



Fredric Jameson and his Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

The present paper is about the notable literary and cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, who has been contributing continuously in the field of literary theory. This paper presents Jameson's distinctive vision of western culture's relation to political economy. He has meaningfully contributing to the domains of post structuralism and postmodernism. After 1983, Jameson turned his attention to the culture of *late capitalism*. Here, an effort is to understand the notions and concerns of Jameson and the development in his ideas. His oeuvre can be dividing into three parts. This paper charts his exploration of capitalism in the mode of economic production, where postmodernity is an unchallenged, a long voyage of capitalism. This also helps to understand Jameson's distinctive view of dialectic and its role in understanding certain concepts in its unfashionable time. It may possibly underscore the major thematic concerns in his oeuvre.

The “desire for Marx” can therefore also be called a desire for narrative, if by this we understand, not some vacuous concept of “linearity” or even the *telos*, but rather the impossible attempt to give representation to the multiple and incommensurable temporalities in which each of us exist.

(Fredric Jameson *Introduction to the ideologies of Theory*)

Fredric Jameson is the prominent literary and cultural Marxist critic in the English speaking world. He has written extensively on culture, art, literature, history, film studies and postmodernism. He has been writing since last six decades, produced 25 books and published many articles. His devotion to writing articulates his firm belief in Marxist theory. He exhibits the range and usefulness of Marxist thinking in evaluating and interpreting art and literature. He has got critical acclaim and reception widely. He was awarded the annual Holberg International Memorial prize in 2008 and also became the receiver of the Modern Language Association’ celebrated lifetime achievement award.

Jameson is currently Knut Schmidt-Nelson Professor of Comparative Literature and Romance Studies and the Director of the Centre for Critical Theory at Duke University. Jameson’s several key ideas are illustrated by his slogans. Among them the most famous one is “Always historicize,” it asserts the importance of history in the creation of work of art. Jameson’s versatility stems from the fact of varied influences on his thought and writing, among them can be counted the names of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Jean Paul Sartre. This also provides interdisciplinary to his *oeuvre*, ranging from art to philosophy and from cinema to architecture. Some of remarkable works are *Sartre: the Origin of a Style* (1961), *Marxism and Form* (1971), *The Prison House of Language* (1972), *Political Unconscious* (1981), *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), *A Singular Modernity* (2002), *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), *Representing Capital* (2011), *The Ancients and the Postmodern* (2015) and *An American Utopia* (2016).

Jameson has a great interest in interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary; he has been revealing an astonishing variety of cultural phenomena. He discusses capitalism, globalization, utopianism and new media. Jameson has received rather generous critical reception, because of his pertinent theoretical insights. Stevens Helming (2001) in his article ‘The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: writing, the sublime and the Dialectic of Critique’ provides a critical overview of Jameson as a vanguard in the three decades old discipline of critical theory. Architectural Theory Review (2009) in its published article on ‘Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Postmodernism and Architecture’ eulogies Jameson as the originator, who introduced the subject of architecture and its relevance in critical theory. Jameson pays great notice to style, forms, interpretations and language. Terry Eagleton, the famous British Marxist asserts that:

There is surely no doubt that Fredric Jameson is not only an eminent critic but a great one, fit to assume his place in roll-call of illustrious names stretching from Edmund Wilson, Kenneth Burke, F. R. Leavis and Northrop Frye to I. A. Richards, William Empson and Paul de Man. Even this is to limit the judgment to Anglophone colleagues only, whereas the true field of comparison ranges much more widely. No literary scholar today can match

Jameson's versatility, encyclopedic erudition, imaginative brio and prodigious intellectual energy. In an age when literary criticism, like so much else, has suffered something of a downturn, with forlornly few outstanding figures in the field, Jameson looms like a holdover from a grander cultural epoch altogether, a refugee from the era of Shklovsky and Auerbach, Jakobson and Barthes, who is nonetheless absolutely contemporary. (p.123)

In the present study, an effort will be to understand the notions and concerns of Jameson and the development in his ideas. His oeuvre can be divided into three parts:

1. Early Jameson (Before 1983),
2. Jameson as a Theorist of the Postmodern (After 1983 to 1998), and
3. Recent Jameson (After 1998).

First Phase-Early Jameson (Before 1983)

Jameson in his early writings is concerned with Marxist method that is a revitalization of our understanding of Marxian thought. He attempts to comprehend art in relation to politics and economics. He has worked extensively in the fields of literature and philosophy, and revealed a non-conformist attitude while reading against the grain. He wrote his thesis on the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre entitled *Sartre: The Origin of a Style* (1961). In this phase, Sartre was his role model, which is evidenced from Jameson's attitude to hegemonic order of styles, forms and trends in writing. While explicating Sartre's philosophy and his ideas on consciousness, opposition between subject and object and his interest in dialectical thinking, Jameson opines that history progresses through failure to success. Jameson does not focus on any one work of art in particular; rather he focuses on individual's subjectivity and consciousness. He clarifies that no study can escape from the influence of history and prevailing cultural patterns in society.

In his early phase, Jameson was attracted by Sartre's non conformism, especially his foreword to Frantz Fanon's work and the upholding individual freedom. It is through the dialectics of man and universe that Sartre explains that man is formed of ideological forces, active in his environment. Sartre did not privilege history but Jameson differed with Sartre regarding the position of history. According to him Marxism possesses twin codes- it is objective in terms of perpetrating history. It is subjective in the sense of the presence of class struggle; these codes operate dialectically. Sartre opines past can be rendered dynamic through its association with "event". As he states, consciousness never "is" anything, but is always an action.

Marxism and Form (1971) is Jameson's pioneering work that is devoted to the study of dialectical thinking and Marxian critical theory. It appraises Western Marxism as Jameson grapples with ideas ranging from art to philosophy, to theology. He uses Marxian key concepts to reveal the affinity of Marxism to art. First he privileges form over content, but later he explains how both exist in a dialectical relationship. Jameson discusses a number of dialectical Marxist thinkers like Gyorgy Lukacs, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Johann Christoph Von Fredrich Schiller, Ernst Bloch and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Dialectical thinking can be seen as *reversal* that helps to unravel the complexities of art, philosophy and life. Adorno's *Negative Dialectic* is meaningfully discussed by the

Jameson to explicate various contradictions in philosophy, since society comprises of antagonistic relations. He blends the Hegelian and Marxist ideas to form his views on form and content. Jameson's reading of Bloch, Marcuse and Benjamin's helps clarifying his understanding of dialectical thinking. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson is of the view that Marxism is a mental operation to unravel the inner truth of existence and the dynamics of dialectical thinking.

The Prison House of Language (1972) is the reappraisal of Structuralism and Russian Formalism, where the writer debates upon the role of language in the crystallization of thought. Jameson opines that a philosophical comprehension of structuralism can be seen as 'mystic of intellect'. Structuralism has been largely employed in linguistic models. But it can also help clarifying and present reality, where Jameson is deliberating upon a satisfactory to the Kantian dilemma of the "the unknowability of the thing in itself". He alters the signification through "transcoding", whereby attempts is made to signify through new codes new codes to arrive and to position meaning in an altered epistemology. This appraisal seems to have far reaching implication, since he attempts to go beyond the notion of sign and semiology. Jameson also agrees with the concept of differential meaning and situating in synchronic rather diachronic. He goes on to discuss arbitrary the nature of the linguistic signs and reappraises the idea of automatization and *defamiliarization* of the Russian Formalism. These are the areas where Jameson's *The Prison House of the Language* holds immense promise of the course, there is a usual problem of structuralism of being not able to take history into consideration, where Jameson is of the opinion that historical and dialectical thought can glamorise mental categories into the historical to present elaborate and significant new.

Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist (1971), attempts to reread the works of British novelist through his depiction of modernism, where he thinks of Lewis as a "protofascist", who meaningfully focused on the interconnections between Fascism and Modernism. He employs the insights from Marxism, Freudianism and structuralism and formalist method to highlight contemporary and ideological stances as also to comprehend the strange and the hostile in Lewis's writing. He sees Lewis's narratology as imbued with tension with a ruin to present the dilemma of modernism. Jameson's attempt is to understand the relation between modernism and fascism and gaps and discontinuities in the binaristic signifier and signified. He also understands the ideological stance of a work of art and to analyze the strange and hostile energies in Lewis's writing. According to Jameson, "Lewis's use of aggressive deconstruction of metaphors is an expectancy of post structuralist thought."

The Political Unconscious (1981) presents Jameson's insights that "the political perspective is the horizon of all reading and interpretation." He creates a therapeutic method, whereby he attempts to cure the literary theory that he does not regard as healthy enough. He also reconciles Marxism and Freudianism for the purpose of comprehending political stance and in textual strategies. Here, Jameson attempts to unravel the veiled and to gauge discontinuities in the narrative. He privileges history and also employs Derridian 'deconstruction' to dismantle the conventional and repudiate false consciousness. Here, Page Marxist notion of meditation is examined in a newer way, where he alludes to

“transcoding.” According to Jameson, textual process and symbolic meanings are decoded and reified. He studies the ideas of Lacan and Althusser to understand the working of the ideology in greater detail, where no writer is rid from the ideological fervor. It is the introduction itself, Jameson said, “Everything, in the finale is political,” where the idea of ideology is seldom glimpsed; but it is always present. Althusser in his *A Letter of Art* explained that it is that makes us see the genesis and significant meanings borne by language.

Second Phase-Jameson as a theorist of Postmodernism

After 1983, Jameson turned his attention to the topic of postmodernism and in the culture of ‘late capitalism’. His inaugural essay entitled “*Postmodernism and Consumer Society*” was his first effort at theorizing phenomenon, where he discussed the transformation of reality into images and fragments into perpetual presents. He goes on to say pastiche and fragmentation came to larger presence in the postmodern. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, studies the postmodernism dialectic as both catastrophe and utopia in an attempt at its ‘cognitive mapping’. Ernst Mandel has extended into the cultural domain, where postmodernity is an unchallenged domination of capitalism. Jameson has blended the views of Althusser’s *Structural Causality*, Lacan’s *Schizophrenia* and affected from Deleuze, and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipal*.

This is Jameson’s most quoted and debated work on the subject, where he has seen the phenomenon as depthless and ahistorical, discontinuous and schizophrenic. He has attempted to characterize the nature of cultural production in the second half of the twentieth century, the era of late capitalism. He also presents various other characteristics of postmodernism, new economic growth and Communications Media and the spreading of capitalism into even nature and pre capitalist spaces that also includes high prospects. He also comments on the utopian as phenomenon of capitalism.

Late Marxism and *The Cultural Turn*, both contemplate on postmodern. *Late Marxism: Adorno or, The Persistence of Dialectic* (1990) is the rereading of Adorno to see the viability of Marxism in the contemporary Adorno stresses on totality for Marxian critique of “identity”. Jameson repudiates it and deals with it dialectically. He goes on to discuss historical conscious through reification and Jameson attempts to fix coherence, associates social totality identitarian thinking. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (1998) is a pondering on Postmodernism and on art, architecture and culture and the end of history.

The Cultural Turn peruses upon postmodernism, art, architecture, culture and history. He presents space to the “cultural turn”, appraising through Marxian ideas that concrete forms of labour have been rendered as abstract, where the basis of everything is money exchange relation.

Third Phase-Recent Jameson (After 1998)

Jameson, of late has shown his great interest in interdisciplinary, going on to write on cinema and film criticism. It is in the *Signatures of the Visible* (1990) and *The Geopolitical Aesthetics* (1992) that he explains the notion of *political unconscious* through films. Jameson goes on to read existing philosophies in *A Singular modernity*

(2002), there are through is once again Jameson's contemplation of modern and modernity. He attempts to understand the use of modernism as aesthetic concept, with no coherent ending of modernism. Jameson is of the opinion the postmodernism is inexplicable without modernism, where modernism was incomplete modernization of the west, but postmodernism is thorough reification and commodification of the present.

Valences of the Dialectic (2009), presents detailed insights into dialectical method and offers scholarly reading of the thinkers from Derrida to Deleuze, Rousseau to Hegel. They stresses upon the praxis of future socialism, promoting Hegelian dialectics at a time when it was out of fashion to do so. As according to him, anti-dialectician employ similar method without knowing that they are doing so. Jameson's contemporary concerns are with a survey of history and procure materials to grasp present and future alternatives. Jameson feels that the world can be transformed and understand through dialectical thinking, philosophy and aesthetics, are re-examined dialectically as also the relevance of the idea of Sartre and Lukacs. Jameson presents a triad of nomenclature of the dialectic and presents it as the sole way to see and grasp the monolithic and universal to wear toward singularity. He even comprehends Aristotle's concept of *peripeteia* as classical dialectical reversal.

Jameson provides three names of *dialectic* as (i) Dialectic, (ii) Dialectics and (iii) Dialectical. This tripartite process helps us find the un-representable and universal. The established categories in the poem, of "I" and "We" are contradictory. Jameson's *Valences of Dialectic* explores the limitation of Hegelian *Logic*. He states that dialectic is still operative in contemporary theory, viewing Hegel, not as a thinker of One, rather of Two (not in yin or yang or binaristic sense). Because in Hegel's idea a thesis is a thesis and its opposite is antithesis, and both lead to synthesis. Jameson questions this idea by saying that every idea and value is contradictory in itself. As "I" is not one's something personal or independent, but it is created and regulated by the dominant ideology, so "I" is in itself a thesis and antithesis. "We", on a surface level represents communion but this is not our union. It is legitimized by the power. He iterates Deleuze's idea that every sign has differences; there is no collectiveness at all

Jameson in *The Ancients and the Postmodern* (2015) investigates industrial and monopoly capitalism. The work is of reminiscent of his earlier publication namely *Representing Capital* (2011) where he deliberated upon the "totality" of capital, which he viewed a prerequisite for rapid growth in all areas of economy and culture. However his 2015 study is rather ambiguous on this count. He has given the concept of bare life by which he meant the present day technocratic life, which is replete with dissatisfaction. Jameson went on to see bare life of the contemporary as having both merits and demerits. Of course he is a sincere in his appraisal of what he sees as the core concern in the present day world. Jameson went on to publish *An American Utopia* (2016) last year, wherein he insisted on adopting utopian thinking to see the present as different as and better than the past. He also goes on to offer the vision of the "future", although it is idealistic rather than real.

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