

Mapping Postmodernism Through Comodity Circulation
By Ella Harmon

Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, written in 1984, seeks to characterize a moment in which the commercial sphere has dilated to such a degree that we see it transposed over all others. The necessarily expansionist capitalist mode of production reaches increasingly into every aspect of contemporary life, from aesthetics to the state, collapsing all distinctions between previously considered independent sectors of society. In *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, we chart the postmodern as a cultural dominant through five central processes; a rise in depthless, the decentering of the subject, the waning of affect, the disappearance of history, and increased spatial aimlessness. These features are understood by Jameson as a series of "semi autonomous and relatively independent traits," which indicate, yet do not privilege, a loss of historicity.¹ The postmodern is said to seize on uncertainty as its first clue, looking "for events rather than new worlds."² It registers breaks in its fabric yet struggles to place itself within a larger system of development. Estranged from history and bereft of spatial coordinates, the problem of cognitive mapping arises. This paper acknowledges Jameson's five features of postmodernism and traces them to the capitalist mode of circulation as a *primary* defining factor in their formation. I argue that the project of mapping cannot be conducted effectively without a structural base or locus of relation from which we may seek to apprehend the whole. In the capitalist mode of exchange, we not only find a set of logical tendencies which allow us to orient Jameson's five features of postmodernism within global capitalism, but are given a tool by which we may map further aspects of our cultural landscape.

¹ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Introduction IX

² Jameson, Introduction VII

I: Capitalist Circulation & Expansionism

“What we must ask ourselves is whether it is not precisely this semiautonomy of the cultural sphere which has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism...”³ Capitalism is structurally unable to subsist beyond the premise of its own expansion. The general formula for capital begins with commodity circulation, with the inversion of the direct form of circulation, C-M-C, into M-C-M'. “We do not need to look back at the history of capital’s origins in order to recognize that money,” the universal commodity, “is its first form of appearance.”⁴ The capitalist form of circulation contradicts Karl Marx’s previously developed laws of commodity exchange by failing to adhere to an exchange between commodities of distinct *quality* and equal *quantity*.⁵ Qualitatively, the money put into exchange by the capitalist is no different from the money they seek in return. The capitalist’s only escape from this tautology (M-M) is the addition of a greater sum of the money commodity on the other side of their exchange. It is from the perversion of the exchange relation that the constant need for valorization arises. With the completion of each circuit, the need for valorization arises anew. The change in the value of money transformed, however, cannot take place within exchange itself.

Capital cannot arise from circulation, but “it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation.”⁶ The capitalist purchases the commodity at its value and must draw more value from it in circulation than they put into it, meaning a change must take place within the use value of the commodity initially purchased. The sale of alienated labor power allows the capitalist to purchase a commodity with a special capacity for valorization. The limit of labor’s commodity’s value is determined by the value of a worker’s physical means of subsistence prior

³ Jameson, 47

⁴ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, 247

⁵ This problem has roots in the confusion of use-value and exchange-value by bourgeois economics.

⁶ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, 268

to its entrance into circulation; however, its use-value “consists in the subsequent exercise” of laborer power.⁷ The capitalist mode of exchange thus provides the capitalist with every incentive to reduce the portion of time a laborer spends reproducing themselves, not only by lengthening the working day, but also by increasing the efficiency of productive forces at large, which involves the advancement of instruments of labor, the consolidation of monopolies, the cheapening of goods, and the global expansion of Capital’s industrial reserve army.

II: Postmodern Culture

The five central cultural developments of postmodernism are best mapped as a series of direct consequences of estranged labor as such. The infinite valorization of money is the process by which “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally.”⁸ Postmodernism is not a “waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement;” it is the extension of an economic logic that began in the Sixteenth Century.⁹ As Jameson notes, the underside of the expanding sphere of capitalist inclusion is always an institution of more brute forms of exploitation. Primitive accumulation and ongoing U.S. imperialism considered, any semblance of an outside to ‘late capitalism’ appears to feed it just the same. This statement can be taken both historically and geographically.

The characteristic *depthlessness* of the postmodern begins here, with the inability to see beyond a sphere of commercialization that absorbs all. Unlike Van Gogh’s modernist paintings of peasant shoes, Andy Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes offer no spacial context for the viewer. Their flatness mirrors that of a camera negative, leaving the mere ghost of a mass of homogeneous commodities against a nondescript backdrop. Warhol’s shoes are “debased and contaminated in

⁷ Marx, 277

⁸ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pg. 4

⁹ Jameson, pg. 1

advance by their assimilation into glossy advertising images.”¹⁰ The immediacy of a life which leapt at us from Van Gogh’s peasant shoes, their texture, their wear, and their utopian gesture towards a “world of agricultural mystery, of stark rural poverty” vanish into the white halls of a museum with Warhol. A shoe is no longer an object that carries the peasant through their daily life; it is an object to be worked on through the fragmentation of an assembly line, an object to be sold for an abstract value larger than the sum of its parts. In an advanced capitalist society, the shoe’s context is irrelevant. This is not to say that the use value of the commodity is inessential, but rather that it is obscured into quantitative oblivion. The lack of depth seen in Warhol’s art is compensated by repetition. For every screen-print-style portrait of the deceased Hollywood star, Marilyn Monroe, there are at least twenty-two more.

“The need for money is... the true need produced by the modern economic system, and it is the only need which the later produces. The *quantity* of money becomes to an even greater degree its sole effective attribute: just as it reduces everything to its abstract form, so it reduces itself in the course of its own movement to something merely *quantitative*. Excess and *intemperance* come to be its true norm.”¹¹

Commodity fetishism emerges as the central subject of Warhol’s work. The products of human labor that walk into relations with each other and people fittingly walk across the walls of The Whitney Museum. Labor, the mediating metabolism between humanity and nature, has turned into a double process of estrangement. Alienated from nature and oneself, the object of labor becomes “the objectification of a man’s species life,” and humanity’s advantage over animals is turned against itself.¹² Species life becomes a means to one’s individual existence, leading to the ultimate “estrangement of man from man.”¹³ By 1980, the relations between individuals have become so thoroughly material that all of the hands and feet which once touched Warhol’s high

¹⁰ Jameson, pg. 9

¹¹ Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 93

¹² Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 76

¹³ Marx, pg.77

heels vanish into the mystique of their commercial appeal. The postmodern artist grasps at the social relations between commodities because there appears to be nothing else left.

This brings us to the *decentering of the subject* in postmodern culture. The so-called ‘death’ of the bourgeoisie ego culturally represented corresponds to an economic erosion of individual essence. “The end of the distinctive individual brushstroke”¹⁴ can be read as a concession to the fact that “all men are alike in the face of capital.”¹⁵ We have established how capitalist circulation creates a situation in which quantity is more ontologically significant than quality. The alienated worker is “nothing more than personified labor time,” just as the soul of the capitalist “is the soul of capital.”¹⁶ The role of the latter is to increasingly close the gaps in the former’s laboring hours in order to maintain their being.¹⁷ The Capitalist exerts pressure on the worker in negotiations about the working day through an excess of unemployed laborers waiting to replace them.¹⁸ With the necessity of collective labor, the worker’s time becomes a mere aliquot part of a collective working day, and labor is divided such that a worker is employed in a highly specific and repetitive trade.¹⁹ The deskilling of work through the division of labor reinforces a worker’s dependence on the capitalist for their means of subsistence and ties their being to a machine-like functioning as well as literal machines.

Individuality has little utility in a capitalist mode of production beyond its increasingly ideological marketing campaigns, which tend to appeal to abstract identities rather than the nuanced personality. In postmodernism, we see a shift of modernist styles into “postmodernist codes” or “badges of affirmation” for a particular brand of personhood.²⁰ Developed capitalism

¹⁴ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 15

¹⁵ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, 364

¹⁶ Marx, 342

¹⁷ Marx, 458

¹⁸ Marx, 786: “Modern industry’s whole form of motion therefore depends on the constant transformation of a part of the working population into unemployed or semi-employed ‘hands.’”

¹⁹ Marx, pg. 441

²⁰ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 17

allows those with the most power to rule anonymously as “faceless masters” from offshore accounts and tightly held economic strategies. Capitalist oligarchs have no need to disclose themselves as complex subjects with intentions like the rulers of earlier times. At most, they transform themselves into images that can be sold in the form of celebrity.

Beyond utility, the increasing unavailability of personal style is tied to a true crisis of meaning. The existential preference for quantity over quality is extended by the power of the hoard to transform the social character of its holder. The universal property of the money commodity, to purchase everything, endows its owner with its omnipotence.

“Money’s properties are my properties and essential powers... Thus, what I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness – its deterrent power – is nullified by money...”²¹

Unlike in aristocracies, a capitalist culture assumes that anyone can acquire the power of money if they manage to position themselves in the role of the capitalist. The erasure of social barriers by increasingly large sums and their presumed attainability gives rise to a collective crisis of personality. It is the limits of a thing that give it meaning at all. Conceptualization entails restriction, yet with money, all categories of understanding can be transcended. It seems no coincidence that the term ‘existentialism’ as a category arrives on the scene just a few years before Jameson’s indication of the beginning of postmodernism, nor that existentialism’s origins take off during the expansion of capitalist industry across Europe in the mid-1800s.

Unbounded from essence, intensities seem to roam free, encountering bodies of their own accord. Jameson initially approaches the *waning of affect* by way of the human figure in Edward Munch’s *The Scream*, a modernist cry of alienation and isolation in the ‘age of anxiety.’ The dramatic gesture escapes the subject as a desperate externalization of inward feeling. The

²¹ Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 104

painting “underscores its own failure” by employing an auditory mode of expression incompatible with its visual medium.²² In 1893, art was already grappling with a lack of space for the subject in an increasingly capitalist Europe. As postmodern culture replaces the alienation of the subject with its sheer fragmentation, affect becomes an untethered mass of gestures memorialized on the abstract expressionist canvas. In postmodernism, the scream remains, but there are no lungs behind it, as Kafka once said. With no self present to do the feeling, a kind of ecstatic expression gets taken up. We see this in the psychedelic idealism of the 1960s, the cocaine consumerism of the 1980s, and in the disembodied rave scene of the 1990s. In a postmodern culture that repudiates depth models, such as the dichotomy between the inner and outer, it is a dream to lose oneself in the mass. Today, hyperpop is a great example of how aesthetic currents of de-subjectification and the waning of affect have expanded with capitalist global financial hegemony. This contemporary development in music is plagued by a despair that can only be communicated through sheer excess. Death drives run from nobody to everywhere at eighty to one hundred beats per minute. High-pitched, spastic melodies sample and mock every aspect of consumer culture, from advertisements, to popular music, to 911 calls, to political speeches, without levying any specific critique. Nothing is off limits, and no singular voice is responsible.

Irony is a tool of the postmodern which allows for the imitation of dead styles without any commitment to their cultural context. Jameson discusses “pastiche” as a kind of blank parody indicative of the *disappearance of history*. Hollowed of personal style, postmodern producers of culture turn to the typified past for inspiration. Events are turned into their images. Flattened in this way, moments past can be collaged onto one surface. “The new spatial logic of

²² Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 14

the simulacrum” modifies historical time.²³ Where in the decentering of the subject, we observed quantity passing into quality, here the dialectic flows in its reverse direction.²⁴

“The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them... The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of *being* into *having*...”²⁵

Returning to the simple M-C-M’ formula, being in contemporary society is inseparable from the exponential accumulation of wealth. Unlike in the C-M-C circuit, capitalist exchange begins anew in the same place each time. Where once a bible was exchanged for money in order to be exchanged for beer, money is now exchanged for a bible in order to be exchanged for money. The next cycle imports nothing from history besides the simple addition of money which is nulled as soon as the next circuit begins. Any relic of the previous transaction comes readily integrated into the present moment and cannot be parsed out from it.

Attempts to retrieve a past beyond existential memory expose the contradiction between postmodern culture’s fascination with nostalgia and its access to genuine historicity. “Pastness” for the postmodern is a stylistic connotation that reduces history to aesthetic stereotypes. A history of appearance displaces a history of human relations. *Zeitgeist* narratives handpick attributes of dead cultures and integrate them into the collective memory. Every aspect of a period films, from setting, to costume, to framing conspires to hide signs of contemporary life while approaching the subject in a way that is relatable to the present viewer. The postmodern appropriation of old-fashioned images gives way to new formal inventions. Take, for example, the current trend of color grading digital movies to appear like celluloid by converting the color

²³ Jameson, 18

²⁴ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, pg. 423: “...the correctness of the law of Hegel discovered in his *Logic*, that at a certain point merely quantitative differences pass over by a dialectical inversion into qualitative distinctions.” Pg. 424, Footnote 5: “by the simply quantitative addition of CH₂ to the molecular formula, a qualitatively different body is each time formed.”

²⁵ Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, pg. 5

space to suit a camera of a bygone era, adding grain and halation, tinting the shadows blue, and pushing highlights yellow, among other minute visual time stamps.

It is not convenient to remember human history in all of its depth when attempting to naturalize an exchange relation that is only a few hundred years old. “The whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations lies in this forgetting.”²⁶ Bourgeois relations are smuggled into natural laws by abstracting economic relations, such as free trade, from a particular social body in history. We would be hard-pressed to find a postmodern film that represents, say Shripad Amrit Dange’s depiction of the primitive communism in ancient Indian societies. “Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced.”²⁷ The dual character of the commodity is advantageously missed by classical political economy in favor of abstract value.²⁸ With society’s sights on money, the form of exchange overshadows the use value which upholds it. Money, although in one sense being the form of appearance of the human relations behind it, is not a mere symbol. Money has real content and, like every other commodity, must be put into relation with other useful commodities to express its magnitude of value.²⁹ The properties of things are activated by their relations to other things, but they do not arise from the relation alone.³⁰

Abstract representations of the aesthetic past transposed on top of the current world endow “present reality...with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage” and distract from the

²⁶ Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse*, pg. 85 - The Externalization of Historic Relations of Production

²⁷ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pg. 18

²⁸ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, pg.174: “It is one of the chief failings of classical political economy that it has never succeeded... in discovering the form of value (another commodity’s natural form or use) which in fact turns value into exchange value.”

²⁹ Marx, pg. 185

³⁰ Marx, pg. 149

terror of commercial sovereignty.³¹ Pistache compensates for the postmodern impossibility of experiencing history in an active way, creating a superficial refuge from the current moment. Genuine historicity, by contrast, orients one within the current reality by noticing structural changes embedded in moments of revolution across time. “The history of the productive organs of man in society... organs that are the material basis of every particular organization of society,” renders temporary the iron clutches of the current socioeconomic order.³² A critical history feels as distant as capitalism’s inevitable defeat within a postmodern aesthetic that resorts to gleeful dissociation as a coping mechanism for its alienation.

The flattening of historical time into space through its objectification makes it difficult to orient oneself temporally and clutters the spatial plane. Postmodern culture is “increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic” despite its economic organization around efficiency.³³ Capitalist laborers are kept in the dark as to what portion of their working day serves to reproduce their labor force. By contrast, the corvée system spatially divided a feudal vassal’s time spent in service to his lord from that spent maintaining himself. Alienated from time, the very form of the inner, postmodern subjects skate across a flat landscape composed of fragments.”³⁴

The instruments of labor used in different epochs “indicate the social relations within which men work.”³⁵ Tools are invented within the paradigm of a particular mode of production and simultaneously work to sustain it. Technology “give(s) capital a power of expansion which is independent of the given magnitude of the capital actually functioning.”³⁶ An implement

³¹ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pg. 21

³² Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, pg. 493

³³ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pg. 25

³⁴ Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, pg. 180: “Time is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our self and our inner state... Time is the *a priori* formal condition of all appearances in general.”

³⁵ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, pg. 286

³⁶ Marx, pg. 754

distinctive of global capitalism is the computer, whose smooth, reflective surface houses a network of complex connections. The machinery of capital prior to our moment had “visible emblems” which gave “tangibility and figuration to the motive energies of that earlier moment of modernization.”³⁷ Modernist work by painters like Diego Rivera and Fernand Leger seized on these landmarks of industry as a way of connecting technology with the agency of the human body and redirecting machine energy towards the goal of a revolutionary society. The screen does not possess the same capacity for representation as steam engines and smokestacks.

“I want to suggest that our faculty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something deeper, namely, the world system of present-day multinational capitalism”³⁸

The decentralized organization of industrial reserve armies, supply chains, and commercial zones demands a standardized global communication system. Computers in the age of the internet have an omnipresent yet spatially compressed power that reaches most human eyes through simplified visual codes. This technology reaches equally into hours of reproduction as it does production. Upon its glass surface, the whole world can be rendered as a two-dimensional image. Financial management systems, social lives, memories, and whole occupations are squashed onto one increasingly portable surface. No matter where we are in physical space, a decentered global network travels with us.

The *spatial aimlessness* characteristic of postmodernism shows itself in architecture. Jameson takes The Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as an example. Its mirror-paneled exterior brings a view of the surrounding city to its very surface. The ‘glass skin’ of the building distracts from the structure itself, while its circular walls distort the surrounding location, resulting in a peculiar placelessness. The hotel has three entrances, none of which resemble a

³⁷ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 36

³⁸ Jameson, 37

traditional hotel lobby, and all of which are unmarked. The interior mimics the business of the city itself, though contained in a kind of “hypercrowd.”³⁹ The top floor features a revolving view of the city framed by the windows that distorted it outside. The only signed coordinates provided within the four symmetrical towers of the hotel point its visitors to a shopping mall. The Bonaventure Hotel’s aesthetic cannibalization of the city itself allows little escape from its setting. The turbulent emptiness of an overstimulating commercial environment is mimicked by this space of relaxation as though it has never tasted anything else. John Portman, architect and real estate developer, is emblematic of a capitalist ‘sphere’ which has expanded to produce culture itself.

II: The Project of Mapping

Taken together, depthlessness, the decentering of the subject, the waning of affect, the loss of historicity, and spatial aimlessness, create a situation that scrambles an individual’s ability to map their relation to the whole. Human activity has been absorbed by capital at every turn, undermining society’s rational functioning. Even forms of resistance are aestheticized and repackaged as selling points by companies multinational corporations like Doc Marten, Pepsi, and Gucci. Jameson proposes a new hypothetical aesthetic of *cognitive mapping* as a way forward, given the inability to return to aesthetic practices belonging to a historical situation that is no longer ours. Disalienation in a traditional city entails a “practical reconquest of a sense of place” which can be retained in individual memory.⁴⁰

Cartography, as a science and art, demonstrates the need for a tool that mediates between one’s local and the totality. Precartographic ‘maps’ worked more like itineraries than later maps, indicating only the information relevant to a particular journey or path. The invention of the

³⁹ Jameson, 40

⁴⁰ Jameson, 50

compass added a new dimension to the map, which carried key existential data. It pointed out one's relationship to the totality. With this data, cartographers gained the ability to construct an abstract geographic whole corresponding to unseen parts of the whole. Given the temporal and spatial dislocation of the postmodern subject, the tool employed to map the swollen sphere of capital must be one unhindered by the absence of historical and spatial data points. I propose the formula of capitalist circulation as our tool of mediation. Special attention must be paid to the laws that regulate a system if one is interested in mastering it, a lesson learned to be taken from the compass's observance of the Earth's magnetic field.

Not just stylistically, and not just historically, can the postmodern be comprehended in its expanding completeness. The new space of postmodernism "stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium."⁴¹ New perceptual habits must be acquired in order to navigate this "mutation in built space itself."⁴² Taking continued awareness of the form of capitalist circulation as our sixth sense would open up a new way of orienting oneself within the entropic economic whole. By tracing the relation of postmodern phenomena back to the mode of circulation, we begin to order the fragmented mass. This would also impart a new existential data point for many by revealing the economic motivations which dictate central parameters for individual life. Similar to the globe, the spherical structure of which makes it clear that there are no true maps, the circuit of commodity exchange shows a continuity of repetition that the straight arrow of history can only allude to.

Marx's argument in *Capital* can be misread as a historical one, when its basis is really a formal investigation. The historical development of capitalism is a question of economic "laws themselves, of these tendencies...working themselves out with iron necessity."⁴³ This is the

⁴¹ Jameson, 38

⁴² Jameson, 38

⁴³ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, Preface to the First Edition, pg. 91

manner in which “the country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed, the image of its own future.”⁴⁴ Aristotle came very close to Marx’s understanding of the money form in recognizing that ‘5 beds = 1 house’ is indistinguishable from ‘5 beds = a certain amount of money.’⁴⁵ However, he does not recognize how unlike things can be comesurable. The historical relevance of this issue for Marx is one of social form. Since Greek society was founded on slave labor, the equivalence of all kinds of labor escaped Aristotle, thus blinding him to the concept of value.⁴⁶ The “necessity of successive determinate orders of social relations” shows itself here as a logical one.⁴⁷ As aforementioned, the beauty of M-C-M’ as a tool for orientation within the context of postmodernism is that it offers a form of socioeconomic organization that can be understood prior to historical examples.

III: Objections

One possible objection to the primacy of capitalist circulation in mapping the postmodern is the concern that consolidating an entire culture into a pervasive economic formula might enclose us in a “terrifying machine,” as Jameson critiques Foucault of doing.⁴⁸ The result being paralysis in the face of capitalism’s scope. An argument can certainly be made for the importance of resistance in Foucault’s work, even though its oppression takes center stage. Discipline arises in response to an ever-present threat of collective revolt, which makes it advantageous to individuate, isolate, rank, and monitor the public. In our case, however, the capitalist mode of circulation avoids this fear on two counts. First, it is being argued that the postmodern is best mapped through its dependence on capitalist circulation, not that the postmodern is synonymous

⁴⁴ Marx, pg. 91

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics Book V*, pg. 287-9

⁴⁶ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, pg. 152

⁴⁷ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, Postface to the 2nd Edition, pg. 100

⁴⁸ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 5

with all contemporary cultural production. Capitalist circulation does seem to dictate the movement of culture at large, but it does depend on an outside, primarily for purposes of primitive accumulation. There are however still exceptions to even this, such as the North Sentinel Island in the bay of Bengal, which remains in complete cultural isolation. The recognition of capitalism as something that is expanding implies that there is a place for it to go. Furthermore, it assumes society to be “no solid crystal, but an organism...constantly engaged in a process of change.”⁴⁹ Second, even if capitalist circulation was all-pervasive in a literal sense, there would remain the freedom to invent new ways of seeing which inform rational action. Paradigm shifts, such as the interjection of the proletarian point of view into political economy, can produce revolutionary movements with material consequences. Viewing postmodernism through the capitalist mode of circulation is a potential way out of the cultural stalemate that our moment appears to present.

Another possible objection might be a claim of expressive causality, given that postmodern culture is being understood as a consequence of capitalist circulation. Expressive causality is related to problems of periodization for Jameson, as “any rewarding use of the notion of a historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization” to express “some unified inner truth.”⁵⁰ One danger is a reduction to a kind of ‘master narrative’ or ‘inner essence’ used to explain other parts of the whole in question. Jameson indicates an expressive causal tendency to move from a particular collective history to the destiny of a particular individual.

Jameson’s diagram of expressive causality in a narrowly economic Marxist structure illustrates the mode of production as the ultimate determining factor in other levels such as

⁴⁹ Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume 1*, Preface to 1st Edition pg. 93

⁵⁰ Jameson *The Political Unconscious* pg. 27

culture, ideology, the juridical, the political, and the economic. The argument of this paper on the other hand, does not take place within a moment where such ‘levels’ exist in isolation. Mapping culture through capitalist circulation is not an issue of expressive causality because the modernist spheres of society have imploded. Transposed on top of one another, we need not mediate ‘between’ levels by assimilating hierarchical them into one another for identity affirmation.⁵¹ Mediation must take on new meaning here as we are not dealing with the symbolic but the real structure of a whole.

The final possible objection addressed here is a historical one. Given that the capitalist formula for circulation is centuries old, why didn’t postmodern culture develop until ostensibly the 1950s? The answer to this involves an initial denial of the expansionist nature of capitalism on the part of the modernist bourgeois. In works such as Baudelaire’s *Fleur de Mal* and Balzac’s *Girl With The Golden Eyes*, we see a fantasy of carving out a sphere of privacy apart from commercialism, an ideal already actively collapsing. In *The Girl With The Golden Eyes*, De Marsay hides away in a room built for love with Paquita, a place constructed such that not even the loudest scream should not escape. In the end, it is revealed that the opening chimney was never considered and that the place apart had been porous the whole time. De Marsay’s failed escape from day-to-day consumerism is foreshadowed earlier by De Marsay’s preconception of his own impending adventure as that of a character in a stage play. Already in the early transition from merchant capitalism to industry, De Marsay is incapable of seeing himself for much more than a role. No matter how much the couple dreams of running away to “the country where one lives in the midst of a nation of slaves, where the sun shines ever on a place which is always white,” their arrival there is impossible from the beginning.⁵² While Marx was noticing that once

⁵¹ Jameson *The Political Unconscious*, pg. 32

⁵² Balzac, Honoré de, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, pg. 70

England reached a certain level of industrial development, it must spread throughout the continent, European modernism clung to a disappearing world.

6. Conclusion

The capitalist formula of circulation shows in the simplest illustration possible that existence within the capitalist mode of production is synonymous with the infinite valorization of value. From here, it is easy to understand why the once-separate spheres of modernism have been enveloped by the economic. The tactics employed by capitalists to squeeze ever-more surplus value out of the labor commodity result in an estranged global population, through whom postmodernism becomes the cultural dominant. Developments such as the rise in depthless, the decentering of the subject, the waning of affect, the disappearance of history, and increased spatial aimlessness each share an intimate and particular relationship with the demands of capitalist circulation. “How urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap into the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration” are questions whose answers begin with the population’s lack of tools to express their experience of a socioeconomic landscape that consumes them.⁵³ By looking to the laws of capitalist expansion, we can begin to remap the individual’s position in relation to a decentralized network of global exchange.

⁵³ Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 33

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