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Postmodernism and Transitional Society

Fredric Jameson's compelling essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" navigates uncertain conceptual waters, outlining the primary components of Postmodernism as a periodizing concept and related consumer behavioral response. General recognition of "Postmodernism" itself, as both term and movement, is heavily debatable, even among Jameson's contemporaries—which complicates his model of it as cultural phenomenon and rewrite of Modernism. For Jameson, Postmodernism functions across multiple fields, reacting against the canon by effacing boundaries between the elite and populous as it parallels an emerging social environment rooted in consumerism, media and spectacle. He identifies the use of pastiche and historicity, which (almost negatively) reflect a growing cultural dismissal of time, an escapist lack of engagement in the present moment and a humorless absorption of older styles. The great dilemma of the postmodern artist, then, is the question of what to do if everything has been done before. For Jameson, the answer is producing art *about* art (and the failings of art)—but he indirectly reveals a farther-reaching answer: pastiche actually functions as an interdisciplinary tool—a mode of remix culture that emphasizes context and arrangement over concern for style and stylistic "originality." Pastiche is not a failure of Postmodernism, but a grapple with historicity itself—a way of acknowledging the death of styles¹ in favor of fresh

¹ Many scholars have referred to "the death of styles," especially in relation to the point Jameson makes. If "stylistic innovation is no longer possible" (Jameson 132) style itself must somehow be abandoned or rethought. JD Jarvis is one such

contextual arrangement. As such, Jameson's argument is still relevant to contemporary Post-Postmodern artists as we position ourselves in the 21st century. By investigating Jameson's assertion of pastiche and schizophrenic time in Postmodernism, limitations in his argument segue into newer modes of thinking and production.

Though no single theory officially defines “Postmodernism,” Jameson's essay is nonetheless influential—concepts he raises relate to later writings on convergence culture² and the death of styles. Jameson’s interpretation is one among many, certainly not a universal understanding—in fact Postmodernism itself fundamentally resists the idea of universality. His investigation recognizes Postmodernism as a “new, schizophrenic mode of space and time” (ix Foster), even as other scholars challenge its existence, or essential characteristics.

Postmodernism emerged after World War II, in reaction to the shortcomings of Modernism (Jameson 128) (Stokstad 1171). The midcentury saw the first break with then-indoctrinated Modernist thought (Foster xiv) and Jameson identifies Postmodernism as a mid-1950s and pivotal 1960s phenomena, parallel to changes in Abstract Expressionism.³ Before it, Modernism had defied bourgeois culture and its false normativity, only later to be hailed as the “official” culture by the same strata it once critiqued⁴ (Foster x)(Jameson 142). Once scandalous,

scholar who says, “today’s art world is so saturated with styles accumulated over the last 600 years of art making that we might have to consider things have run their course... perhaps we have entered an era where art is no longer a matter of this or that style, but instead a strong, thick murky brew of people and tools and diverse expression—an open field of creativity. From this point of view, style is just another tool of expression” (Jarvis). We can push a step further and acknowledge that style *becomes* method and not subject or methodology—thus any perceived “newness” would lie in the arrangement of elements and use of the tool, not a unified sense of style across an entire perceived movement.

² “Convergence Culture” is a concept developed by Henry Jenkins which describes a fundamental, information-age paradigm shift (243): “Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content... spectators *perform* in the new media system” (Jenkins 3). Beyond this, it also recognizes a new kind of participatory culture, the fractured nature of parallel but separate realities and data streams (not unlike Jameson’s recognition of language privatization) and the ability of culture recipients to “construct [their] own personal mythologies” from a stream of information (Jenkins 3). Convergence culture relates to an integration of media, data formats, art and styles—“convergence thinking is like interdisciplinary thinking” (Jenkins 12). It is safe to say Convergence Culture is a product or relation of Postmodernism, but is truly investigated in Post-Postmodernism.

³ Though Jameson defines the 1960s as a “key transitional period” (129) he never offers a precise date range to define the Postmodern era. The artists he cites as examples of emerging Postmodernism (John Cage, Andy Warhol, Robert Venturi, Terry Riley, William S. Burroughs, Godard and John Ashberry) are fundamentally tied to the 50s, 60s and early 70s (127).

⁴ Modernism became the norm: taught in colleges, praised by museums, recognized by the masses. Some scholars claim that

now canonized, dominating but no longer innovating, Modernism lost its edge. Whether Postmodernism evolved from its ashes, or whether it arose as a conscious, separate response, post-mod thinking addresses and rewrites Modernism within a new context (Foster xi).⁵

Jameson's discussion of Postmodernism is oblique at times and he acknowledges difficulty defining it due to its cross-medium diversity and lack of unifying stylistic voice, which can seem unfamiliar and disjointed to the average scholar-observer. In spite of its blurry behavior, he considers Postmodernism a specific reaction against established forms of Modernism (127, 128). The once-vanguard, rebellious Modernism had become the establishment and its sterilization led to the postmodern reaction (143).⁶ In practice, post-mod erodes the division between mass culture and academia, which is uncomfortable for some (128).⁷ It emerges as part of a new cultural and social order, the shift from Modernity and industrialization to a society of the media, spectacle, consumerism, globalization and computerization. Pastiche⁸ itself becomes the ubiquitous mode of delivery—since Jameson sees us awash in a sea of private

once a movement is “dead” it is taught as mainstream. Alan Kirby suggests this is an indication that Postmodernism itself is dead and has been since the 1990s – 2000s: it is packaged and taught in universities as an official, contemporary movement—entering the museum of academia as a relic (Kirby).

⁵ It is important to note that some scholars do not consider Postmodernism to have even begun until the mid-1970s (Stokstad 1190), while others felt it was already over and done with by 1977 (qtd. in Kirby).

⁶ In fact, Jameson claims there will be as many “Postmodernisms” as there were Modernisms, as artists respond to and reconstruct each Modernist point (128). This is debatable (and contradictory) as Jameson ends his entire argument questioning whether or not Postmodernism is reacting against anything at all, since it does not behave rebelliously. I ask, why does each branch of Modernism have to spawn its own reaction in Postmodernism, anyway?

⁷ Jameson himself seems uncomfortable with the erosion of distinction between high culture and mass culture: “this is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture... but many of the newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels” (128). In this sweep of confusion, Jameson categorizes Michael Foucault's field-bending theory and B-Movies in the same eroded space, neither adhering to previously prescribed genres or social strata (128-129).

⁸ Jameson defines “pastiche” as “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody” (131). Pastiche is used in Postmodernism due to the erosion of the idea of a linguistic or cultural norm as a result of increased privatization (130) as a way of producing work in a world where “stylistic innovation is no longer possible [and] all that is left is to imitate dead styles” (132). For example, *Star Wars* is pastiche of the serial adventure format—functioning as a nostalgia film not for its intergalactic content, but for its reinvention of the familiar feel of the serial (134). Jameson's characterization of pastiche as a flat, humorless method differs greatly from other scholars, like Kirby, who see Postmodernism as self-aware, amusingly ironic, full of humor and rampant with parody (Kirby).

languages divorced from older concepts of a linguistic norm⁹ (Foster xv).

For Jameson, Postmodernism refuses to engage the present or to think historically; existing as a schizophrenia¹⁰ of consumer society with a loss of shared symbolism (Foster xv). He sees the “allusive and elusive plagiarism of older plots” (134) as an attempt to tackle Postmodern confusion. The schizophrenic existence of the Postmodernist, then, is one of disassociation. It is “an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence”¹¹ (Jameson 137). This model illustrates how Postmodernist work operates without a finite sense of time, historicity, or connectivity—a result of wrestling with the central motivating question: if everything has been done before, what are artists supposed to be doing (132)? Jameson claims artists use pastiche to imitate dead styles because it is the only method left in “a world where stylistic innovation is no longer possible” (132). Postmodern art has no choice but to become about *art* itself, specifically about the failures of art and aesthetics (Jameson 133). In addition, the artist imprisons history, creating a perceptual construction of the present without tying it to actuality, instead deferring to a constructed version of time (143-144). In the end, he sees post-mod creation as the transformation of reality into images, with a corresponding dissociative fragmentation (144).¹²

Jameson’s article is contradictory and open-ended—begging the reader (and artist) to ask how it remains relevant in the inevitable face of Post-Postmodernism. Setting aside the obvious (reading scholarship is beneficial in itself), Jameson retains importance because he occupies a

⁹ Modernism was invested in the idea that there was a unique subject, an individual genius who, while tied into the idea of personal identity, was reflective of a larger “norm” or overall adherence to a socially defined performed normativity. This social or linguistic norm was an echo of classic Capitalism, the nuclear family and the division of classes—ideas which were challenged by Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism, which sees the bourgeois norm as a myth (Jameson 131-133).

¹⁰ Jameson does not use the term “schizophrenia” for its medical determination. Instead, he focuses on the concept of schizophrenia as a “language disorder” which breaks down the division between signifier, signified and referent, causing the viewer to lose temporal reality and historical or linear understanding (136).

¹¹ From Jameson: “the schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and “me” over time” (137).

¹² Jameson’s conclusion mirrors the density and confusion of his argument in that he closes with a question, rather than an assertion: does Postmodernism function against society at all, or is it essentially just a product itself (144)?

pivot point between Postmodernism and a rapid, culture-wide paradigm shift. In his attempt to define a “movement” already on its way out in 1986, he inadvertently addresses future concepts. His now-recognizable relationship to newer scholarship directly relates to my work as scholar and artist, having critically occupied almost the same space—the same transition point—personally. I am constantly asking about the nature of time, the use of style and whether or not it is necessary to be concerned about either in a linear sense.

In 2006 Alan Kirby claimed “Postmodernism is dead and buried” since the mid-1990s, supplanted by a technology-fueled, radical overhaul of social forces, creative output and media relationships (Kirby). This new movement, dubbed “Pseudo-Modernism,” *enables* the viewer, dismantles the idea of authorship, changes the nature of “text” or “piece” and focuses on shifting notions of “authority, knowledge, selfhood, reality and time” (Kirby). It is a shift marked by reality television, the internet, new media, brevity, malleability, and interactive consumerism. The author/viewer relationship is forever changed and at its heart is the convergence culture of Henry Jenkins and the conundrum of where (and *how*) to go from here.¹³

Jameson, therefore, relates directly to our understanding of Post-Postmodernism/Pseudo-Modernism and information-age ideas, even as he condemns a perceived breakdown in social concern for linear time. This “schizophrenia” is actually a fundamental aspect of contemporary information culture: websites, texts, database queries—even *American Idol* votes and news media—are immediate, shifting, organic masses, paused temporarily in the flow then released again without permanency. It is not inherently negative, as Jameson implies, nor is it necessarily escapist.

Jameson’s insistence on recognizing the use of pastiche to overcome a lack of stylistic

¹³ Post-Postmodern/Pseudo-Modern artists (and public) are contributors. We are no longer passive receivers or passive creators. Instead, the viewer/author paradigm becomes inverted and participants share, assemble, affect, re-contextualize, edit and stream content all the time (Kirby) (Wasow) (Jenkins 3, 136).

option fails to address a bigger remix phenomena: pastiche is essentially a mixed-media of style and concept, not unlike the interdisciplinary behavior that increasingly dominates our contemporary landscape (Jenkins 129)—and it is not a flat, humorless inability to use parody. From science (systems thinking) to education (interdisciplinary degrees) to the arts (collaboration, mixed media), a blurring of traditional boundaries affects everything we do. Pastiche describes the new *remix* culture (Wasow)—certainly not a failure of Postmodernism and not a symptom of the contemporary artist’s inability to develop anew.¹⁴ In fact, when Jameson refers to the medium-spanning nature of Postmodernism as an obstacle to defining it, he overlooks this cross-media behavior’s function as interdisciplinary thinking and its relation to expanding information. Shifting time and a freestyle mixed media of information is a new, inherent part of our culture. It is only “difficult” because mediums, especially in Modernism, have tended to stay separate and “pure” (Greenberg 201-202).¹⁵ Developing in the transitional years between post-mod and “Pseudo-Modernism” myself, understanding the way these concepts apply to production of my own work is vital. How much can I carry forward from post-mod? How do I unlearn attachments to authorship? Do I use the parallel but separate privatization of language to my advantage?¹⁶

In investigating Post-Postmodernism, new media, connectivity and the digital landscape, I found I kept returning to Jameson’s text and his model of disengagement and pastiche—relating

¹⁴ I would argue that when Jameson defines “pastiche” in the 20th century, he is really describing interdisciplinary thinking without directly naming it such, making his argument more about an angle of the total social information mutation than about a specific group of artists struggling to decide what comes next.

¹⁵ Artists like Robert Rauschenberg, whose combines were both painting and sculpture, defy the purity of medium separation that so heavily characterized Modernism. Rauschenberg himself says he wanted his art “to *be* life,” moving it into a conceptual world of biology or even spirituality, divorcing it from any hard and fast rule of paint or materiality (Solomon 81).

¹⁶ Jameson’s discussion of the way we have exploded “into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as whole” (130) is not only dead-on, but neatly echoes Jenkins’ idea of the viewer’s creation of “personal mythologies,” constructed across media and experience, culled from a unique information cascade experience (Jenkins 3). This again relates to Eli Pariser’s discussion of a growing polarization of social interaction—an internet collage that offers “parallel but separate universes” of social and political experience (5). I do not have the answers to these questions yet—they will always be a part of my creative investigations.

to my own experimentation in freezing time at the moment of creation or dissolution, my use of two-dimensional space to depict temporality, and ideas of information manipulation and data visualization.¹⁷ My work might exhibit some of what Jameson dislikes: pieces are *seemingly* divorced of linear history by remixing varied earlier styles,¹⁸ but they are really engaged in a relativity of time and form. Contemporary artists (like myself) can gain increased understanding of our current cultural climate by analyzing and re-orienting even the most assumptive of theoretical arguments, however off-key. Therefore, Jameson's now-historical take on the nature of Postmodernism remains relevant for identifying coming cultural change and marking a pivot point in theory, recognizing elements central to the personality of Postmodernism and the groundwork of Post-Postmodern thought.

¹⁷ I am fascinated by the movement of data and its constant re-contextualization. From a Picasa dump of my own accumulated image files (which collapse time and distance when displayed together in a single digital iteration), the non-linear nature of the internet and its treatment of collapsed time is also factoring heavily into possible future works (Critical Art Ensemble 94). The "author has become an abstract aggregate" (Critical Art Ensemble 97), like Kirby's inversion model, we live in a world where the recipient is now fetishized. We are able to impact everything from the outcome of television programs to data flow and media. Considering how this unique play affects my own work is an ongoing journey and I find connections to it everywhere.

¹⁸ There are unique collaborative, curated experiences happening on the internet all the time. Sites like Flickr, Tumblr and Pinterest offer a workspace in which a shared, separate but parallel, development of curated information streams is able to play out. Users come together to collectively assess, remix, cull, cultivate and develop their own image or info feeds—developing a unique aesthetic language and rule system that may relate to the outside world (Murray 149), but which is, as Jameson predicts, a privatized dialogue (130). The actual application of Jameson's privatization of language model is far beyond the limiting, closed-circuit world he imagined. This is the start of the "age of the recombinant" (Critical Art Ensemble 84), whether language, digital, 2D, 3D or time-based interaction.

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