but must rather be characterized as “about” that condition. We must distinguish, in other words, between postmodernism as an organization of experience and postmodernism as a particular set of thematic concerns.

I would like to think that Jameson would welcome such concrete inquiries, although their modest empirical and sociological specificity is a far cry from the sweeping historical drama of “late capitalism.” What worries me, however, is Jameson’s easy evasion of all serious engagement with the grubby particularities and difficulties of such social explanations. Throughout *Postmodernism* grand causal historical hypotheses effortlessly proliferate, as though society could be remade with the turn of a phrase. It seems to me deeply ironic that in the almost magical puissance assumed in this casual obliteration of the old fashioned principles of evidence and proof, Jameson re-enacts the postmodern denial of nature he elsewhere so penetratingly exposes.

Lured by the promise of Utopian redemption, intoxicated by the exercise of theoretical mastery, Jameson’s uncontrollable speculation loses hold of the most subtle insight of its Marxist heritage—that reality, although perhaps unknowable in its noumenal essence, can nevertheless be engaged and respected through forms of human praxis. The very principles of evidence and proof abandoned by Jameson constitute for us a form of praxis by which history ceases to be merely our own cultural construction, and is instead made visible as stretching behind and beyond us in all its depth and integrity.

Of course it has become part of the recognizable international style of the new cultural criticism to radically subordinate history and sociology to “theory” in this fashion. The distinctive contribution of *Postmodernism*, however, is to expose the disturbing and self-defeating implications of that subordination, which, by depriving us of the presence of an independent world, drives us into the sovereign but stationary logic of consumerism. That this logic should ensnare even *Postmodernism*’s author, among the most astute of cultural critics, vividly illustrates the intense temptation of the postmodern structure of experience.