

## Surfaces



**Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 461 pp, \$19.95 pb)**

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Volume 3, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065110ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065110ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-2492 (imprimé)

1200-5320 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Cecil, W. (1993). Compte rendu de [Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 461 pp, \$19.95 pb)]. *Surfaces*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065110ar>

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**FREDRIC JAMESON:**

### ***POSTMODERNISM, OR, THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF LATE CAPITALISM***

Wes Cecil

**Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 461pp, \$19.95pb).**

Marxist scholars of all kinds have had a deep and continuing interest in questions of aesthetics and culture. While neither Marx nor Engels developed a systematic theory of aesthetics, both devoted considerable attention to questions of aesthetics, and they left behind a large number of tantalizingly incomplete notes and comments. From the Leninist tradition of art as a propaganda tool for advancing the revolution, to the Frankfurt School's ever increasing emphasis of aesthetics, to the existentialist theories of the New Left in the 1960's, Marxists have been diligently working to provide a systematic theory of aesthetics. Despite this long history and great effort, however, no abiding theory of aesthetics has arisen from Marxism, which has delivered so much in fields such as economics, history and political science. By presenting his postmodernist theory (theory as an attempt to think "systematically" and "historically"), Frederic Jameson positions *Postmodernism* squarely in the midst of traditional Marxist attempts to create a theory of aesthetics. Drawing on Mandel's *Late Capitalism* and focusing on history and dialectical science as necessary components of postmodern critical action, Jameson is able to demonstrate the politically debilitating effects of our postmodern culture. According to Jameson, the culture of Postmodernism makes claims of ahistoricism that leads to a naive belief that the postmodern age is somehow a post-capitalist age.

While allowing Jameson to argue convincingly against any sense of a surpassing of capitalism, the traditional grounding of this work is also tied in with a number of troubling failures in *Postmodernism*. Significantly, these failures are symptomatic not only of Jameson's work but also of the larger aesthetic tradition in which it is located. It is this symptomatic aspect of Jameson's work that I want to focus on here. To do this, I will turn my /pp. 4-5/ attention to Jameson's trouble with an everyday item of clothing: shoes. In fact, by tracing through a problem Jameson has in keeping track of shoes in *Postmodernism*, I will show how a traditional Marxist privileging of scientific dialectics struggles with issues of heterogeneity. While Jameson's reliance on "dialectical science" allows him to treat a wide range of fascinating, albeit unconventional, aesthetic artifacts -- Magritte paintings, hotels, television shows -- this same reliance ends up creating problems: the heterogeneity of the material he wants to address outstrips his ability to systematize.

Two examples in particular raise questions about both Jameson's theory of postmodern aesthetics and a general failure of Marxist aesthetic criticism to deal adequately with heterogeneous systems. The first passage occurs in a discussion of Van Gogh's "*Ein Paar Barnschuhe*." Jameson contends that Postmodernism is a unique historical moment distinguishable by a number of features found in art, architecture and culture in general. He then goes on to use a comparison between Van Gogh and Warhol to lay out one of the key distinguishing features of Postmodernism: the fetish. The fetish is important for Jameson in both the Freudian sense of a partial forgetting or covering up -- in this case of capitalist social relations -- and in the Marxist sense of material objects being perceived as having pre-eminent social importance. Van Gogh's painting, representing high-modernist art, is juxtaposed with Warhol's "*Diamond Dust Shoes*," representing postmodern art. Jameson contends that *Ein Paar Barnschuhe* contains "the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty" (7) and therefore is not a fetish since it does not cover up the ugly social relations that constitute them. In contrast, "Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes evidently no longer speak to us with the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear." Jameson argues, "it does not really speak to us at all . . . on the level of content, we have to do with what are far more clearly fetishes" (8). For Jameson, a key difference between modernism and postmodernism is the forceful presence that the fetish has attained in all aspects of culture in the postmodern age, which he contrasts with the immediacy of modernist art. To support the uniqueness of the presence of the fetish as a postmodern feature, Jameson turns to Derrida who, "remarks, somewhere . . . that the Van Gogh footgear are heterosexual, which allows neither for perversion nor fetishization" (8). Jameson uses Derrida to demonstrate that the fetish is not only absent from Van Gogh's painting but actually precluded because of the heterosexuality of the shoes. What is curious, even disturbing, about this pronouncement is that Derrida argues precisely the opposite, and critiques Heidegger's failure to perceive the possibility of the shoes being a homosexual pair. Derrida asks, "what makes him so sure that they are a *pair* of shoes? What is a pair?" (*Truth in Painting* 259). Derrida spends no less than 130 pages exploring the ramifications of this question, making the specific point that the painting

allows for both fetishization and perversion, since the "pair" of shoes looks suspiciously like two left shoes rather than a pair. And shoes, considered as Freudian fetishes, are distinctly not heterosexual even when clearly a left/right pair; as Derrida reminds us, "bisexual symbolization remains an irrepressible, archaic tendency, going back to childhood that is ignorant of the differences of the sexes" (Derrida 268). Faced with such ambiguities, Jameson's failure to recognize even the possibility of a homosexual "pair" exemplifies his fetishization of the idea of heterosexuality, a fetishization which we will see is symptomatic in this work as he plays matchmaker, attempting to make heterosexual pairs of the most disparate couples. Jameson's "heterosexual pair, which allows neither for perversion nor fetishization," is not clearly heterosexual, not clearly a "pair," but it does clearly allow for fetishization.

Jameson's mis-quoting of Derrida is not simply a scholarly slip, although it may be a Freudian one. Jameson needs the shoes to be a heterosexual pair to displace any possibility of an "unnatural" pairing of two left shoes and thus displace the possibility of the fetish. The disturbing nature of this "pair" creates problems for one cornerstone of Jameson's theory: that Postmodernism is the cultural effect of a specific historical period. If Van Gogh's shoes do not pair up properly, then the fetish becomes a real possibility, and the immediacy of modernist art which these shoes represent becomes suspect.

The importance of historical specificity as a cornerstone of Jameson's theory can be seen in his reliance on Ernest Mandel's seminal book *Late Capitalism*, from which Jameson takes his subtitle and from which he draws his understanding of our specific historical circumstances. Mandel's goal was "to provide an explanation of the capitalist mode of production in the 20th century" (Mandel 9). Mandel's project specifies that the post-world war economic structure is a predictable and specific stage in the development of capitalism. Somewhat simply, Jameson's *Postmodernism* is an attempt to show how the economic structure presented by Mandel is the force behind contemporary cultural phenomenon; Postmodernism is thus the result of historically specific circumstances and not at all ahistorical. Jameson's slip-up on the Van Gogh piece is, therefore, rather a problem. It blurs the distinction between the art of two distinct historical periods, since both pieces display aspects of the fetish which, according to Jameson, is a marker of the postmodern.

Now one might argue that no single piece of art can disprove Jameson's theory. One expects variation in historical periods. Similarly, and more to the point, neither can one work nor even a small group of works be taken as representative of a specific period in history. It is not that evidence for Jameson's historical periods cannot be found in Van Gogh and Warhol but rather that evidence can be found *both* supporting and challenging such periodizations, as is clearly the case in Jameson's own examples. Herein lies one of the key difficulties with Jameson's theory: the need for homogeneous culture as a precondition of Postmodernism. Jameson's failure to consider the possibility of a homosexual pair of shoes repeats his failure to perceive

the possibility of an intermixing of historical periods. Van Gogh's shoes *must* be a heterosexual pair if Jameson is to proceed with his systematic interpretation. Of course, in doing this, Jameson must dodge a simple question: can we, for instance, talk of owning such a "pair" of shoes if they are not a heterosexual pair, and if they are not a "pair," what then are they? By arguing that they *must* be a pair, Jameson creates an orderly situation which is much easier to systematize, and one which precludes the fetishisation supposed to be lacking until the postmodern era. Jameson can stand firmly in this pair of shoes and make his argument about distinct homogeneous periods of history progressing in a dialectical two step. Two left shoes, on the other hand, would most surely trip him up.

Curiously, a heterogeneous concept of history is much more of a problem for Jameson than for Mandel. Mandel argues that uneven development -- and therefore the simultaneous existence of cultures in various stages of capitalist development -- is a key feature of the dialectic development of capitalism. Mandel characterizes historical periods by the interrelationship of the various economies and organizations which make up the world economy. Jameson does not, however, maintain the complexity of Mandel's definition of late capitalism when he presents the aesthetics of Postmodernism. Jameson argues that the overall effect of Postmodernism -- a culture that has lost all sense of history in an all encompassing wave of the new (307-9) -- is a myth: we have not escaped history; we have just forgotten history. Jameson does not, however, see a dialectical progression of uneven development creating equally complex cultural heterogeneity; rather, he sees a hegemony of ahistorical Postmodernism. He goes so far as to say that only in modernity do we see developed an aesthetic "corresponding to an uneven moment of social development" (307). Herein is the crux of what I see as a problem in both Jameson's specific approach and more generally in many Marxist theories of aesthetics: heterogeneous elements (which theories such as Mandel's are able to incorporate in a dialectical progression of changing relations and heterogeneous development) are obscured when these theories are reified into hegemonic structures in order to provide "scientific" theories of art applicable to single artifacts. In other words, where Mandel has argued that hegemonic capitalism depends on uneven development and therefore a heterogeneity of cultures, Jameson interprets hegemonic capitalism as mandating cultural homogeneity and thus a limited amount of interpretive possibility. - From the vulgar base/superstructure model of culture, to Adorno's mis-recognition of the revolutionary potential of jazz, to Jameson's definition of Postmodernism, there seems to be a repeated failure in Marxist theories to deal adequately with heterogeneous elements at the level of the specific. History, like Van Gogh's shoes, must come in discreet pairs, otherwise the possibility of multi-relational structures creates, or so Jameson seems to feel, unresolvable difficulties.

Jameson encounters a similar excess of heterogeneity when he tries to introduce Lacanian concepts by pairing them up with terms from Althusser. Despite numerous references and two sustained discussions in *Postmodernism*, Jameson's discussion of Lacan remains troubling both in the

vague way it introduces Lacanian ideas and in its complete failure to develop them once they are introduced. As with Jameson's misquoting of Derrida, I find his references to Lacan to be symptomatic of both problems in this work and of general problems in many Marxist theories of aesthetics. The postmodern experience for Jameson is the experience of "a gap, a rift between existential experience and scientific knowledge" (52). In order to explicate the nature of this rift Jameson wants, even desires, to turn to Lacan. As much as I agree with the notion of this rift, Jameson begins a problematic series of homologies when he tries to theorize this rift with the "great Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinitions of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relations to his or her *Real* conditions of existence'" (51). Setting aside for the moment the question of whether or not Althusser and Lacan have the same definition of ideology (or whether Lacan ever mentions much less defines ideology), the real, or the imaginary, Jameson's basic argument is that Postmodernism leads to a breakdown in the subject's ability to adequately maintain the representation of relationships with the world in which it finds itself. In short, this failure is a breakdown of ideology. Before finalizing -- or even really beginning -- this argument, Jameson actually changes the homology between Lacan and Althusser. Two pages later the "Marxian-Althusserian opposition of ideology and science correspond [to] only two of Lacan's tripartite functions: the Imaginary and the Real, respectively" (Jameson 53). This homology is introduced and then dropped by the end of the paragraph in which it is presented, completely undeveloped. Again we can see Jameson's desire for the heterosexual pair, in this case two pairs. Althusser and Lacan in this model each have the same pairing of ideas; left shoe/right shoe, ideology/imaginary, science/real. Jameson wants to maintain the orderliness of the binary system, even when he is arguing that the binary system is part of the problem with our attempt to understand Postmodernism.

While questions could be raised about whether the imaginary = ideology, or the real = science, or history in *The Political Unconscious*, and even how this homology is supposed to line up with the previous definition of ideology, I think it would be more productive to move on to the point of these homologies; the introduction of the third of Lacan's "tripartite" system: the symbolic. Jameson introduces the symbolic as the concept which is missing from the traditional Marxian-Althusserian critique of culture. According to Jameson, the absence of an understanding of the symbolic has prevented a successful understanding of the rift in ideology created by Postmodernism. Presumably, an understanding of the complexities of the symbolic will in turn enable us to deal with the vast complexities of Postmodernism. I say *presumably* because the introduction of the symbolic is also the conclusion of Jameson's argument. Having spent several pages (50-54) working towards an introduction of the symbolic, Jameson again leaves the Lacanian concept undeveloped; the chapter ends after one more paragraph. Two interrelated questions suggest themselves. First, why does Jameson want to mention Lacan at all? Second, why doesn't he develop the Lacanian concepts he is at such pains to introduce? I would argue that Jameson is correct in wanting to use Lacanian concepts of subjectivity to help explicate the complex world of representations in which we find ourselves; however, he fails to develop these ideas because Lacan's concepts of subjectivity and representation are

fundamentally at odds with Jameson's construction of the postmodern subject as an otherwise stable subject disrupted by postmodern culture. This is why Lacan is introduced with Althusser: to contain Lacan's arguments within the framework of traditional Marxist analysis. Similarly, this explains why, when the new term "symbolic" is introduced, the chapter ends without its development. The idea that Althusser's and Lacan's ideas come in pairs that can then be easily compared cannot be sustained if Lacan suddenly shows up with three "shoes." It is not that we simply have another left or right shoe; rather, if someone shows up with three shoes the relationship between all shoes becomes questionable. More concretely, the relationship between the imaginary and the real in Lacan cannot be compared directly with Althusser's concept of ideology and science if, for no other reason, simply because the real and the imaginary are not a pair at all, they are something else, something Jameson finds both attractive and repulsive.

The idea of the symbolic is attractive because it provides insight for Jameson into the "representational dialectic of the codes and capacities of individual language and media" (54). Being somewhat reductive, for Lacan the subject is a by-product of the symbolic, a symbolic effect. If the symbolic forms the subject, and the symbolic order is shaped by interactions with the real, then Lacan's theory gives support to Jameson's claims about the new economic world order as a definitive influence in shaping subjectivity even at the level of the unconscious. Therefore, understanding the symbolic would help us come to grips with our postmodern subjectivity and the forces shaping it. Unfortunately for Jameson, the Lacanian symbolic is not quite stable enough to provide for the kind of hegemonic structures for which Jameson argues. On the most basic levels, the vagaries of metonym, pun, metaphor etc., working at any given moment of the symbolic, cannot have a predictable effect upon the subject which the symbolic in part constitutes. Further, I would suggest that the "gap," with which for Jameson only the postmodern subject must contend, is a definitive feature of subjectivity within a Lacanian paradigm of deferral, lack, and desire. And finally, even if Lacan's symbolic worked perfectly with Jameson's paradigm, only by forgetting the disruptive elements of subjectivity such as *jouissance* and the extreme heterogeneity of Lacan's opaquely defined mixture of the imaginary, real and symbolic can Jameson import the symbolic on its own. Once again, at the level of the specific, Jameson's critique breaks down as it tries to skirt issues of heterogeneity. It can introduce, but not develop, the complex notions of subjectivity that might help us come to grips with a notion of Postmodernism but which in so doing would disrupt the very foundations Jameson has laid for defining the postmodern.

Jameson appears to struggle with the fundamental tension between systematic thought and heterogeneous elements throughout *Postmodernism*. Passages of powerful insight into particular artifacts, such as the Bonaventure Hotel, interrupt sections of unfocused analysis. Such tensions are not Jameson's alone, however. In trying to provide a complete and "systematic" theory of aesthetics, Marxist theorists hark of art. One needs only peruse the shelves of an art library and repeatedly flounder, particularly at the level of the specific where the art section of a large

bookstore to recognize the limited impact of Marxist aesthetic theories in contemporary art. To redress this lack and begin to come to grips with some of the fundamental tensions Jameson's work brings to the fore, I suggest we look to some not-so-mainstream, less canonical figures. The works of Bataille and his economy of excess or Burke's notions of situated rhetorics offer a groundwork for coming to grips with massive heterogeneity that seems an inevitable feature of any attempted aesthetics. If we try to understand cultural artifacts as manifestations of global economic trends, as Jameson, Adorno and Lukacs, among others, have, we run the risk of losing track of the local, even when the local might manifest productive resistance to the global capitalism we are at such pains to criticize.

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