

## ART AND CULTURE IN THE WORK OF FREDRIC JAMESON

ERNEST ŽENKO

### I

It has often been noted that Fredric Jameson is “probably the most important cultural critic writing in English today,”<sup>1</sup> or, as Perry Anderson put it in his introduction to Jameson’s *Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, “the most arresting and impressive theorist of postmodernism”.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, I would like to point out that there is a considerable problem related to the acceptance of his theory. I share the opinion that the acceptance of his work in general, and particularly his writings on culture, postmodernity and globalization, are culturally dependent, and therefore far from being universal, even if we regard them within the so called Western World.

Although Jameson can be considered a central figure in contemporary theoretical thought and cultural debates within the United States (and probably in Canada), until recently he had received relatively little critical attention within Western Europe. As Sean Homer pointed out in a 1998 book about Jameson,<sup>3</sup> one does not find the sheer welter of introductory and expository texts that one does for most major continental theorists (Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault, etc.).<sup>4</sup> How can we account for this relative ignorance?

The first reason is probably a consequence of the fate of Marxism in Europe. “While Marxism and work within a Marxist framework have undergone

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<sup>1</sup> This is an often-repeated quotation from Colin MacCabe from his Preface to Jameson’s book *The Geopolitical Aesthetics: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1995, p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998*, Verso, London 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Sean Homer, *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> His *Reader* actually appeared in 2000. *Jameson Reader* (ed. Michael Hardt), Blackwell, 2000.

a significant revival in the US since the early 1970s, in continental Europe there has been an unremitting 'demarxification', to use Jameson's term [...]."<sup>5</sup> Marxism has been displaced by alternative theoretical discourses, such as structuralism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, but its declining influence must be also seen in the context of politics and society at large: "Eurocommunism, Maoism and Trotskyism all in their different ways suffered political defeat in the 1970s and proved unable to meet the aspirations of a generation radicalized through the student protests of 1968 and the emerging new social movements."<sup>6</sup>

Jameson is, of course first and foremost a Marxist thinker and insists on the continuing relevance of traditional Marxist concepts, including history, class struggle, reification, commodity fetishism and the totalizing nature of (late) capitalism. In his view, the radically changed political and theoretical climate does not mean that Marxism should be abandoned, but that it should rethink some or most of its fundamental tenets. Jameson's work therefore remains within the Hegelian-Marxist framework, formulating a kind of non-dogmatic Marxist cultural practice that he finds appropriate for late capitalism.

The second reason for the relative ignorance of Jameson is the historical specificity of his discourse. His work is often criticized for being historically and culturally too constrained and, moreover, as specifically North American. "His overriding concern with the universalization of capitalism and with thinking or representing the totality of the world economic system cannot be separated from his position as a theorist within the only country, the United States, that can at present aspire to global hegemony."<sup>7</sup>

It is therefore not a surprise then, that his specific understanding of the so-called "Third World" can be problematic, especially for "Third World" readers. In one of his essays about "Third World" literature we can find an example of overgeneralizing, showing his distant view: "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*."<sup>8</sup> To substantiate this claim Jameson proposes a reading of a work by (only) two writers, one Chinese (Lu Xun) and one Senegalese (Ousmane Sembène). The question is, how is it possible to reduce the heterogeneity and diversity of "Third World" literature

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text*, vol. 15 (1986), p. 69.

to only two examples, and is it really possible to say that all "Third World" literature always constitutes national allegories?

Jameson's overly totalizing logic, which treats "Third World" as a homogeneous whole, is a problematic concept, and as Aijaz Ahmad, a writer from Pakistan, noted after reading Jameson's essay: "I realized that what was being theorized was, among many other things, myself. Now, I was born in India and I am a Pakistani citizen; I write poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among US intellectuals. So, I said to myself: 'All? ... necessarily?' ... The farther I read the more I realized, with no little chagrin, that the man whom I had for so long, so affectionately, even though from a physical distance, taken as a comrade was, in his own opinion, my civilizational Other."<sup>9</sup>

It is not possible to misread the fact that in Jameson's text the Third World is defined solely in terms of its experience of colonialism. And, as Robert Young critically recognized: "It is hard, however, to avoid the conclusion that his insistence on socialism's development as a global totality involves a form of neocolonialism: 'we Americans, we masters of the world' know what is best for everyone else. The attitude does not change whether the prescription be capitalism or socialism."<sup>10</sup>

For Jameson only Marxism can offer us an adequate account of "the essential *mystery* of the cultural past [...] These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story [...] only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot."<sup>11</sup> The concept of history is one of the most relevant concepts of Marxism, but in this particular case, the question is: whose history is Jameson talking about? And if the history of the world (the First, the Third, and after all the Second) comprises a single narrative – whose narrative is it? Whose unfinished plot? Put into the critical words of Young: "There is no need to recover an original urgency if you live in a State of Emergency."<sup>12</sup>

This history is obviously the history of the West: the history of modernization and the rise of capitalism. And, even more, no one is "allowed a history outside the 'us' – that is Western civilization and the Western point of view, which for Jameson seems to mean the USA."<sup>13</sup> This *US-centrism* is

<sup>9</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", *Social Text*, vol. 17 (1987), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge, London and New York 1995, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1986, pp. 19–20.

<sup>12</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



probably one of the most problematic aspects of Jameson's thought and also at the moment bears the blame for the aforementioned ignorance or disagreement.

## II

Let us suppose that it is possible to distinguish between two major phases in Jameson's work, particularly if we are interested in his comprehension of art and culture – between the pre-postmodern and the postmodern. His early works (his first book on Sartre, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style*, originated as his doctoral thesis and was published in 1961) are not concerned with the analysis of the contemporary situation, let alone contemporary art and culture. He was, to be sure, writing about art (realist and modernist, and he even already in 1971 anticipated the conditions of postmodern art), however, his main interests were somewhere else: his intent was, so to speak, to pave the way for all of his future activities. And he was, furthermore, preparing the milieu for the acceptance of Marxism in United States.

His book *Marxism and Form* (1971) evidently shared this special task. Under its title Jameson published a variety of studies of the major figures of Western Marxism (Sartre, Adorno, Lukács, Benjamin, Marcuse, Bloch), which he carried out from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. He was concerned with the introduction of the unfamiliar tradition of European Marxism and cultural critique to a North American academic readership. Each of these authors was concerned with art or culture, and in this sense, Jameson was writing about art and culture from the very beginning of his career; only that he was writing almost without exception through their own eyes, using here his technique of "close reading", resulting in a situation where it is very difficult to distinguish between the original text and Jameson's own reading or interpretation of it.

*The Prison House of Language*, published in 1972, brought to the American public a critical survey of the tradition of Russian Formalism and French structuralism. The next important book, *The Political Unconscious* from 1981, posed the primacy of Marxism from a global and totalizing perspective, as a final untranscendable horizon. Marxism is "the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation,"<sup>14</sup> wrote Jameson. This book provided sustained intervention in contemporary theoretical debates, first of all, on the contemporary theories of Althusser, post-structuralism and deconstruction. But in all these works an analysis of the contemporary situation was missing.

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Although in *The Political Unconscious* Jameson mostly focused on literary modernism, this does not mean that he was unconcerned with other forms of contemporary culture, as his writings on film, painting and science fiction testify, but that until the early 1980s modernism remained in the center of his theoretical project.<sup>15</sup> However, *The Political Unconscious* differs from earlier works in at least one important feature. Jameson was here not only presenting other thinkers, or other ideas (using his "close reading" technique), but for the first time he also presented his own theoretical and philosophical positions.

However, when in 1984 Jameson published what was to become his most influential and popular single essay, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", his field of research and criticism drastically changed. Nevertheless, this "sudden break" was not a break in his thought (a conversion from modernism to postmodernism), but could rather be seen as its simple and necessary continuation. As Douglas Kellner pointed out, this text presented, "the culmination of a series of historical and theoretical studies which provide part of the methodology, framework, and theoretical analyses requisite for a theory of contemporary society which Jameson conceptualizes as a product of a specific historical trajectory: the transition from a discrete national system of state/monopoly capitalism to an interlocking system of multinational corporate capitalism".<sup>16</sup>

This essay is therefore not a departure from his earlier works and ideas but, on the contrary, as a conceptualization of postmodernism it represents the culmination of his ideas introduced already in an article about Theodor Adorno in 1968.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore the culmination of his "efforts to introduce, defend, and develop the Marxian theory in a climate and situation often ignorant of or hostile to the radical tradition of which Marxism is a key component."<sup>18</sup>

It should be further noted, that already in the preface to his *Marxism and Form* (1971) Jameson had been aware (probably under the influence of Baudrillard and Debord) of the changed terrain in which Marxist criticism found itself at that time. He pointed out the difference between everyday experience and the global expansion of the capitalist system, the development of the postindustrial society, the dominant role of the image in society, the fragmentation of the subject, the dissolution of metaphysics etc. All these

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Homer, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Jameson – Postmodernism – Critique*, Maitsonneuve Press, Washington 1989, pp. 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, "On Politics and Literature", *Salmagundi*, no. 2–3 (1968), pp. 17–26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



issues can be regarded as representing the essential characteristics of the postmodern debate which appeared a decade later. Or, in the words of Homer, "the preface can be seen as a description of postmodernism *avant la lettre*."<sup>19</sup>

Kellner suggested that such fragments from Jameson's earlier work anticipate his later theoretical concerns. This view, in which the focus is set to a single coherent narrative of Jameson's *oeuvre*, has to be confronted with the changes in his work that are necessary in order to theorize the changing cultural, political and theoretical conditions. If he wrote in the preface to *Marxism and Form* that "a Marxism for which the great themes of Hegel's philosophy – the relationship of part to whole, the opposition between concrete and abstract, the concept of totality ... – are once again the order of the day," two decades later things seemed to change. In his Wellek lectures, published in 1991 as *The Seeds of Time*, the "great themes of Hegel's philosophy" no longer appeared appropriate for the analysis of contemporary (that is, postmodern) culture.

### III

Jameson, however, did not completely abandon Hegel's philosophical approach. In the article "'End of Art' or 'End of History?'" published in 1994, Jameson sheds some more light upon his understanding of art (as well as philosophy and consequently theory), and attempts to map the history of art after Hegel.<sup>20</sup>

For Jameson the question of the end of art is therefore connected with the question of history. For him it is clear where we are now (even if we do not use the notorious term *postmodernity*): we are, according to Jameson, in a situation which is marked by a merging of fields, so that "economics has come to overlap with culture: that everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented".<sup>21</sup>

Jameson argues that there were actually two different "ends of art", and leads us back to Hegel, to the source of this debate. In Hegel's view everything

<sup>19</sup> Homer, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Debates about the "end of art", and the "end of history" are not specifically post-modern, but of course derive from Hegel and his ideas about history.

<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History?'" *The Cultural Turn*, p. 73. One gets the impression that something is missing in this picture; that there should be some missing link between culture and economy, namely the society itself. In the picture that Jameson paints this is not the case; in his view culture and economy do not need mediation through society, which is why the very notion of society remains blurred.

is tied up in the famous triadic progression (thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis). Two of them are particularly relevant at this point: that of *absolute spirit*, passing through phases of *religion*, *art* and *philosophy*; and that of art itself, as it passes through local stages of the *symbolic*, the *classical*, and the *romantic*.<sup>22</sup> Art moves "towards the end of art, of course, and the abolition of the aesthetic by itself and under its own internal momentum, the self-transcendence of the aesthetic towards something else, something supposedly better than its own darkened and figural mirror – the splendour and transparency of Hegel's utopian notion of philosophy itself, the historical self-consciousness of the absolute present ... in short, the shaping power of the human collectivity over its own destiny, at which point it founders (for us here and now) into an incomprehensible, unimaginable, utopian temporality beyond what thought can reach."<sup>23</sup>

This absolute present will also turn out to be "the end of history". But, according to Jameson, whatever reading one chooses to make of Hegel's final stage of art, or after that stage, few historical prognoses have been so disastrously wrong. "Whatever the 'end of art' may mean for us, therefore, it was emphatically not on the agenda in Hegel's own time. And, as far as the other part of the prophecy was concerned, the supersession of art by philosophy, he could not have chosen a worse historical moment for this pronouncement either".<sup>24</sup>

Hegel was of course – and paradoxically – at least in Jameson's view, the last traditional philosopher. His writings were later subsumed and transformed in and by Marxism as a kind of post-philosophy and, furthermore, his thought occupied the philosophical terrain so completely as to leave little room for any others.

Unexpectedly, and suddenly, we are confronted with the "end" of philosophy rather than the "end of art". But, as Adorno has argued (in a somewhat different context): "[P]hilosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."<sup>25</sup> From this perspective Jameson argues: "[T]he dissolution of art into philosophy implies a different kind of 'end' of philosophy – its diffusion and expansion into all realms of social life. [...] It ends, in other words, not by becoming nothing but by becoming everything: the path not taken by History."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jameson rehearses such triads elsewhere when he talks about three stages of art – realism, modernism and postmodernism –, tied to three stages in the development of capitalism.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Collected Works Vol. 6, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 15; quoted in Jameson, "End of Art' or 'End of History'?", p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 82.



How could this happen, or better, what did happen according to Hegel himself? (Art ended up as philosophy, which did not happen.) To understand this particular moment (for Jameson, surprisingly, not a moment in history, but a moment in Hegel's philosophy), we have to read Hegel's *Aesthetics*: "Just as art has its 'before' in nature and the finite spheres of life, so too it has an 'after', i.e., a region which in turn transcends art's way of apprehending and representing the Absolute. For art still has a limit in itself and thereby passes over into higher forms of consciousness. This limitation determines, after all, the position which we are accustomed to assign to art in our contemporary life. For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself."<sup>27</sup>

What Hegel wrote here concerns a particular time in history: modernism (or, what we understand under modernism in the arts), laid claim to a unique mode of apprehending and representing the Absolute. Or, at least, it wished to be for us "the highest mode in which the truth claws its way into existence. ... Modernism found its authority in the relativization of the various philosophical codes and languages, in their humiliation by the development of the natural sciences, and in the intensifying critiques of abstraction and instrumental reason."<sup>28</sup> But the ways in which the authority of philosophy was weakened and undermined cannot be said to have simply allowed art to develop alongside it, as a kind of alternative path to an Absolute. In this sense, argues Jameson, Hegel was right: an event took place, the event he named "the end of art". And, continues Jameson, the fact is that a certain art ended.

Of course, the supersession of art by philosophy, as Hegel assumed, did not occur. Rather, something else has happened: a new and different kind of art suddenly appeared to take philosophy's place after the end of the old art. This new art wanted to supplant the philosophy that was, or was meant to be, the "highest mode in which truth manages to come into being [die höchste Weise, in welcher die Wahrheit sich Existenz verschafft]". This art was then (and still is) known as modernism.<sup>29</sup>

However, we are still confronted with two types of art, two types that had

<sup>27</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, Berlin 1953, pp. 102–103; quoted in Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>29</sup> How modernism (and consequently postmodernism) is understood depends upon its definition. Confusion arises because it is used as both an aesthetic category and a term for cultural phenomenon, which coincides with a particular epoch of history. Jameson's description (it is hardly a definition) is in this sense closer to cultural phenomenon than to an aesthetic category, even if the latter is not excluded. Cf. Michael Newman, "Revisiting Modernism, Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses of the Visual Arts", in: *Postmodernism: ICA Documents* (ed. Lisa Appignanesi), Free Association Books, London 1989, pp. 95–96.



already been known and theorized in Hegel's day and even before: *the Beautiful* and *the Sublime*. Jameson here follows Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who has claimed that what we call modernism will eventually be identified with the Sublime itself. "Modernism aspires to the Sublime as to its very essence, which we may call trans-aesthetic, insofar as it lays a claim to the Absolute, that is, it believes that in order to be art at all, art must be something beyond art."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, that kind of art whose end Hegel foresaw is (in the light of Kant) to be identified as Beauty. It is hence the Beautiful that comes to an end in this famous "end of something" event, but what replaces it is not philosophy (Hegel was therefore wrong) but rather the Sublime itself; in other words the aesthetic of the modern.

The Beautiful also did not really die. It died in Hegel's eyes in the sense that it has no relationship with the Absolute. It also died in the eyes of the modernist artist. Otherwise, the supersession of the Beautiful by the Sublime is accompanied by the persistence and reproduction of secondary forms of the Beautiful: the Beautiful survives as decoration (without any claim to truth). This is, in short, for Jameson the picture of the first "end of art". However, nothing seems to have stopped there, and everything seems to be getting worse. Therefore, it is possible to see the arrival of another "end of something".

For Jameson the second "end of art" began in the 1960s, when, in his poetic words "the world was still young". If the world was then young and innocent (how it is possible to claim something like that for a period of the Cold War remains a minor secret), the question is, why was this end of art (at least in Jameson's view) political? "I think it would scarcely be an exaggeration to suggest that the politics of the sixties, all over the world [...] was defined and constituted as an opposition to the American war in Vietnam, in another words, as a world-wide protest."<sup>31</sup>

This, however, is an important issue. For Jameson the very deployment of the theory of the (second) "end of art" was political insofar as "it was meant to suggest or to register the profound complicity of the cultural institutions and canons, of the museums and the university system, the state prestige of all the high arts, in the Vietnam War as a defense of Western values: something that also presupposes a high level of investment in official culture and an influential status in society of high culture as an extension of state power."<sup>32</sup>

The sign of this second "end of art" is in Jameson's view the emergence of happenings, which could hardly be imagined as having opened the way to

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<sup>30</sup> Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?", p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75. This exaggeration is another example of the aforementioned US-centrism.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

the final realm of philosophy any more than the end-of-art's nineteenth-century equivalent had. The second "end" is related to the process of the dissolution of the modern, to the cultural process that led to the emergence of Theory. It is the Theory which supplanted traditional literature and extended across a broad range of (old-fashioned nineteenth-century) disciplines: from philosophy (which is now – in the sense of Baudrillard – everywhere and dead), anthropology and linguistics to sociology, effacing boundaries between them.

Jameson argues that, "This grand moment of Theory (which some claim now also to have ended) in fact confirmed Hegel's premonitions by taking as its central theme the dynamics of representation itself: one cannot imagine a classical Hegelian supersession of art by philosophy otherwise than by just such a return of consciousness (and of self-consciousness) back on the figuration and the figural dynamics that constitute the aesthetic, in order to dissolve those into the broad daylight, and transparency of praxis itself."<sup>33</sup>

The "end of art" of this period at the end of modernity was not merely marked by the disappearance of the great authors of modernism from 1910 to 1955, but was accompanied by the emergence of now equally famous theorists such as Lacan, Barthes, Baudrillard, Derrida, Žižek and Jameson himself.

Jameson argues that Theory emerged from the aesthetic itself, from the culture of the modern; hence for him the aesthetic is not only a part of the Beautiful, but in modernism a part of the Sublime as well. He makes a conclusion that could be expected: "Perhaps it might be argued ... that Hegel was not so terribly wrong after all; and that the event in question could at least partially be grasped as a dissolution of figuration at its most intense into a newer form of lucidity ...".<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, this is only partly true; for the function of the Sublime is taken over by Theory, while the Sublime is only one part, or one half of art (or, better, of the aesthetic). The other half of art (after its first end, of course) is the Beautiful, and it is this other part, the Beautiful, "which now invests the cultural realm at the moment in which the production of the modern has gradually dried up."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.



## IV

We are now already deep in the postmodern debate, concerning the return of the Beautiful and the decorative instead of the older (modern) Sublime, and the abandonment by art of the quest for the absolute or of truth claims. What remained as art is a source of sheer pleasure and gratification. Therefore both Theory and the Beautiful constitute the second – postmodern – end of art, and even tend to block each other out. The 1970s appeared in Jameson's view to be the age of Theory, the 1980s a period of consumption. Even Theory itself has become commodified. On the other hand, the return of the Beautiful appeared as a colonization of reality by visual and spatial forms.

This is the reality of late capitalism; still, the main question remains unanswered after the double "end of art": Can the Sublime and its successor, the Theory, restore the philosophic component of postmodernity, and crack open the commodification implicit in the Beautiful? If philosophy is dead and theory cannot threaten the commodification implicit in the system of multinational corporate capitalism (for the theory itself is also commodified and without critical potential) what is the role of art? Can art be critical?

In one of his earlier essays (1977) Jameson claimed that art itself has an important social and political role to play. It is vital that art (in this passage he is writing about new realism in contrast to modernism) is able "to resist the power of reification in consumer society and to reinvent that category of totality which, systematically undermined by existential fragmentation on all levels of life and social organization today, can alone project structural relations between classes as well as class struggles in other countries, in what has increasingly become a world system."<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, the circumstances have changed and instead of discussing the realism/modernism issue (new realism evidently did not solve the problem) Jameson was more and more involved in the modernism/postmodernism debate. However, according to Jameson, it is difficult if not impossible to search for the critical potential in postmodern art, and with the conflation of high art and popular culture, the search for critical aspects of art/culture became even more problematic.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate", *The Ideologies of Theory. Essays 1971–1986. Syntax of History*, Vol. 2, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, pp. 146–147.

<sup>37</sup> It should be mentioned here that postmodern art from the Central/Eastern Europe proved that it could carry strong critical potential.

To mention but one example, Jameson claims that Warhol's paintings are not strong political statements. Even though we can trace both the modern and postmodern traits of Warhol's work (this is not only an issue in the case of Warhol, but also in other "postmodernist" artists also mentioned by Jameson, most notably the writer Thomas Pynchon), Warhol is for Jameson one of the key postmodern artists. On the one hand, it is not difficult to see why: if we disregard all that Jameson writes about his works (depthlessness, specific colors, particular technique, concern with consumerism, etc.) and focus on the question of history, we get a postmodern artist *par excellence*: not only his paintings are without history or narrative, the artist himself made a great effort to efface his own history, even the date and the place of his birth.

On the other hand, it is possible to claim – contrary to Jameson – that there is some hidden critical potential in Warhol's work. As Sartre pointed out on various occasions, it is not possible *not to choose*, for the decision of *not making a choice* is already a choice. If we look at Warhol's work from this standpoint, we can find in his "political silence", in this absence of criticism that stares us in the face, exactly his own political statement. This may be a kind of immanent criticism that is the only promising way of doing criticism within the global system of multinational capitalism. The question if such a critique is acceptable for Jameson remains, however, unanswered.

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Jameson was actually seeking a kind of art that would be able to challenge the culture of late capitalism, but without success. However, Islamic fundamentalism seems to be the only alternative to multinational capitalism at the moment, but at the same time not a solution we would be glad to accept. It is not possible to step outside this system, or to destroy it (and we do not want to, either). But as some recent Hollywood films, such as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) or *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowsky, 1999) show, it is possible (not for contemporary art in this case, but for popular culture) to preserve some of those critical aspects, once reserved for philosophy, and it is they that probably represent the kind of "art" that Jameson was looking for.

We can now be almost certain that the form of (new) realism that Jameson was writing about in 1977 is not a proper solution for a critical art of this kind, and that the film *Fight Club*, which ends with the collapse of the whole system of capitalism (symbolized by the demolition of the skyscrapers belonging to multinational corporations) also did not succeed to offer an acceptable and reasonable alternative. As Jameson would have put it decades ago, it is not the content, but the form that counts.



The SF film *The Matrix*, on the other hand, is much closer to Jameson's (and also the Althusserian) idea of ideology. In *The Matrix*, which is, according to Adam Roberts, "surely one of the most Marxist films ever to come out of Hollywood,"<sup>38</sup> we can clearly see the importance of totality at work. "The matrix" – computer generated virtual reality – is more than a set of false beliefs about reality, more than false consciousness, and more than "the truth that you are a slave", as Neo (Keanu Reeves) was told, "The Matrix" is reality itself. It defines and conditions thinking, acting, and behavior, in short, it defines peoples' lives. To break the chain of the virtual reality, to defeat the "Matrix", i.e. the whole system, it does not suffice to take care of this or that particular problem. The only way out leads through a full comprehension of the entire system, which is possible only if a total vision, a totality which Jameson never stops to defend, can be achieved.

However in the case of *The Matrix* the situation is relatively simple, because even though it forms a complex system, the spectator has a chance to understand how the "Matrix" works, and he/she can see how it is possible to understand it from within – from Neo's standpoint. This is possible (and necessary for the film to be effective) because the "Matrix" is only a scheme – complex, but graspable. In postmodern reality we are dealing with something much more complex, and even if there is a considerable question whether we will ever be able to grasp it, for Jameson this is an important issue. In a way similar to Neo in *The Matrix*, we should strive for a total vision, attainable through the cognitive mapping of reality.

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<sup>38</sup> Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, p. 38.