Annotations on Frederic Jameson's
"Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"

José Ángel García Landa
Brown University
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- Jameson finds a common element in the various post-modernisms from architecture to pop music: the effacement of the difference between high culture and mass culture. Mass materials are no longer "quoted" but incorporated into the very substance of the postmodernist work of art. All search for common elements involves simplification, but this is an oversimplification. The very idea of incorporation preserves the difference between that which is incorporated and that which incorporates. If Jameson implies that high culture and mass culture have become one, I think this is simply not true. I also doubt whether the border between them is any more blurred now than it has always been, and I think that the poles of "high" and "low" are constantly moving away from each other. High culture is not only art: it is also specialised discourse, such as Jameson's (who does he think he is writing for?). This is somewhat obscured by Jameson's focus on architecture; architecture is used (ideally) by all kinds of people, and it forces you into a minimum of analysis as you use it (if you do not believe me, you can test your bearings at what has been called the "infamous double staircase" in the Graduate Center [at Brown
University]). Anyway, the "aesthetic populism" of Venturi's theory of architecture is not mass culture in the sense that the outskirts of (say) Caracas are architectural mass culture, and the hotel Jameson describes is an extreme of self-consciousness unthinkable in mass culture.

- Poststructuralism replaces truth / appearance and surface / depth models with "practices", "textual play". OK, but the practical impact of these insights outside the academia remains to be seen. For Jameson, "concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern". But isn't he speaking of a coterie-art, the continuing avant-garde, which has very little to do with real mass art? If the ideal subject of these works is a decentered or exploded one, does not that indicate the measure of their alienation from mass culture, where the (illusion of the) centered subject is alive and kicking, just as in everyday practical activity? The artistic (or intellectual) avant-garde does not fall apart as this centered subject falls apart; rather, it thrives in the dissolution of the subject which gives the avant-garde an identity, as opposed to mass culture. Hume already "deconstructed" the Cartesian or bourgeois self and declared that it was a fiction, more than two hundred years ago. Nothing happened to the man in the street: only, high culture pulled farther away from mass culture.

- As to the "waning of affect" or the idea that "we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic," I do not accept the wide range of application that Jameson wants to give to these concepts. They are (arguably) tenable to describe the subjects posited by the avant-garde or poststructuralist criticism. But I do not see that they can account for more than a small percentage of the experience of a small percentage of the actual individuals, let alone "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages". I think that our daily life, psychic experience and cultural languages are driven by inertia and practical necessity to an extent that Jameson does not recognize. How dare he speak, without further qualifications, of "the disappearance of the individual subject"? Where has this subject dissappeared from? Not from law codes, for instance.

- Jameson also does away with use value in a dismissive way: "the very memory of use-value is effaced". This is beyond me. I would
argue the contrary: use-value is inflated, multiplied by capitalism through the creation of new ("artificial") needs. It is inseparable from the proliferation of exchange-value.

- On the 1950s as the "organic age" in the American myth of history, and American Graffiti as nostalgic "1950s-ness". How true! I have often felt this effect Jameson describes, of these films creating a sense of the eternal Thirties or Fifties, beyond history. Jameson sees here a sign of the waning of our historicity. However, I do not see any ideal moment in the past where history could be experienced by individuals in an active way. Jameson means, of course, the revolutionary experiences, but he neglects about 99% of actual history, which is experienced in a passive way by the individuals. Historicity is not destroyed by nostalgic art; rather, it is made available as a commodity, in a heavily ideological form. The Reagan era seems to be the political equivalent of the nostalgia films.

- Postmodernism is redefined by Jameson as the reinforcement and the intensification of tendencies at work in late capitalism, rather than a simple reflection of life under late capitalism. I like that better. This may be more Aristotelian than Marxist, but it allows us to see in postmodernism both a significant and a marginal, elitist phenomenon. It is not necessary, then, to see in it a collapsing of the barrier between mass and high culture.

- I do not understand how Jameson can give up the notion of critical distance the way he (says he) does. He acknowledges a critical as well as a cosmetic potential in postmodernist works. Surely the difference is then in the beholder's eye, in the way they are used by a theory which does have a thrust of its own and somehow is not an ideological product of late capitalism.

- I do not know if I understand rightly the idea of cognitive mapping. I see it as a poststructuralist theory of political (or aesthetic-political) aims, which involves a recognition that objectivity (or "scientific socialism") is a fiction while it preserves the idea of the overall coherent system of cultural representations as a controlling principle against the redefined "ideology". If this is the case, I would argue that this kind of mapping has always been at work in some way, because
objective fact in practical action is usually decided on the grounds of interest; of course it is attributed an ontological validity, but only as a matter of course, and not out of any kind of theoretical deliberation. In short, I think that political action will always be carried along the guidelines of interest, and that the illusion of objectivity will always be used as a shortcut to defend one's position. Maybe Marxist theorists will have to revise their clear-cut division between ideology and science, but I doubt whether the political effects of this will be very noticeable.

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Works cited


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