

Post 2

1 April 2015

### **The Prison-house of Postmodernism On Fredric Jameson's "The Aesthetics of Singularity"**

In my first post, I pointed out that almost all academics today subscribe to the notion of posthistoricism, meaning simply that they see the present (and also the future) as slightly modified extensions of the past. Accordingly, they explain current developments that seem to deviate sharply from postmodernism by either tweaking existing poststructuralist theories or "rethinking" them in a way that lets them keep on using them without any substantial changes. The result is an attitude that, if translated into regular English, sounds like "things in culture are changing, kind of—but not enough for us to really have to worry about them all that much."

When I saw on several Facebook posts that Fredric Jameson, the most eminent theoretician of postmodernism, had come out with a reassessment of the postmodernism theory that he had helped found, I was naturally intrigued. Would he actually address the problem of post-postmodernism? Would he break the posthistorical mold?

Some hope was offered by Jameson's theory of postmodernism itself. Because Jameson is a Marxist, he retains an interest in History, and because his methodology retains elements of good old structuralism, he is quite capable of making binary distinctions between old and new. In fact, the major advantage of his seminal essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" from 1984 is quite simply that it makes a clear distinction between modernism and postmodernism that the competition doesn't. Francois Lyotard's definition in *The Postmodern Condition* actually applies best to late modernism and not the Andy-Warhol-style postmodernism that Jameson explains so well, and Brian McHale's otherwise useful structuralist definition of literature (in *Postmodernist Fiction*) hopelessly mixes up the categories of epistemology and ontology. Because of this, I'm a big fan of Jameson's. If I have students who are clueless about postmodernism, the first thing I do is e-mail them a PDF of his famous article and tell them to work their way through it (Jameson is a notoriously difficult writer).

So what does Jameson actually say in "The Aesthetics of Singularity" (*New Left Review*, March 2015)? As my title suggests, Jameson (unfortunately) remains in same posthistorical rut as almost everyone else. However, it's a good opportunity to show the problems involved even with very sophisticated posthistorical thinking and also to highlight the alternative offered by performatism.

Jameson begins his analysis of the "ontology of the present" by acknowledging that postmodernism as a stylistic system is for all purposes pretty much over with. As he admits, "insofar as the word postmodernism

designated an artistic style as such, it has certainly become outmoded in the thirty years since I first used the term” (p. 104). You might think this would be a really good time to take a closer look at what has replaced that style (just like Jameson did in his original 1984 article). Jameson, though, is interested in something bigger, what he calls “postmodernity.” In fact, he says he would have been better off calling “postmodernism” “postmodernity” from the very start: “for I had in mind not a style but a historical period, one in which all kinds of things, from economics to politics, from the arts to technology, from daily life to international relations, had changed for good” (p. 104).

But what does this new “historical period” look like? What makes it different from other historical periods? Part of this answer is Marxist (but also just common knowledge, the kind you get from reading the papers if you still do). Jameson says that one of the main differences between now and back then (the 70s and 80s) is globalization and certain exaggerated kinds of financial speculation, most notably with derivatives. Most people (including myself) could subscribe to that without too much difficulty. The argument becomes weird, though, when Jameson turns back to culture. This is because the “new” culture which he describes is almost exactly the same as the “old” culture of postmodernism he outlined so vividly in the 1980s. In particular, Jameson offers up his notion of “pastiche” as an explanation of “postmodernity,” pastiche meaning “the simulation of the past and its dead styles, a little like Borges’s Pierre Menard copying *Don Quixote* word for word three centuries later” (p. 106). So what Jameson is in effect saying is that pastiche (as a specifically postmodern stylistic strategy that appropriates older stuff in a deadpan, ironic way) lives on in his more encompassing category of “postmodernity.” The “new” part of this familiar argument is the focus on singularity, which is to say on things, events, or strategies that resist universalization and that seem to be unrepeatable in their being, a “pure present without a past or future” (p. 113).

Jameson then turns to the problem of aesthetics and beauty per se. I don’t follow the art world systematically, but based on Jameson’s remarks on beauty and art I get the impression that he either hasn’t left the house for the last twenty years or, more likely, has internalized the unwritten code of posthistoricism, which means that you can pretty much ignore anything that doesn’t fit into your postmodern mindset. First, he says that “the beautiful [...] has [...] in the age of images, lost all power either as an effect or an ideal” (p. 107). This will come as a big surprise to anyone who has followed the booming academic discussion on beauty that started with Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) and similar works. It will also come as a surprise to anyone who has noticed the resurgence of non-conceptual, non-ironic art that many people think produces beauty in the good old Kantian way (without concepts, without norms, and intuitively—these works grab you by the heart when you look at them). To top it off, Jameson uses as examples Damien Hirst and his

dead shark (p. 108) and the concept artist Jenny Holzer, both of whom are about as postmodern and ironic as you can get. So in terms of art history, we're pretty much back where we started.

I'll skip a detailed discussion of the second part of Jameson's article, which is on economics and, in particular, on derivatives, those shady bundles of "fictitious securities" (p. 117) that resulted in the financial crash of 2008. In his mind, they represent a kind of financial analogy to postmodern texts and works of art (which as pastiche or simulacra also don't have any particular substance to them). Jameson's take on derivatives sounds pretty good, but as a guy with a degree in Slavic Literature I don't feel especially competent to judge just how important they are for the capitalist economy as a whole, or whether proper regulation (Elizabeth Warren, where are you?) is enough to keep them in check. This is the point in expansive "cultural critiques" where I always think it might be nice to consult someone who has some sort of specialized knowledge about how these things work.

In the third part of his discussion, Jameson turns to ideas, and, more specifically, to an explicit defense of posthistoricism. Jameson suggests that part of the third stage of capitalist development (i.e. postmodernity) is marked by singularity, which he defines as

"[...] something unique which resists the general and the universalizing (let alone the totalizing); in that sense, the concept of singularity is itself a singular one, for it can have no general content, and is merely a designation for what resists all subsumption under abstract or universal categories." (p. 126)

Subsumption, for its part (which is bad),

"[...] means turning heterogeneities into homogeneities, subsuming them under abstractions (which are by definition idealisms), standardizing the multiplicity of the world and making it into that terrible thing that was to have been avoided at all costs, namely the One as such." (p. 119)

The focus on singularity (which is analogous to the singularity of art objects like Hirst's dead shark and financial objects like derivatives) and on resisting totalization is a standard feature of postmodern philosophy. As a good Marxist, Jameson adds that it has contradictions that "cannot be solved philosophically" (p. 126), but my general impression is that he can live with this kind of thinking pretty well (he's certainly not interested in locking dialectical horns with any philosophy outside of it). Whatever the case, both "aesthetics" and "ideas" turn out to be postmodern. There is nary a hint of any counter-trend or different path of development. And indeed it's hard to imagine how there can be. For there really is a post-postmodern (performatist) "style" that runs counter to the

materialist base of "postmodernity" Jameson's whole construct would fly apart at the seams.

If you have the feeling by now that Jameson has painted himself solidly into a posthistorical corner, you are right, and Jameson even seems to have this feeling himself. Thus he notes that there is even a danger that we might abolish temporality itself (p. 120):

"It is obvious that the deconstruction of postmodernity in terms of a dominant of space over time cannot ever, for the temporal beings we are, mean the utter abolition of temporality, however melodramatically I may have staged our current temporal situation in the essay referred to above. We have here rather to do with an inquiry into the status of time in a regime of spatiality; and this will mean, not Bergson's reified or spatialized temporality, but rather something closer to the abolition, or at least the repression, of historicity." (p. 120)

Non-academics may need a crowbar and a dictionary of philosophy to get through this passage. What Jameson is saying, though, is that we are pretty much in a posthistorical situation where very little will change in an across-the-board, "historical" or epochally defined way. The only thing that keeps what is left of history going are violent or destructive shifts in spatiality (Jameson cites the various "square" movements like Tianmen, Tahrir, Occupy etc.) and singularity, which is by nature not totally predictable. (I'm simplifying his arguments here, but not a whole lot.)

Jameson ends with what might be called a Marxist version of the spatialization argument used frequently in cultural studies:

"This is why, as our system becomes ever more abstract, it is appropriate to substitute a more abstract diagnosis, namely the displacement of time by space as a systemic dominant, and the effacement of traditional temporality by those multiple forms of spatiality we call globalization. This is the framework in which we can now review the fortunes of singularity as a cultural and psychological experience, before passing on to its ultimate realization in politics today." (p. 128)

Jameson's strategy and his basic attitude are fairly typical of present-day academic thinking. First, he's not interested in a discrete analysis of "style" or "form" above and beyond what he did around thirty years ago. Secondly, he ties everything together in a very large package ("postmodernity") and connects its various realms (art, food, philosophy, economics, politics) by way of analogy. Thirdly, he is pretty sure that we can explain any changes in that system through spatial analysis, i.e. charting individual, singular shifts in its

make-up. The result is a self-fulfilling posthistorical prophecy: postmodernity will continue on indefinitely because from the very beginning it's impossible to create any historical or temporal alternative to it.

Performatism is, if anything, about finding this alternative. This would involve, as a direct counter-program:

- writing the discrete history of (post-postmodern) style or form that Jameson isn't interested in;
- avoiding argument by analogy and focusing on functional relations within discrete spheres of cultural activity; we can still talk about their political implications without trying to ground them in a vast, vaguely defined socio-economic category ("postmodernity," or whatever);
- start analyzing the massive deviations from postmodern art, theory, literature and finding new concepts and theories to do so, even if these deviate from postmodern orthodoxy.