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A SINGULAR MODERNIST: FREDRIC JAMESON AND THE POLITICS OF MODERNISM

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For the past 30 years Fredric Jameson's name has been so inextricably tied to the fate of postmodernism that his recent work on modernity and modernism has been interpreted by some critics as a "retreat" from the cutting edge of contemporary cultural theory to politically regressive and imperialistic notions of modernity. For some of us, however, Jameson's recent work marks a welcome return to what he always did best, writing about modernism. The "Preface" to *A Singular Modernity* (2002), however, seems to exhibit a marked weariness on Jameson's part to returning once again to all those old undesirable issues that it had been "one of the great achievements of postmodernity" to have discredited (1). It is not just the renewed interest in notions of modernity in popular political and academic discourse that concerns Jameson but, I want to argue, a much older "dispute in the politics and philosophy of history." What remains at stake for Jameson in these "undesirable" issues of modernity and modernism is the fate of socialism's emancipatory project in light of the seemingly irresistible triumph of global capital.
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Fredric Jameson observed more than a decade ago that we are experiencing a certain "return of the repressed" in the early twenty-first century as those previously moribund concepts of aesthetics, ethics, citizenship and civil society are once again resuscitated in academic discourse (*Singular* 2-3). For Jameson, at least, aesthetics as a discipline was simultaneously invented and deconstructed by modernism and should finally have been laid to rest with the emergence of postmodernity.[1] If this is, indeed, the case, then what are the implications for "Politics and/in Aesthetics" when one term out of the two is already outmoded and outdated?* Do politics disappear with aesthetics as just one more residue of modernist nostalgia? Or does the eclipse of aesthetics clear the ground for some more appropriate form of contemporary cultural politics? Certainly, for Marxism the question of aesthetics has always been a question of politics and at its most combative these questions have been fought over in relation to modernism.[2] In his 1977 "Afterword" to the volume *Aesthetics and Politics,* Jameson also drew our attention to a "return of the repressed," albeit a rather different return than the one we are experiencing today:

> Nowhere has this return of the repressed been more dramatic than in the aesthetic conflict between 'Realism' and 'Modernism', whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today, even though we may feel that each position is in some sense right and yet neither is any longer wholly acceptable. ("Reflections" 196)

For Jameson, at that time, it was paradoxically realism that offered the possibility of a new political aesthetic as modernism's aesthetics of fragmentation and estrangement had become irredeemably reconciled

*A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the "Politics and/in Aesthetics" conference, hosted by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and the University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, 2005.

[1] Hal Foster's influential early collection of essays on postmodernity was, of course, originally published as *The Anti-Aesthetic* and later reprinted as *Postmodern Culture*.

[2] See in this respect Adorno et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* and Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*.

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to the logic of the market and consumer capitalism. Today the cultural landscape has radically altered and the terms of aesthetic conflict are no longer staged between realism and modernism, but modernism and postmodernism, and it is within this new conjuncture that I want to explore Jameson's own return to the politics and aesthetics of modernism.[3]

For the past 30 years Jameson's name has been so inextricably tied to the fate of postmodernism that his recent work on modernity and modernism – in particular, *A Singular Modernity* (2002) and *The Modernist Papers* (2007), but also his rather neglected book *Brecht and Method* (1998) – has been interpreted by some critics as a "retreat" from the cutting edge of contemporary cultural theory to politically regressive and imperialistic notions of modernity.[4] For some of us, however, Jameson's recent work marks a welcome return to what he always did best, writing about modernism. But why rehearse well-worn discussions over modernity and modernism today? The "Preface" to *A Singular Modernity* exhibits a marked weariness on Jameson's part to returning once again to all those old undesirable issues that it had been "one of the great achievements of postmodernity" to have discredited (1). It is not just the renewed interest in notions of modernity in popular political and academic discourse – from Tony Blair's "New" Labour to Anthony Giddens' Third Way – that concerns Jameson but, I want to argue, a much older "dispute in the politics and philosophy of history" (Osborne 66). What remains at stake for Jameson in these "undesirable" issues of modernity and modernism is the fate of socialism's emancipatory project in light of the seemingly irresistible triumph of global capital.

In this paper I also want to probe the absence from Jameson's work of two of the most influential studies of modernism from the Marxist Left, Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) and T. J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* (1999). For both Berman and Clark, modernism was inextricably tied to revolutionary praxis and there is an overtly elegiac and mournful tone in both their texts for the eclipse of that revolutionary tradition with the decline of modernism. It is arguable that Jameson's distance from the work of Berman and Clark – he does not discuss Berman at all in any of his major publications and Clark's more recent work only receives two minor footnotes in *A Singular Modernity* – can be taken as a useful critique that keeps alive the possibility of an emancipatory politics today. I want to suggest, however, that this is not the case and it is Jameson's own theorization of postmodernism that undercuts such a critique of Berman and Clark. Indeed, in the closing sentences of *A Singular Modernity* we read that what is required today is the wholesale rejection of the discourses of modernity for an "ontology of the present"; an ontology that will displace the thematics of modernity by the desire called utopia. But utopia, Jameson has written elsewhere, comes at a price, the suspension of the political. I will come back to this idea in my conclusion.

Interpreting Jameson's work in terms of breaks and returns has always been problematic and in one sense misses the point. He has been writing about modernity all along, we just somehow lost sight of it. In "The Existence of Italy," written in 1990, Jameson argued that if Marxism is a master narrative of the kind parodied and stigmatized by postmodernists, then it is a narrative with only one story to tell, that is, "the transition from feudalism to capitalism, a story that often bears the name 'modernity' in the Bourgeois disciplines" (226).[5] Furthermore, it is not just Marxism that seems to be obsessively pre-occupied with the *transition* to modernity, but modern historiography as a whole:

> If this is something like the primal mystery, … or the unthinkable, it becomes clear that none of these descriptions can be neutral or innocent, since all pass through our ideological attempts to think what remains for us (in the collective unconscious) the only true Event of history. "Modernization" is one word for that event, a word filtered through a certain kind of contemporary (and even technocratic) bourgeois ideology at a late stage in industrialization. (227)

Narrative, modernity, ideology, modernization, periodization, transition, complete industrialization, these are all terms familiar from Jameson's discussion of postmodernism as well as framing his present consideration of modernity and modernization. For Jameson writing about modernity and modernism inevitably involved writing about postmodernism; one can only write about modernism today, we read on the very first page of *A*

[3] Jameson has more recently returned to the reappraisal of realism in his extraordinary work *The Antinomies of Realism* where he rereads the notion of realism through a theory of affect.

[4] For a critique of Jameson's "return to modernism" see Zhang, "Modernity as Cultural Politics: Jameson and China."

[5] For a critique of the tendency to equate modernity with capitalism, see Anthony Woodiwiss, "Against 'Modernity': A Dissident Rant."

Singular Modernity, within the context of "full postmodernity" (1). T.J. Clark has observed that whatever we may think of the "post" in postmodernism, whether or not something really has changed, or turned away, or against itself, "a great deal depends, it follows, on getting modernism right" ("Present Crisis" 85–6). This is precisely what Jameson is doing in *A Singular Modernity*, getting modernism right in "full postmodernity." However much the blurb may describe *A Singular Modernity* as a "major new interpretation of the problematic," it is, in fact, much more of a summation of Jameson's long stated positions on modernism and modernity and, more importantly, I want to argue here, behind this of Perry Anderson's thesis in "Modernism and Revolution" (1984).

For free market social democrats, like Blair and Giddens, the concept of modernity is useful, ideologically speaking, because it contains within it the idea of modernization and thus allows us to once more entertain ideas of progress and development. But the concept also brings with it some rather unfortunate baggage, including notions of authoritarianism, repression, centralized planning, not to mention modernism's asceticism, phallocentrism, logocentrism, minimalism and teleology. We must distinguish, therefore, between older forms of modernity and what is being repackaged and resold to us today, that is to say, modernity without modernism. On the one hand, then, Jameson suggests that modernity is simply a code for global capitalism and, on the other, he suggests that it is an empty signifier, or to be more precise, what Lacan called *das Ding* – that elusive *Thing* which is nothing in itself and only becomes something retrospectively through the investment of desire by subjects (43-70). Consequently there is no correct use of the term modernity to be uncovered but so many ideological deployments of the concept, and this is the task Jameson sets himself in this recent book.

Four Maxims of Modernity

A Singular Modernity outlines four maxims for understanding modernity: first, we cannot *not* periodize; second, modernity is not a philosophical concept, but a narrative category; third, the narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity, as consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable, but can only be narrated through specific situations; fourth, no theory of modernity makes sense today unless it comes to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break. These four maxims are all familiar from Jameson's previous work and critical for his argument that postmodernism represents an intensification of the logic of capital rather than a structural or epochal break. I will take each of Jameson's maxims in turn before turning to the broader issue of modernity and history.

The problem with periodizing modernity and rewriting it as a narrative is that it tends to erase what is specific about the concept itself, its distinctive modes of temporality.[6] As Raymond Williams (1989) pointed out, the unique problem of locating modernism is its paradoxical tendency to shift in time. The modern designates the time of the present but as such it immediately slips into the past; consequently modernism always designates the time just before the present. In *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman attempted to circumvent this problem by defining modernity as a mode of experience, an "experience of space and time, of self and others, of life's possibilities and perils" (15) above all as a sense of "firstness," a sense of the new. For Jameson, modernity also designates the time of the present, now-time, and he suggests that we can accommodate its paradoxical temporal drift if we take the terms *modernity* and *modern* to be linguistic "shifters," that is to say, terms which have no specific referent but whose content shifts depending upon speaker and context. As one can never directly, immediately, experience the "now," modernity always brings with it a sense of the past, a time from which it has broken and which it has superseded. Consequently, the terms *modern* and *modernization* always bring with them some kind of periodization. Berman, for instance, gives us three phases of modernization; first, the early sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, when Europeans were just beginning to experience modern life; second, the period from the 1790s and the French Revolution until the end of the nineteenth century; finally, the twentieth century and full-blown modernity, when, Berman suggests, people lose touch with the roots of their own modernity. Clark also designates the 1790s and the French Revolution as the origins of contemporary modernity and modernism, with the end of the revolution designating the end of modernism proper (*Farewell* 52). Although the authors concerned highlight the problematic nature of periodizing modernity, it seems to be impossible to write about modernity and modernism without positing some point of origin. The crucial point here, notes Jameson, is not the arbitrary date that one assigns to the

[6] See Homer, Fredric Jameson and Cunningham, "The Anxiety of Returns," for further discussion of this point.

origin of modernity but the necessity of the gesture itself, the unavoidability of marking the past and assigning some point of rupture with it. Thus Jameson proposes his first maxim – we cannot not periodize – the terms modern and modernity inevitably bring with them the necessity of distinguishing them from the past and suggesting some kind of break with a prior historical period, the pre-modern, the Middle Ages, antiquity.

The inevitability of periodization paths the way for Jameson's second maxim, that "modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise but a narrative category" (*Singular Modernity* 40). One way of understanding modernity, suggests Jameson, is as a rhetorical effect, a rhetorical trope that dramatizes its own conditions of possibility. "The trope of 'modernity' is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms" (55). In this sense, narrative enables us to perceive modernity, not as a singular event, but as the cultural logic of a broader historical period. Jameson's rewriting operation was more fully developed in *Signatures of the Visible* through the dialectic of realism – modernism – postmodernism. There he proposed that we estrange the concepts of realism and modernism by rewriting them in reverse and viewing realism as a theory of praxis and modernism as scientific representation. Narrative dispels, once and for all, reductive notions of realism as a mere reflection or copy of reality and foregrounds the ideological function of culture in the very act of rewriting and narrating.[7] At this point, Jameson suggests, it might be better to abandon all attempts at formulating conceptual accounts of modernity and simply restrict it to rewriting previous narratives of the past. However, he himself does not take this option and proposes a third way of looking at modernity, that is, as representation.

Jameson writes that an account of the emergence of modernity as representation has the advantage of providing us with "a history without a subject or a telos" (44). He outlines three such narratives. First, we have what is often seen to be the inaugural moment of philosophical modernity, Descartes' *cogito*, and the emergence of modern subjectivity. In this account the *cogito is* representation, or more precisely, the representation of consciousness. Second, he presents Heidegger's two alternative theories of modernity: first, as the Cartesian break of representation and the emergence of the epistemological "world picture"; second, as the Roman imperial break that cut off the Greek experience of Being. Finally, Jameson presents Foucault's periodization from *The Order of Things* (1970) and the two moments of modernity in European culture as the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century and the industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The lesson Jameson draws from this *excursus* both validates his second maxim, that modernity is not a philosophical concept but a narrative, and provides him with his third maxim – consciousness, as with the lived experience of subjectivity itself, is fundamentally unrepresentable. Consequently, "the narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity (consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable)" (*Singular* 55).

If, one might legitimately ask, subjectivity and consciousness are simply too weak as categories to be useful in this rewriting of modernity, then why bother with them? Here we come back to the issue of periodization again. What each of the above theories of modernity raises but fails to address is the question of the "break," the transition from one period of representation or history to another. Indeed, this is not just a problem of modernity, but a problem for Marxism itself as "the most troublesome passage in Marx has to do with the emergence of a new mode of production" (77). What characterizes capitalism for Marx is the notion of "separation" and it is the notion of separation as "autonomization," argues Jameson, that provides the most systematic and rigorous model of the succession of modes of production to date, that is to say, Althusser and Balibar's notion of structural causality (273-308). Althusser and Balibar's solution to the problem of transition between modes of production was to suggest the co-existence of two or more modes of production simultaneously. Furthermore, they reversed the relationship between history and temporality, as the time of lived experience. History was no longer seen to depend upon categories of temporality but the different structures of temporality were themselves thought to be generated within the mode of production. Thus, Althusser and Balibar effectively removed the problem of transition from the theoretical agenda as Balibar's formulation "does not conceptualize the emergence as such; but it does suggest that periodization is not some optional narrative consideration one adds or subtracts according to one's own taste and inclinations, but rather an essential feature of the narrative process itself." (*Singular* 81)

[7] See Jameson, "Existence of Italy" (155-67), for an example of this rewriting operation in relation to film periodization, and Homer (118-25) for an extended discussion of this dialectic.

Jameson's excursus on representation and subjectivity, therefore, leads us back to the necessity of periodization and his fourth maxim – "No 'theory' of modernity makes sense today unless it is able to come to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern" (*Singular* 94). Here we come to the crux of the problem, but why one needs to go through the labour of the concept if the concept is indeed so degraded as to be worthless in contemporary discourse is another question. As David Cunningham notes, *A Singular Modernity* is actually more about postmodernity than it is about modernity, and that anxiety of returns that Jameson is so concerned with seems to "derive from a perceived threat to the contemporary critical standing of the concept of postmodernity itself … with which the fate of Jameson's own theoretical project is now clearly entwined" (41). I want to argue, though, that what is at stake here is a much larger question of the philosophy of history and not only of understanding the present but of the very possibility of entertaining an alternative future.

Marxism and Modernity

I mentioned above that *A Singular Modernity* makes no reference to Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*. Jameson has left this engagement to his long time friend and associate Perry Anderson and is happy, here and elsewhere, to restate the main arguments of Anderson's critique without directly engaging with Berman himself (*Singular* 134). Anderson was primarily concerned with what he saw as the subtext to *All That is Solid*, that is to say, its critique of a Marxian view of history. For Berman, Marx identified the contradictory dynamic at the heart of bourgeois society, its creative destruction. The great achievement of the bourgeoisie, according to Marx, "has been to liberate the human capacity and drive for development: for permanent change, for perpetual upheaval and renewal in every mode of personal and social life" (94). At the same time, however, capitalism destroys the very human possibilities that it creates, and this holds as much for the revolutionary class as it does for the bourgeoisie. With such a theory of modernity, argues Berman, what is there to stop the revolutionary community from dissolving itself into air as "Marx's communism might launch the liberated self into immense unknown human spaces with no limits at all" (114)? For Berman, the only certainty of Marx's dialectic of modernity is that it will melt into its own air.

It is this one-sided reading, as he sees it, of Marx that Anderson challenges. Berman extrapolates a universal progressive/regressive dialectic of development from the teleological vision of history outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*. For Berman, it is this notion of development as both economic and self-development that provides the historical experience mediating the economic processes of modernity with the cultural visions of modernism. As a consequence, Anderson argues, "the idea of modernization involves a continuous flow process in which there is no real differentiation of one epoch from another save in terms of mere chronological succession of old and new" ("Modernity" 101). Such may be "an accurate account of temporality of the market and of the commodities that circulate across it" but it does not account for revolutionary change (Anderson 101).

Contrary to Berman, Anderson proposes the Marx of the *Grundrisse* as "a complex and *differential* temporality, in which episodes or eras were discontinuous from each other, and heterogeneous within themselves" (101). What is important here, if we are to rescue Marxism's revolutionary project from the inevitability of its own dissolution, is that the historical trajectory of the Bourgeoisie is not a continuous process of creation, expansion and self-destruction but is "curvilinear": "Bourgeois society knows an ascent, a stabilization and a descent" (101). Thus, if we are to have any understanding of what capitalist development actually means we must *periodize* history, and the concept of modernization occludes rather than facilitates this understanding. Anderson's own attempt at clarification, however, also leaves open a number of questions concerning the relationship between modernity, temporality and history.

Peter Osborne has argued that what is at stake in Berman and Anderson's exchange is nothing less than a dispute within the politics of the philosophy of history. For Osborne, the key to the dispute lies between two possible meanings of the term "modernity": first, as Anderson uses it, as a category of historical periodization, and second, in Berman's usage, as a distinctive form of social experience. The key to the dispute lies, therefore, in the dialectics of the temporalization of history:

> There is something decidedly new about "modernity" as a category of historical periodization: namely, that unlike other forms of epochal periodization (mythic, Christian or dynastic, for example) it is defined solely in terms of temporal determinants, and temporal determinants of a very specific kind. (Osborne 68)

As a category of historical periodization, "modernity" plays a peculiarly dual role, it at once "designates the contemporaneity of an epoch to the time of its classification" and, at the same time, "registers this contemporaneity in terms of a qualitatively new, self-transcending temporality, which has the simultaneous effect of distancing the present from even that most recent past with which it is thus identified" (73). Anderson is correct to recognize the distinctive quality of modern differential temporality. His error lies, from Osborne's perspective, in having too undifferentiated a view of modernization and identifying the process of modernization with homogenization and mere chronological succession. What is unique about the temporality of modernity is its constitutive dialectic of homogenization and differentiation and "the way in which these are tied up, inextricably, with its *spatial* relations" (74). Modernity is based upon a constitutive differentiation between its own time and that which precedes it, consequently the very temporal structure of modernity itself dictates that it constantly re-establish itself on the basis of an ever receding and expanding past. It is at this point, Osborne argues, that the geopolitical significance of colonialism comes into the picture. The discourses of colonialism provided a series of criteria of "progress" through which the foundational temporal differentiation of modernity could be universalized, as "thereafter, the differential between itself and other 'times' was reduced to a difference within a single scale of 'progress,' 'modernization' and 'development'" (78). For Osborne, then, modernity is a distinctive form of historical consciousness, it is an abstract temporal structure that, from the vantage point of an ever-vanishing and ever-present present, opens up the possibility of a plurality of futures provided they conform to the basic logical structure of modern temporality. And this is what Anderson's notion of differential temporality and periodization fails to grasp:

> The cost of Althusser's conjunctural form of differential temporality is thus the impossibility of thinking the transition from one mode of production to another: precisely that "object" which it is the ultimate rationale of historical materialism to think – since, in the end, such transitions can be thought only as "breaks" or "ruptures" between different articulated sets of times. (82)

This is also the lesson, according to Cunningham, that Jameson's recent work on modernity has failed to take account of.

Empty Signifiers: Modernism?

Let me now turn to the question of modernism, as this appears to be the one area in *A Singular Modernity* where Jameson thinks the notion of modernity has some purchase. Immediately, however, Jameson raises all the same issues we have been discussing above in relation to modernity. One solution, he suggests, to the thorny issue of defining modernism is to identify modernity as a new historical situation, modernization as the process of getting there and modernism as the response to both. The problem with this is that it is too homogenizing and does not take account of the different national traditions of modernism.[8] It would be better to see modernism as essentially a by-product of the process of incomplete modernization (in terms of his periodization this is important, for postmodernism, of course, is the product of complete modernization). Again Jameson is following Anderson's critique of Berman here.

Against Berman's universalization of modernist aesthetic practices, Anderson proposes "a *conjunctural* explanation of the set of aesthetic practices and doctrines subsequently grouped together as 'modernist'" ("Modernity" 104). Modernism, as a cultural field, was triangulated by three decisive coordinates: first, the academicism of an older culture which it defined itself against, second, the emergence of new technologies of mass communication that fueled the imaginations of the futurists, constructivists and so on, and finally, the proximity of social revolution that gave modernism its messianic and apocalyptic character. Anderson's point, notes Jameson,

> [i]s not that the artists of the modern occupy the same space as these new social forces, nor even manifest any ideological sympathy or existential knowledge of them; but rather that they feel that force of gravity at a distance, and that their own vocation for aesthetic change and new and more radical

[8] Jameson is frequently criticized for working with a narrowly "Western" view of modernism. However, this criticism is difficult to sustain on the evidence of his own work where, for example, he discusses the different national traditions of modernism. See Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (302-313); "Soseki and Western Modernism," and "In the Mirror of Alternate Modernites." See also, in this respect, Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (3-14). I am grateful to Holger Briel for raising this issue.

artistic practices finds itself powerfully reinforced and intensified by the dawning conviction that radical change is simultaneously at large in the social world outside. (*Singular* 134–35)

For Anderson, these three coordinates disappeared with the onset of the Second World War to be replaced by a universal system of commodity production, consumerism and mass culture, a new conjuncture that he saw at the time as simply a twist in modernism's tail and only later came to theorize, following Jameson, as postmodernism. Famously, Anderson concludes his piece with the following assertion: "modern*ism* as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories … it designates no discernible object in its own right at all: it is completely lacking in positive content" (112). A genuinely socialist cultural practice, he suggests, would not insatiably seek the new but would multiply difference through a diversity founded on the far greater complexity of possible ways of living that any free community of equals would create. The vocation of a socialist revolution, in short, "would be neither to prolong nor to fulfill modernity, but to abolish it" (112–13). Significantly, this piece was written in 1984, before the social transformations of 1989 and Anderson's subsequent pessimism or disillusionment with Marxism's emancipatory project.[9]

In a similar vein, Jameson describes the ideology of modernism as simply a North American and cold war phenomenon that was retrospectively applied to everyone else. This ideology was virtually the invention of the art critic Clement Greenberg, whose passion to eradicate politics from the avant-garde and works of art is only matched by the equally passionate political commitments of the early avant-garde themselves. Whereas Greenberg was concerned with the canonization of Abstract Expression in the US in the 1950s, this project has shifted today, according to Jameson, from art to literature and especially the canonization of "high" literature in opposition to popular culture. Literature, in this sense, is itself the ideological product of late modernism and the cultural resistance, or more precisely cultural reaction, to the emergence of mass culture in advanced capitalist societies.[10] As Jameson puts it, "high literature and high art mean the aesthetic minus culture, the aesthetic field radically cleansed and purified of culture (which mainly stands for mass culture)" (*Singular* 179). Jameson is at pains to distinguish here between the critical and radical impulse of the early, or high, modernists and the institutionalization and conservatism of late modernism: "the ideology of modernism and of the autonomy of art is the theory of that practice we have called late modernism or neo-modernism, the survival and transformation of more properly modernist creative impulses after World War II" (197).

What we see in late modernism is a continuation of the characteristic features of high modernism but transformed through the new situation of postmodernism. If the high modernists were self-reflexive and self-conscious about the possibility of representation and art, they were so within a context in which an acknowledged position and role still existed for them as artists and for art itself. Today this social role no longer exists and late modernist reflexivity is little more than the self-consciousness of the artist as a modernist artist and of art as art. Today modernist art is little more than the cultural expression of a particular, university educated, class fraction:

> [the] canon is simply modernism, as late modernists have selected and rewritten it in their own image. Its "greatness" and timeless permanence is the very sign of its historical impermanence; and it is with this late modernism that postmodernism attempts radically to break, imagining that it is thereby breaking with classical modernism, or even modernity, in general and as such. (*Singular* 210)

If we have been talking about postmodernity all along, then why do we not just name it as such?

Getting It Right!

T. J. Clark has persuasively argued that a lot of what Jameson and Anderson have to say about postmodernism depends on whether or not Anderson got modernism right in the first place.

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[9] I cite two texts here, Anderson's sympathetic appraisal of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, "The Ends of History" and his editorial "Renewals" in the relaunched *New Left Review* in 2000, where he explicitly states that we should abandon any hope for a radical transformation of capitalism in the foreseeable future and replace it with a critical and unremitting realism. For an assessment of Anderson's increasing pessimism on the future of socialist politics, see Blackledge, "Perry Anderson and the End of History."

[10] Jameson first elaborated this dialectic of high art and mass culture in his seminal essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture."

> [T]he only sufficient answer to Anderson and Jameson would turn on a demonstration not just that modernism and postmodernism share "devices and features," but that their purposes, problems and objects are essentially the same – they stand in the same central, undecidable relation of ambivalence toward the main forms of modernity of bourgeois industrial society. ("Present Crisis" 90)

Clark draws into question all three of Anderson's coordinates suggesting that modernism was not so much a form of political insurgency, of the Left or the Right, but a set of artistic practices for testing out modernity's modes of representation. He also questions modernism's axiomatic relationship to new technology and the charisma of the machine. Finally, he questions the loss of political alternatives today as something specifically postmodern or new. Did not modernism, Clark asks, constantly and *constitutively* live with just such an experience of ending? In other words, Clark gives us an entirely different "situation" of modernism than the one sketched by Anderson and Jameson.

In particular, Clark criticizes Jameson's recent definitions of art as always containing within itself the capacity for self-transcendence, of becoming more than art. What this leaves out of the equation is the other side of the dialectic, that is, art's contingency and brute materiality. Jameson's view of modernism constructs it as a movement of transcendence, always awaiting another movement. Following Benjamin, Clark reads modernism as a ruin, as our own antiquity. Modernity is a ruin whose logic we cannot grasp today, and the forms of representation to which it gave rise have become unreadable. This is not because, as a ruin, that past has become irretrievable for us, on the contrary, the modernity which modernism prophesied has now finally arrived. What post-modernity mistakes, writes Clark, is "the ruin as the ruins of modernity itself rather than its triumph" (*Farewell* 3). Now there is nothing here that Jameson would disagree with, as far as I can see, especially as both critics draw on the work of Clement Greenberg to designate what counts as modernist art.[11] So where are the grounds for dispute? For Clark, modernism was linked to socialism and the radical critique of capitalism; negation is the key term here and the defining feature of modernist art. Modernism, in short, is inseparable from the idea of revolution. Similarly for Berman, modernism is associated with the values, visions and *critique* of the perpetual revolution we call modernization. What we now call postmodernism, or late modernism, may retain much of the imaginative playfulness of early modernism, but it has lost its critical bite (Berman 32).[12] What has been lost, in short, is the sense of socialist revolution, a sense of revolutionary transformation that Jameson wishes to displace through the desire called utopia. I will come back to this below.

As mentioned above, Jameson did not take the opportunity in *A Singular Modernity* to respond to Clark's text[13] and it has been left to other writers in the pages of the *New Left Review* to mount a critique of Clark. According to Malcolm Bull, Clark's view of modernism as resistance and negation is too simple and too general. Modernism was a much more disparate and local phenomenon, whereas modernity "characterized by the erosion of traditional ways and the rationalization of social life, has been global, continuous and inescapable" (Bull 96).[14] In this sense, modernism could never be said to be the culture of modernity in the same way that postmodernism is the culture of postmodernity. Moreover, modernism was not always in opposition to capitalism; both Italy and Japan, for example, had fascist modernisms. If socialism was simultaneously the expression and negation of modernity, modernism and socialism were rarely opposed to the same things. Clark's mistake is to take the mythology of modernism's revolutionary impulse and restate it again today. Contrary to this mythology of modernism and revolution, Bull argues that capitalism has had two cultures and not one, the first being realism, the second mass or commodity culture. According to Bull, modernism exists between these two cultures: "[m]odernists were not partisans resisting the present and pressing on eternity, they were negotiating the equally tricky but rather more mundane path between the two cultures of capitalism (102).

Modernism exists within this double fold, beginning where realism turns back on itself and ending where it turns into commodity culture. Seeing modernism as simply a fold within the history of realism, Bull effectively severs the link between modernism and revolution. That is to say, while modernism might have created local sites of resistance to capitalism, it was not in itself inherently revolutionary. Thus, concludes Bull,

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[11] See Andrew Hemingway and Paul Jaskot, "Review of *Farewell to an Idea* and *Icons of the Left*."

[12] Although Clark comes from a tradition of Marxist art criticism, he now sees socialism as implicated in the horrors of modernity and writes more from a position of Situationist or "anarchist individualism," what Hemingway and Jaskot define as "mournful ultraleftism," 270.

[13] Jameson has engaged with Clark's text elsewhere, see "From Metaphor to Allegory."

[14] Hemingway and Jaskot similarly argue that Clark overstates the role of negation in modern art (263).

for socialism "the disenchantment of the world has always held a utopian promise" (113) but this cannot be fulfilled by art. Bull is effectively restating Anderson and Jameson's position on modernism and postmodernism. By severing the link between modernism and revolution they hope to keep alive the possibility for a radical transformation of the present. But, as we have seen above, this leaves us with, on the one hand, the bland indifference of postmodernism and, on the other, the grim realities of a globalized market. These two alternatives, in Anderson's judgment, allow for no possibility of revolutionary change in the foreseeable future. Consequently, Anderson, Jameson and Bull seek to displace the politics of modernism with a utopian promise, indefinitely deferred in the future.

Suspending the Political

Utopia has long been one of Jameson's defining concerns.[15] What is new in his most recent theorization of literary utopias is that they emerge through the suspension of the political. Utopias emerge in the calm before the storm of revolution, and they require a certain distance from the political and daily life in order to be able to critique the existing order and describe the utopian moment. In this sense utopia is not a positive vision of the future but a negative judgment on the present:

> Its function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future – our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined. (Jameson, "Politics" 46)

Utopias come to us, as Jameson rather wonderfully puts it, "as barely audible messages from a future" that may never come into being ("Politics" 54).

But is utopia a term with any political resonance today in a world pervaded by postmodern cynicism? For Jameson it would appear not, and utopia is one of those concepts discredited by postmodernism. Symptomatically, Jameson concludes his article with a quotation from Marge Piercy's feminist utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time*, written in 1976, as the last wave of the revolutionary hopes of the 1960s were in decline and on the cusp of postmodernism. In a rejoinder to Jameson's piece on utopia, Anderson notes that postmodernism is much more susceptible to dystopian science fiction, of which we have seen so many great examples in cinema since the early 1980s. Jameson is right to see a flourishing of the utopian imagination in those moments of calm before the upheaval of revolutionary change, but he fails to acknowledge those equally great utopian works produced at the height of political struggle. As Jameson attempts to separate aesthetic practices from political praxis in modernism in order to displace it with a desire for utopia, he fails to accord it any political substance and prepares the ground for the apolitical world of postmodernity. But what, I would ask, was the slogan of the, now defunct, World Social Forums – Another World is Possible – or, the Occupy movement – We are the 99% – if not a rallying call to the revolutionary and utopian imagination?

Let me conclude by returning to the questions posed by Jameson in the late 1970s and ask if a new political aesthetic is possible today? Is the time now ripe for the "new realism" that Jameson then called for or is postmodernism simply it? As Jameson pointed out at the time, one does not have to take sides in such debates but rather understand the historical and social conjuncture in which they function:

> To take an attitude of partisanship towards key struggles of the past does not mean either choosing sides, or seeking to harmonize irreconcilable differences. In such extinct yet still virulent intellectual conflicts, the fundamental contradiction is between history itself and the conceptual apparatus which, seeking to grasp its realities, only succeeds in reproducing their discord within itself in the form of an enigma for thought, an aporia. It is this aporia that we must hold, which contains within its structure the crux of a history beyond which we have not yet passed. ("Reflections" 213)

It is precisely this impasse, I think, that still makes modernist aesthetics so politically interesting today. It is the very contradictions that modernism embodies and enacts – the refusal to surrender to the dictates of the market at the same time that it could not escape it, the critique of bourgeois humanist ideology of which modernism was itself a prime exhibit, the search for meaning in a seemingly anarchic and meaningless world – that makes it so exhilarating to read. Terry Eagleton has argued, contra Anderson and Jameson, that it is the very emptiness of the signifier, modernism, that instills it with value, "the very nebulousness of the word may

[15] See Anderson, "The River of Time."

be in some sense significant" (138). Modernism signifies, it signifies a "portentous, confused yet curiously heightened self-consciousness of one's own historical moment, at once self-doubting and self-congratulatory, anxious and triumphalistic together" (139). Whatever new political aesthetic emerges from the present historical conjuncture these are surely features we will recognize in it.

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