What does postmodern mean? Questions requiring answers. Fredric Jameson, from Marxism to Marsism

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Fredric Jameson, from Marxism to Marsism

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- 1 “Jameson’s postmodern theory may not have enjoyed the same acclaim in Europe as those of other theoreticians [...] but this is not because it is any less persuasive or satisfactory (it is probably because he is neither European nor a philosopher)”¹, observed R. Shusterman when *Postmodernism* was published in 1991. The 1984 essay, which is the eponymous chapter in the book, was actually immediately translated into Spanish, German and Italian. As for the book itself, it was widely acclaimed in the Anglo-Saxon world, in South America and in the Far East. And it is all of fifteen years later that it reaches us here in France where, in matters postmodern, Baudrillard and Lyotard held the fort. Let us therefore salute the endeavours of the three publishers: the publication of

these books offers access to the theory of postmodernism according to Jameson, and fills a major gap in translations of American cultural criticism. We should also congratulate the translators for their handling of Jameson's notoriously difficult language. For, not content with passing through a field of eclectic references and developing his arguments by way of antagonistic arguments, Jameson writes in a complicated, not to say confused—and confusing—way. Though his dialectic may seem disconcerting, it is no less delightful. He never seems more at ease than when he is reconciling the most contradictory of traditions, and when he is solving the most daring of paradoxes, or daring to put forward the most improbable switches in subject. But the author's conclusions often turn out to be frustrating: the problems dealt with invariably seem richer than their solutions. In the 1960s, Jameson stood up against the dominance of logical positivism in American academie, with the help of Sartre, then Lukàcs, Bloch and the Frankfurt School. He then strove to put forward a counter-model to the various kinds of anti-historical formalism (structuralism and semiotics). For him, the analysis of any artifact must be included in that of a reflection on history—whence the famous Jamesonian injunction to historicize and, to do this, to start by periodizing, i.e. locating the subtle shifts, the antagonistic dynamics and the underlying changes which affect the historical fabric.

- 2 In the early 1980s, Jameson focused his interest on the changes which, with the onrush of worldwide neo-liberalism (the third so-called “latter” stage of capitalism in the view of the Trotskyist economist E. Mandel) led to the triumph of the culture industry. This generalized reification is described by Jameson with the term “totality” (an immaterial and thus non-representable space where there is a movement of information, knowledge, products and capital). The spread of these mechanisms of “de-differentiation” of the cultural and economic spheres seems inevitable to him. So it is futile to adopt a moral position in relation to the “postmodern” culture: we are all its agents and/or victims. The initial critical stance consists in analyzing this “world system”, informed by a logic of the simulacrum, of fragmentation and by a crisis of historicity, history itself having become a commodity. The author is interested in all forms of expression in the capitalist culture: architecture, for postmodernist theories here have had conspicuous concrete developments, video, which he sees as the symbolic medium of this process, the novel, film, and the plastic arts. Far from rejecting them for what they incarnate, Jameson broaches these objects with empathy and deconstructs their interpretations to deliver his own reading thereof. The lengthy conclusion of *Postmodernism* may not really answer the stated aim—i.e. the quest for a still possible form of political art, but it permits him to reassert the validity of his materialist position and place himself in relation to ambient theoretical trends, in particular, cultural studies.
- 3 We may well wonder if the book sheds any light. The historian of the art and culture of the 1980s will find in it a vital critical tool. As for its current relevance, it is there in so much as what it calls postmodernism is today known as globalization. Jameson gives us an early reading of the phenomenon. It is a good idea to link *Postmodernism* to two other books to see how his investigation develops through new objects and how his quest for alternatives to the spectacular has found its most promising instruments.
- 4 *La Totalité comme complot* thus illustrates the “cognitive mapping” undertaken by the author. It is here applied to North-American films of the 1970s and 1980s, spy movies, war films and science-fiction films as well as to novels (Pynchon and Dick). These works do not just show the consequences—paranoid awareness, schizophrenic time-frame—of the non-representability of the “world object” on the contemporary imagination, but they

also make it possible to gain a better understanding of how, in a society saturated by signs and information, “the penetration of private life by merchandise is such that the private sphere is turning into something “corporate”, into some “entrepreneurial” experience, in other words, where the individual cannot find refuge in the protective space of the monad” (N. Vieillescazes, p. 20). Conspiracy fantasies are holding individual rebellion in check, as well as the notion of “closure”, which makes totality inconceivable, singling out the powerlessness of civil society in the face of hyper-capitalism. So how are we to struggle against the “cynical reason” that is the hallmark of our *Zeitgeist*? Against all expectations, answers can be flushed out in utopias. In his *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson revisits the ground-breaking texts of the genre as well as the remotest enclaves of science-fiction. By way of a detour in the company of Martians, that is to say, via a political analysis of radical representations of otherness and “unknowability”, it is in the “utopic impulse” that it is possible to regain a critical distance and fuel our capacities for action. “The slogan of anti-anti-utopianism could well be the best operational strategy” (p. 21).

NOTES

1. Shusterman, Richard. « Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism », *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 50, n° 3, summer 1992, p. 254-257