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The promise of a new cultural periodization: Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism*

According to Fredric Jameson, understanding cultural history or, more broadly, history as such, is based upon specific diachronic sequences. Certain categories are isolated in such a way as to set them apart and place them in a diachronic relation to others. The best-known example of absolutisation of historical categories is the Nietzschean distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In the Polish literary and historical tradition, the flagship example of such an operation is Julian Krzyżanowski's sinusoid.¹ Krzyżanowski divided the history of literature into two periods. One of them were (a) classical epochs i.e. rational, based on knowledge and reason (Antique, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Neoclassicism) and the others were (b) romantic epochs: irrational, looking up to faith and sensitivity for their foundations (Middle Ages, Baroque, Romanticism, Neo-Romanticism [Art Nouveau]). Accordingly, he claimed that literary history is being made up of alternating classical and romantic epochs, forming the famous sinusoid. This periodization concept is based on the extraction of certain categories from the historical continuum, in this case, categories derived from romanticism—and their reification. Once isolated, the opposition classicism vs. romanticism seems to breathe life and motion into history, it is enough to simply choose the right examples.²

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¹ J. Ziomek, *Epoki i formacje w dziejach literatury polskiej*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 77 [4] (1986), p. 29.

² It has been a vivid experience for me when during my first Polish language and literature class in high school my teacher drew Krzyżanowski's diagram on the blackboard. What was significant was that she treated Krzyżanowski's concept with a certain wariness, but she simply did not know or was unable to present other approaches allowing to capture history of literature as a whole. A few

Is it possible these days to find a comprehensive narrative encompassing the entire course of history and forming an interpretive framework applicable both to texts from the distant past as well as to more contemporary works? Fredric Jameson's works from the last few decades seem to point to an affirmative answer.

Already in *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson attempted to demonstrate that every diachronic construct and every periodization involves a methodological choice (with its own determinants), and is not a neutral act of "pure reason", where the categories applied are obvious and equally valid regardless of the place and time. Ultimately, the spatial, temporal, personal and ideological connections that ensure the cohesion of an era, epoch, period, phase, moment etc. are unverifiable. All such "common denominators", all that allows to—as if at a touch of a magic wand—put a sign of identity on everything placed over the fraction bar, is based on a decision dependent on the point of view and initial assumptions, adopted more (or less) consciously. The adequacy of such a choice, which decides whether we perceive something as continuation, repetition, or rather a radical breakthrough or novelty, cannot be confirmed by facts. Our interpretation of events or facts as different or similar in some respect(s) depends entirely on the initial decision.³

According to Jameson, periodization does not reveal any objective limits. Cultural boundaries are formed in a manner similar with the one observed in the case of borders between states: their position is to a certain extent motivated by the existence of natural barriers, such as mountains, rivers, seas, deserts etc.; in the cultural universe the so-called historical events serve as their counterpart. Most often, boundary lines of historical periods were established as the aftermath of moments of plunder, conquest, carnage, international conflicts and peace treaties. Thanks to millions of cartographic reproductions, which are initially purely conventional, they quickly become almost a law of nature, one worth shedding if not always blood, then at least entire oceans of ink.

One of the prominent syntheses of history of the Lower Silesia region and the city of Wrocław,⁴ attempting to replace the historiographic narrative of rivalry between the "Polish" and the "German" with the narrative emphasizing the traditionally multinational character of the city, shows the whole region as an arena where conflicting ambitions of various dynasties, great historical characters and later nation states clash. This seemingly "local" history in which Lower Silesia becomes a multinational melting pot, passed from hand to hand, presupposes a deeper narrative about history, equating it *tout court* with political history. Periodization thresholds are the boundaries of periods of political domination in the region of various dynasties or states. All in all, this allows to achieve at least three "structuring effects", highly desirable in the current political climate. Firstly,

years later I had the opportunity to take part in a series of scientific meetings with participation of representatives of various cultural sciences. The discussion was devoted to interpretation frameworks that could be used for various cultural texts—and as can be guessed, none of the suggested frameworks gained widespread support.

³ F. Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton 1971, p. 326.

⁴ N. Davies, R. Moorhouse, *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*, London 2003.

the local identity of the region's inhabitants is constituted as linked simultaneously to Poland and several neighbouring nations and cultures. Secondly, it allows for return to the natural as a kind of *telos*: return to the original state is achieved thanks to the transformation of a region until recently isolated behind the Iron Curtain into a bona fide part of supranational structures of the EU and the global market. Thirdly, history interpreted in such a manner can be easily coordinated with the analogous history of other countries and regions, creating the impression of a closed, coherent whole and totality. Understanding history as primarily political history points to the political agency as the "last determining instance" and has been an instrument of political legitimization for centuries. From the point of view of the reproduction of power and ensuring continuity of a state, this approach is completely justified and understandable.

The opposite end of the historiographic spectrum is occupied by the radical philosophical critique of the act of periodization itself, leading to an unequivocal conclusion: history is made up of discontinuities and disjointed episodes, it is simply—as put by Arnold Toynbee—"one damned thing after another". Jameson noted that this type of approach to the past, which in the postmodern times means a return to microhistory, local histories, studies of special cases, etc., is "a reversion to the chronicle as a mode of storing and registering information".⁵

Periodization, however, serves a double purpose. First of all, it is an attempt to learn about the turns in the real course of history, to find an answer to the eternal question: "what really happened?". What is more important from Jameson's point of view, however, that periodization is intended to organize the past in such a way that it becomes accessible and can be grasped by the subject attempting to know it.⁶ A periodization is, therefore, a convenient tool in facilitating understanding. In historiography, as well as in the history of culture, a political model of periodization is certainly "better" than mere chaos, a continuous flow of unconnected events, a chronological chronicle or individual testimony. It brings about a certain order to the messy material of the past and gives functional contemporary meanings to long-ago events. If we take the view that historical periodization is, after all, a step in the right direction in comparison with simple chronicling or post-modern pan-historicism, ultimately "We cannot not periodize".⁷

One of the main objections formulated against periodization is that it tends to blur the differences and promotes the idea of a period or epoch as a great, homogenous whole. In the traditional history of culture, periodization begins with the selection of a collection of texts from which a combination of ideas and a repertoire of aesthetic forms is extracted; these are to function later as features characteristic of a given epoch. The next step is to determine the turning point on the timeline, the moment of division into "before" and "after"; the transformative moment which determines that "before" and "after" differ from each other sufficiently

⁵ F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London-New York 2002, p. 29.

⁶ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Dwa zadania periodyzacji*, [in:] *Moralność i społeczeństwo. Księga Jubileuszowa dla Marii Ossowskiej*, M. Ofierska, M. Dietl (eds.), Warszawa 1969, p. 114.

⁷ F. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity...*, p. 29.

that one can talk about an epochal change. This is the point in time when the selected canon starts to differ enough from what came before that one can observe a qualitative difference. There is no doubt that the choice of such a turning point is highly arbitrary, as evidenced by endless discussions about which event was more important and which is of the utmost significance. The indication of two such threshold moments is enough to define the boundaries of a period and to construe an anthropomorphic, eschatological sequence interlocked with the neighbouring periods: rise-development-fall and its aesthetic equivalent: precursors-apogee/peak achievements-epigonism. Shorter units in cultural history are constructed in the same manner: epoch, age, movement, school, formation, a genius, a person.

In contrast to this, Jameson understands “period” not as a repertoire of characteristic forms, a stylistic homogeneity, universally shared worldview or a common moral code, but as a collection of various answers that culture gives to the given combination of economic, social and political circumstances.

One of the least controversial dividing lines in western historiography is the narrative of the birth of Enlightenment which came after a long period of “immaturity” and dark Middle Ages, industrial revolution within the agrarian world, transition from community (*Gemeinschaft*) to society (*Gesellschaft*), transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production, disenchantment of the enchanted world, and finally transformation of a traditional world into a modern one. Here we encounter a mechanism in which research disciplines and national traditions themselves form their own subject of research.

If an average contemporary Westerner went back in time and ended up in an equally average place in the Western world anytime between the 15th and 18th centuries, it would be, as Fernand Braudel argued, like moving to another planet.⁸ Macrohistorical narratives functioning in the academic circles are based on the fundamental difference between our “modern” era and the period before the defined “demarcation line”:

the contradiction which symbolically preoccupies much of modern historiography is the whole matter of transition, the emergence of the modern world or capitalism, the miraculous birth of modernity or of a secular market system, the end of “traditional” society in all its forms.⁹

Historiography pointed to various reasons for this transition; on the one hand, Hegelians emphasized the key role of ideas in this process, the Marxist tradition emphasized the importance of production, Max Weber—the fundamental importance of Protestant work ethics, the Annales school and the world-systems theory stressed the importance of exchange of goods; traditional, “high school” historiography focused, on the other hand, on the role of prominent individuals, dynasties and political organizations, Marshall MacLuhan saw the root causes of transformation in technology while Jared Diamond in his works highlighted the role of natural and environmental factors...

⁸ F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century. 1: The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, transl. S. Reynolds, London 1992, p. 27.

⁹ F. Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, London 1990, p. 227.

Of all these theories, according to Jameson, the most complete and endowed with a greatest explanatory power is the Marxist metasynchronous model of successive modes of production.¹⁰ Jameson treats this model as the most general and most abstract framework serving as a key to understanding the mystery of history: the issue of *transition*. According to him, most of the narrow, inter-disciplinary and closed national approaches can be reconciled with this fundamental “grand narrative” of Marxism. However, one must remember that the concept of a mode of production, although seemingly an article of faith, is just a perfect, abstract model created for analytical purposes and should be seen rather as a broad outline map allowing—for lack of better frameworks—to find out where the most important boundaries lie and how to talk about the course of history in the most general terms.

According to this model, the dominant in the sphere of production and the dominant in the sphere of culture remain in a feedback loop. The concept of a dominant does not assume the complete uniformity of a given period, on the contrary, it presupposes the presence and simultaneous existence of other—always subordinate—tendencies and characteristics. The state of dynamic equilibrium usually finds a spatial expression: in some areas, the dominant mode of production is omnipresent, in other regions it does not move beyond early stages, and can barely be observed under the layer of archaic—from the point of view of the dominant mode—relations. On the other hand, from the perspective of the peripheral areas, their own economy and culture in comparison with those of the “central” or “dominant” region (embodying the avant-garde of the transformation) would seem to be lagging behind, underdeveloped. It would need to catch up; specifically, what would need to be upgraded would be the mode of production, gradually shifting to the newly dominant one.

That is not all, however. Unbalanced development is visible not only geographically or horizontally, but also vertically. According to Jameson, looking closely at a certain place within a certain time frame, one will always notice tensions existing between different dominants, such tension between dominants emerges also at a scale of individual states, regions, cities, districts... Often this tension is dramatized by neighbouring cities, two generations of one family or indeed, by individual human existence and practically always—as Jameson argues—by individual cultural texts, because ultimately they are always about people and for people.

In the mid-19th century, for Marx and the vast majority of educated people, at the dawn of the most glorious period in history of the Great British Empire when the amount of statistical data was finally sufficient to analyze the roots of this state of affairs, it became clear that the fate of all Europe, and perhaps also the rest of the world is to follow the path of capitalism and industrialization with all their contradictions, vices and virtues.

¹⁰ Hunter-gatherer society; Neolithic agriculture, Asiatic mode of production; Antique mode of production; feudalism, capitalism; socialism. Any and all attempts to present the course of history as a logical whole refer to—for lack of sensible alternatives—more or less modified Marxist categories. See E. Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*, New Haven-London, 2011, p. 15; J. Szpak, *Historia gospodarcza powszechna*, Warszawa 1997, p. 32.

From the perspective of metasynchronous model of successive modes of production, there are no radical breakthroughs or dividing lines in history, but rather a continuous, slow restructuring process in which, when we look at the whole of history from a bird's eye perspective, what had previously been a secondary feature gradually becomes a primary one. However, when we take a close-up view of a given chunk of social or cultural reality, we can see that it is torn by violent clashes of various forces and tendencies.

One of the basic problems that had to be solved in modern times was the production of a new culture: architecture, literature, visual works, music, and later also popular and mass culture—all of which would affect the patterns of everyday life, behaviours, mental reactions, habits and thus facilitate coordination between the new forms of behaviour and the new forms of production and organization of labour. While the capitalist or modern revolution in the economic, social and political sphere has been extensively described by historians, the study of modern cultural revolution remains a relatively new framework for the humanities.

The privileged research material on the basis of which Jameson reconstructs cultural dominants in his works obviously comes of course from areas that were at the centre of civilizational transformations, namely from territories of contemporary England, France and the United States, and to a lesser extent from today's Germany. Nevertheless, it seems that it is possible to coordinate this narrative with the cultural history of the peripheral, dependent areas. Their inhabitants, especially those who wanted to consciously (the role traditionally reserved for the so-called elites) step onto the path of modernity, industrialization, greater efficiency and prosperity provided by new forms of organization and division of labour and exchange of goods, had to import not only machines, know-how and engineers, but also new "lifestyles", views, ideas and aesthetic forms. A novel was, according to Jameson, a modernization tool just like a railway or telegraph. It cannot be a coincidence that virtually all¹¹ significant aesthetic forms or literary genres cultivated in Poland in the last several hundred years have been imported from the West. Such state of affairs is characteristic for peripheral and semi-peripheral regions. In the context of Central Europe Jan Sowa wrote that

there are in fact no "own" forms here, because the cultures of this region have always been secondary: Kochanowski imitated Italian poets in the same way as Polish colourists copied the French painters. Practically in no domain of culture—whether we are talking about arts, economy, politics, science or even cuisine—can we find serious achievements that have had an impact on European culture, let alone global one. Whoever believes that this assessment is unfair should try to name examples of such innovations: an architectural style originating in Poland, a movement in painting dictated by the

¹¹ An exception to this rule is, firstly, *gawęda* (a genre of native Polish epic storytelling), though it is also a genre clearly nostalgic and anti-modern in nature. See K. Bartoszyński, *Gawęda prozq*, [in:] *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, J. Bachórz, A. Kowalczykowa (eds.), Wrocław, 2002, p. 314. The second exception is socialist realism imported from the Soviet Union, but based on certain passages from Marx—a German living for many years in London.

Hungarians, a literary genre invented by the Bulgarians, a scientific breakthrough made in Lithuania, a revolutionary political ideology born in Romania or even a Czech dish that is served in restaurants around the world.¹²

The concept of a cultural dominant functions in Jameson's works with a double meaning. In a more general sense, it applies to entire culture of the capitalist era and is tantamount to reification. Reification is a great label for the capitalist cultural dominant, as it is a mediating concept, allowing for coordination of two levels of analysis: economic and aesthetic ones. In the context of cultural revolution, Jameson uses the notion of reification in a sense that synthesizes Marxist and Weberian legacy, reification as Jameson understands it is connected with rationalization, specialization and a new division of labour introduced on a large scale in the capitalist mode of production.

In cultural research, reification carries meaning also in the epistemological sphere and concerns the mental and physical sensorium. Reification here means transformation in the perception of space that has occurred due to desacralization of the understanding of space in the capitalist mode of production:

For religious man, space is not homogeneous; [...] For religious man, this spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred—the only real and really existing space—and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it.¹³

The old, amorphic space of *profanum* and the sacred places filled with *sacrum* in capitalism are gradually transformed into a homogeneous space of infinite equivalence of the Cartesian coordinate system, one of the prevailing quantitative relations instead of qualitative. The spread of private ownership has cancelled the former communal forms of land ownership; together with industrialization and urbanization the traditional forms of collective rural life were gradually eliminated,¹⁴ and wage labour has made every single person substitutable from a systemic point of view. Reification means also a transformation of the perception of time.

The conflict, then, between the Church's time and the merchant's time takes its place as one of the major events in the mental history of these centuries at the heart of the Middle Ages, when the ideology of the modern world was being formed under pressure from deteriorating economic structures and practices.¹⁵

In the feudal period, historical time was identified with history of the Church, historical reflection was kept in check by rigid forms (*the fall of the golden age*); time was seen as a frozen eternity subjected to the order of cyclical liturgical rites.

¹² J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków 2011, p. 20. Similar remarks can be found in: A. Chmielewski, *Looking westward. The submissiveness of Polish philosophy*, "The Times Literary Supplement" July 23, 2000, pp. 15–16.

¹³ M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, transl. W.R. Trask, New York 1959, p. 21.

¹⁴ The share of urban population in total population of the world increased from around 10% in 1800 to over 50% in 2010 and is expected to grow steadily. See <http://www.newgeography.com/content/003249-what-a-half-urban-world> (access: 4.12.2018). Data in the paper quoted after: T. Chandler, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*, Lewinston 1987.

¹⁵ J. Le Goff, *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*, transl. A. Goldhammer, London 1980, p. 30.

The passage of time was determined by the rhythm of sunrise and sunset, vegetative cycles of nature, the cycle of human life and traditional holidays. It seemed that one of the best ways to counteract the whims of the weather and natural disasters that were decisive for the material existence of peasantry that dominated in the population (and many members of the higher classes living off their work) was to propitiate the divine judgments by means of prayer and superstitious, magical practices.

Ensuring more successful course of business and clarifying commercial transactions required a system of more accurate measurement of time. Installation of communal clocks measuring the time of secular work was the first step toward increasing labour efficiency thanks to the precise organization and planning of a working day. In the modern world, time is no longer cyclical but linear and infinitely divisible; its increasingly smaller intervals fit increasingly simpler activities in the space of a factory hall, and the passage of subsequent “portions” of time is marked by the chime of a clock signalling the end of the working day—and another daily wage earned.¹⁶ In short, since then time has become money.

Certainly, domination of the capitalist mode of production has resulted in irreparable losses in experience and in traditional fabric of society, but Jameson is far from being nostalgic about pre-capitalist social forms. There is no doubt that capitalism (competition, exploitation, technological race, etc.) has amazingly helped to subjugate nature, mobilized huge social forces and unleashed gigantic human potential. Life in an ancient *polis* or in the feudal world was much more brutal and unpredictable, it involved no less exploitation and oppression and still left the individual with a much smaller margin of freedom and social mobility. What distinguishes Jameson from the main, liberal current of modern thought is that he perceives (according to the cynics—naively) the era of capitalism and its immanent contradictions in a radically historical (and dialectical) manner, not as “the end of history”, not as a “now” which will be eternal, but as a stage that can both progress and regress; as the time of greatest opportunities and simultaneously of greatest oppression.

Jameson more often uses the concept of a cultural dominant in its narrower sense, in relation to the three fundamental periods in the history of culture in the capitalist mode of production. Realism, modernism and postmodernism are three interlinked cultural dominants within the capitalist mode of production. The names of individual periods in as used by Jameson suggest that we would be dealing primarily with a set of characteristic stylistic features. However, Jameson treats the notions of realism, modernism and postmodernism as labels for a certain cultural logic that goes hand in hand first of all with replacement of old forms of production with new ones, changes in relations of production, intensification of reification and commodification, development of technology, reshuffling of social strata, dynamics of state and class conflicts, and evolution of forms of trade in goods.

¹⁶ E.P. Thompson, *Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism*, “Past and Present” 38 (1967), pp. 56–97.

It would not make sense to use the notion of realism as a name of an epoch or a cultural dominant if it were not something original and deeply different from earlier and later expressions of artistic creativity or cultural activity in general. The originality of realism as a cultural dominant lies, according to Jameson, not so much in its aesthetics as in its cognitive pretensions. The formal structure of realism shows, Jameson posits, affinity with the rational, scientific perception of reality necessary for efficient functioning in the nascent market capitalism. This applies above all to the perception of time and space. In contrast to pre-capitalist aesthetic concepts, as well as modernism and postmodernism, realism is characterized by both a cognitive claim and at the same time a promise of aesthetic knowledge:

realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by programming their readers; by training them in new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject-positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds of action, but by way of the production of new categories of event and of experience, of temporality and of causality, which also preside over what will now come to be thought of as reality. Indeed, such narratives must ultimately produce that very category Reality itself, of reference and referent, of the real, of the “objective” or “external” world, which, itself historical, may undergo decisive modification in other modes of production, if not in later stages of this one.¹⁷

Jameson does not indicate any single point on the timeline, let alone any single date in which a realistic “change of guard” occurred. Every cultural revolution, and thus also a capitalist cultural revolution, is a long-term process in Braudel’s sense; in Western Europe its origin goes back to the 16th century and it continues until the end of the 19th century when tensions between the bourgeoisie, forces of capitalist accumulation and the blood aristocracy and landowners still survived. Outbreaks of the capitalist cultural revolution could be observed also much later. With the spread of the capitalist system into all corners of the globe, the global peripheries became the place of emergence of full-blown critical realism—with the first being perhaps the Russian Empire of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (at the time including the Kingdom of Poland) and later other parts of the globe.¹⁸

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, only portions of the physical and social space are technologically entirely modern. The new bourgeoisie that knows only the capitalist system is a very small percentage of the population. However, the memory of feudalism and *ancien régime* becomes more and more distant and blurred. As Jameson argues, the first contradiction faced by artists and creators in this period was the partial only modernization, with simultaneous existence of Old and New, and incomplete disappearance of traces of the old modes of production.

Modernists, i.e. intellectuals, scientists, artists, burghers or, more broadly, full-fledged citizens of the modern world, lived simultaneously in two temporalities: in a large industrial agglomeration and in an agricultural village. Citizens of the modern world, though they lived in large urban centres, still spent holidays in the countryside and interacted with the real peasantry. In fact, this space-dependent mental and existential experience allowed for the existence of some vague memory of the “agricultural” mode of production and evoked the original contact

¹⁷ F. Jameson, *The Existence of Italy*, [in:] idem, *Signatures of the Visible*, London 1990, p. 166.

¹⁸ J. Esty, C. Lye, *Peripheral Realisms now*, “Modern Language Quarterly” 3 (2012), pp. 260–288.

with nature. A typical, if one can ever use that term, writer of this period, like Proust or Joyce, came from the provinces, but lived and worked in a great metropolis. That is why, according to Jameson, under the surface of their urban experience of the lapse of time, modernists felt the pulsation of another, mysterious, deeper and more real temporality that could not be fitted onto the calendar and the clock face. It is this experience of the more profound time that the modernists have made into one of their main themes (let us recall Proust's madeleine or Hans Castorp's monologue in *The Magic Mountain*, trying to capture the moment between positions of the second hand on the clock).

Until a certain point in time, the most general framework for the incredible growth of enterprise productivity was the state and the national market. The dynamics of development of large enterprises and production requiring enormous and constantly increasing amounts of natural resources, as well as the development of infrastructure led to a more intensive search for raw material resources in various corners of the planet.¹⁹

According to Jameson, the capitalist cultural revolution with its corresponding realism began to take place in Western Europe in the 16th century. Exploitation of the colonies has played a large role since the very birth of capitalism and was one of the methods of original accumulation. Wars between colonizers for territorial gains from the very beginning of the so-called geographical discoveries were part of the respective imperial policies of European countries. Jameson suggests, however, that at the end of the 19th century conflicts began to emerge with particular sharpness for the simple reason that, to put it colloquially, there is steadily less and less pie to be shared; white spots on the world map are disappearing, and some of the old colonies are gaining independence. The quantitative problem is transformed, in a classical dialectic move, into a qualitatively new situation of confrontation between the colonial powers.

Jameson emphasizes that in contrast to the perspective of contemporary post-colonial theory, in the discussed period the word imperialism referred to the rivalry between national imperialistic states and not to the relationship between the metropolis and the colonies. Against this background emerges the second main contradiction in the modernist situation: contradiction between the existence of an exploitative colonial system, which was at the foundation of economies of European countries, and the total lack of awareness of this state of affairs in the metropolis:

colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world—very different from that of the imperial power—remain unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole. Unlike the classical stage of national or market capitalism, then, pieces of the puzzle are missing; it can never be fully reconstructed; no enlargement of personal experience (in the knowledge of other social classes, for example), no intensity of self-examination (in the form of whatever social guilt), no scientific deductions on the basis of the internal evidence of First World data, can ever be enough to include this radical otherness of colonial

¹⁹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, New York 1989, pp. 56–83.

life, colonial suffering, and exploitation, let alone the structural connections between that and this, between absent space and daily life in the metropolis. To put it in other words, this last—daily life and existential experience in the metropolis—which is necessarily the very content of the national literature itself, can now no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has its meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself.²⁰

According to Jameson, residents of the metropolis, including artists and creators, are not aware of the structural dependence between their everyday life and colonial exploitation. This fact is manifested in the lack of political consciousness in their texts. A radical aesthetic and epistemological doubt about the possibility of capturing society as a whole thus arises: it is this radical doubt that inaugurates modernism. In Jameson's opinion, in the face of this impossibility of presenting life in all its complex economic and political glory, the artists of that age—just as the classical realists did—resort to surprising formal procedures and derealization of content. The domain of the world of labour, history, and protopolitical conflicts could be perceived in modernism only as an inauthentic, undesirable remainder of realism.

For Jameson, further expansion of the capitalist mode of production led to almost complete elimination of pre-capitalist methods of production from the most developed regions of the world. At least in cities, inhabited now by a majority of the global population, both space and social relations have been completely modernized, which is tantamount to them being in the orbit of late or global capitalism. According to Jameson, since modernism was the response to the situation of incomplete modernization, postmodernism, in turn, is a reflection of complete modernization.²¹

the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known "sense of the past" or historicity and collective memory). Where its buildings still remain, renovation and restoration allow them to be transferred to the present in their entirety as those other, very different and postmodern things called simulacra. Everything is now organized and planned; nature has been triumphantly blotted out, along with peasants, petitbourgeois commerce, handicraft, feudal aristocracies and imperial bureaucracies. Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and nonsynchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the "West"). This is the sense in which we can affirm, either that modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete modernization, or that Postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself.²²

This new production of culture is managed by a somewhat different logic than before and in fact, we are dealing with the emergence of a new cultural dominant: postmodernism. In his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson enumerated qualitatively new cultural phenomena:

Andy Warhol and pop art, but also photorealism, and beyond it, the "new expressionism"; the moment, in music, of John Cage, but also the synthesis of classical and "popular" styles found in composers like Phil Glass and Terry Riley, and also punk and new wave rock (the Beatles and the Stones now

²⁰ F. Jameson, *Modernism and Imperialism*, [in:] T. Eagleton, F. Jameson, E. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, Minneapolis-London 1990, pp. 50–51.

²¹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham 1990, p. IX.

²² Ibidem, pp. 309–310.

standing as the high-modernist moment of that more recent and rapidly evolving tradition); in film, Godard, post-Godard, and experimental cinema and video, but also a whole new type of commercial film [...]; Burroughs, Pynchon, or Ishmael Reed, on the one hand, and the French nouveau roman and its succession, on the other, along with alarming new kinds of literary criticism based on some new aesthetic of textuality or *écriture*...²³

The above litany can be expanded with examples such as installations that have become typical postmodern “works of art” (together with equivalents of installations in the macro scale: museums and galleries), as well as products of the so-called mass culture: action movies, cyberpunk or recent spread of TV series with new, hybrid forms. The fact that we are dealing with something genuinely different, and that postmodernism occupies a completely different position than modernism in the capitalist system, is testified, according to Jameson, by two unquestionable contemporary phenomena.

Large numbers of people, from farmers and entrepreneurs in the first world to blue collar workers in the third world, have gained much easier access to it than ever before, consume culture on an unprecedented scale, and culture has become an element of everyday life. The largest contemporary art galleries are visited daily by veritable crowds, and films by Tarantino or Scorsese attract hundreds of millions of viewers to movie theatres. Modernist art was characterized by a strong distinction between popular and high culture, each of these categories served in fact as the *raison d'être* for the other. What allows us to see the above-mentioned cultural phenomena as postmodern is the blurring of this former dividing line between high and low culture.

The second of the fundamental phenomena allowing to distinguish postmodernism from modernism is the aesthetic exhaustion of modernism in postmodernist times. In the opinion of the citizens of the Third Republic or Victorian England, modernist works were something disgusting, scandalous, immoral and subversive. Modernism was essentially anti-bourgeois, anti-philistine and hostile to the market forces.²⁴ Since the 1950s, the most repulsive elements of modernism, such as formal complexity, sexual obscenity, psychological deviations, irrational motivation of the characters or even open political contestation have become part of Western “official”²⁵ culture and are now a form of a fixed convention. In postmodernism “anything goes”, even the most anti-systemic art such as rap is instantly integrated into the system of exchange of commodities and brings, in fact, the greatest profits; the most belligerent, outrageous and disgusting ideas are daily bread to postmodernists and good material for art galleries.

The periodization model provisionally sketched out here changes our perspective when looking at our own Polish culture. Trying to think in Jameson’s terms, one must realize that the Polish language is an ethnic language spoken in principle by one middle-sized nation and emigrants dispersed throughout the globe. To say that its non-ethnic range is insignificant would still be saying too much. Naturally, from a global perspective, our national culture is less influential than any of the

²³ Ibidem, p. 1.

²⁴ P. Anderson, *Modernism and revolution*, “New Left Review” 144 (1984), pp. 95–113.

²⁵ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism*..., p. 4.

national cultures emerging in the world's most powerful states. This translates not only to ignorance of it outside of Poland but also to a specific sense of inferiority among Poles. The complex of cultural inferiority certainly has many roots, but one of the most important ones is Poland's fall from the position of the largest country in Europe with extraordinarily rich Renaissance literature (and the original national ideology of Sarmatism) to a marginalized, highly degraded role as a result of historical turmoil.

The peculiarity of the history of Poland may be appreciated when viewed against the background of the history of Western European countries. Only a few decades of the last two hundred and fifty years can be considered as years of free cultural development under conditions of national independence. The modern era was marked by successive revolts against the imperial powers occupying the Polish territories, and culture at that time focused on protection against denationalization (with Poland's own imperial project as regards its so-called "borderlands" falling entirely to ruins). The system of social classes or social strata in Poland was unique in comparison with the West. For one than a hundred years the local political and cultural hegemon—numerous and relatively poor noblemen—were unable to free themselves from foreign domination. The peasantry, which constituted the majority of the population until the 1960s, was freed from second serfdom a hundred years earlier by the occupants themselves. The bourgeois class (largely German and Jewish) emerged slowly. Eventually, political and cultural hegemony fell into the hands of ethnically Polish bourgeoisie only after the Jewish population and Polish landowners were forcefully removed in the 1940s by the Germans and Soviets. The caricatural socialism, which has preserved many old patterns of culture, was introduced not by the native working class but by the Red Army; accelerated modernization was associated with huge cultural shock. The delayed entry into the orbit of global capitalism was at the same time the worst and the best that could happen to the country. On the one hand, the previously nationalized property was largely taken over and re-privatized by the elites of the previous system, and acquisition of cheap Polish labour for big business in Western Europe tore up the social fabric. Nonetheless, many absurdities of the previous system were liquidated, the infrastructure was rapidly modernized, the standard of living improved and the scope of personal freedoms expanded.

Adoption of this roughly sketched research framework is as interpretatively promising as it is problematic: it cuts across many of our beliefs, violates many taboos and rips apart interpretations that have pretty much been integrated with some of the cultural phenomena. Nevertheless, Jameson's intellectual project offers some constructive conclusions for cultural research. Firstly, national culture cannot be perceived as autonomous and independent, on the contrary, it is always entangled not only in internal class struggles but also in the centre-periphery relationship and its possible tensions. Cultural contradictions, both at the level of content and form, are a reflection of the economic situation of a given area and the degree of penetration by capital. In other words, they reflect the degree of modernization. Secondly, in the case of peripheral or semi-peripheral countries, it is never possible to break away from History; all texts, even those that seem to

be limited strictly to private life, can be read as a national allegory. Histories of individual fate are often an allegory of unequal development. Aren't Kraszewski's *The Magic Lantern* (*Latarnia czarnoksiężska*), *The Trans-Atlantic* (*Transatlantyk*) by Gombrowicz, films directed by Wajda or Koterski and the TV series *The Border* (*Wataha*) all about insufficiently modern Poland after all?

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**The promise of a new cultural periodization:
Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism**

Summary

This article discusses the problem of a possibility of finding a comprehensive narrative encompassing the entire course of history and forming an interpretive framework for cultural studies. The author presents Fredric Jameson's original concept of the history of aesthetic forms: realism, modernism, postmodernism and argues that it offers a promising interpretative framework for Polish studies.

Keywords: periodization, realism, modernism, postmodernism, Polish studies