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Aesthetics Today

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Fredric Jameson,
"Aesthetics Today"

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.3 (2020)**
Special Issue: **A Symposium on Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. Edited by Mathias Nilges.**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/>>

Fredric JAMESON**Aesthetics Today**

Nicholas Brown's new book is divided (not so neatly) between a long and dense theoretical introduction and a series of arresting analyses of mostly contemporary art works drawn from an impressive variety of fields: photography and film, the novel, music, TV: a substantial overview which tends to obscure its basic argument and to raise a host of conflicting questions.

Is it about the nature of art (or the nature of genuine art, a rather different problem)? or about high art and mass culture? about whether art can be political? or whether avant-garde art today has the same function as it did in the modernist period? These and other related aesthetic questions have been hotly debated at various moments of the recent past, and it is not hard to glimpse the ghosts of some famous debates and polemics rising up from time to time: the so-called Brecht-Lukács debate of the 1930s, for example, or that between figuration and abstraction in the immediate postwar period; along with the figures of Clement Greenberg and T.W. Adorno, or more recently Michael Fried, whose polemic on minimalism and recent conversion to photography as an art form are never

very far away from Brown's discussions, along with Roberto Schwarz's more political critique of Brazilian Tropicálism. Meanwhile, all the leftist and populist anxieties about the political possibilities of art are audible. In the middle distance, as are those of the Rancière-type aesthetes anxious to preserve a threatened "aesthetic experience."

The title, indeed, seems to slant the book in their favor with its scarcely veiled allusion to Adorno's theme-song ("the autonomy of the work of art"). So does the cover, actually, which seems to cater to popular or at least cultural-studies tastes, with its representation of Chanel No.5, an expensive, elite product whose "distinction" conquered a middle-class public. A handshake between Stravinsky and Walmart? Photography as advertisement? But the joke is on popular culture: for this is not the Chanel No. 5 box at all, but rather Viktoria Binshtok's 2016 reconstruction of it as a "work of art," the original Warhol copies promoted to a whole complex aesthetic process where, in the spirit of Thomas Demand, she has completely rebuilt the original object from scratch in advance of its reproduction.

This image fittingly sets the tone for Brown's take on the new aesthetic, which in the guise of a pastiche of mass culture offers a new onslaught on the commodity form at the same time that it seems to modify what counts as art today. Like modern philosophy, aesthetics was always the locus of a struggle between object (or substance) and process. Kant's original analysis of beauty, in the 1790 *Critique of Judgement* (published during the French Revolution, in which he was, incidentally, a fervent believer, even during the Terror) was followed almost immediately (1795) by Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, a far more openly political or anti-political work, in which, like Le Corbusier later on, he argues that the aesthetic transformation of the world will make revolution unnecessary.¹ Schiller's emphasis on play will sharply differentiate his notion of art from Kant's account of beauty (or the sublime) as the experience of a certain kind of object. A long and tangled history of a struggle between philosophers and artistic producers (and between beauty and play) leaves us again in a situation in which Adorno's seminar on aesthetics reaffirms the centrality of beauty, while the following generation, drawing on non-Western traditions, elaborates a range of theories of performance.

It is history which is then intersected by the emergence of mass political movements; and the questions of the political consequences and function of art complicate the purely aesthetic ones, inventing an opposition between formalism and realism (or representation) which raises the stakes and greatly enlarges the number of possible combinations. As for reality, it then chastens these abstract theoretical arguments and positions by evolving a society in which commodification increasingly

A poetics is a profoundly historical operation; and what we have before us are the materials of a poetics of postmodernity. This is a diagnosis, not a manifesto; and Autonomy gives us an uncomfortable way of thinking about art in an impossible situation. Let's not hand it over to those who want to make themselves comfortable in it.

¹ I here follow the popular reading of the Third Critique, which wrongly assumes it to be an aesthetic, a treatise on the nature of beauty; whereas in reality Kant is trying to establish the possible logical validity of judgments about beauty as such (irrespective of the content of such judgments or the nature of the beautiful artifact itself).

penetrates all the corners of daily life and spreads its logic over the globe, reducing art to a commodity in the process. Adorno's notion of art as the last refuge against the commodity form (along with nature and the Unconscious) has today come, to seem obsolete, thereby adding a whole new level of complexity to aesthetic philosophizing.

For now what is in question is not whether political art is possible but whether art itself can continue to exist in a world in which everything has become a commodity. Schiller's cultural revolution, revived in Marcuse's ideal of an essentially aesthetic post-revolutionary society, has now been grimly realized in the form of a caricature: Benjamin's vision of aesthetization (which he associated with fascism) taking shape as consumerism, spectacle society and simulation, image society, the consumption of information, becoming the final form of late capitalism. Kant's purposeless purpose now seems realizable only in the form of a commodity one cannot consume.

Despite one of Adorno's more counter-intuitive speculations, namely that the "autonomous" work of art resists commodification by taking on the form of the commodity itself, the more satisfactory solution invented and endorsed by the various modernisms posited an ideal of subversion, or undermining, transgression, negation, estrangement, depending on the nature of the art in question. This is something you can presumably achieve in the content—scandal, unwholesome revelation or exposure—as well as in the form. Still, the modernist versions of these effects were organized by avant-gardes; while in the world of the new museums and art galleries and of "contemporary" curatorial practice, as well as in the institutionalization of the modernist classics in the universities, these strategies no longer seem viable.

My feeling is that the deeper message of Brown's work lies in his demonstrations (across a wide range of the arts) that subversion still exists as an artistic possibility, but that it has been radically interiorized, like a virus within the no longer very autonomous work of art itself. The work must now construct its own generic laws in order to subvert them, as in Jeff Wall's false documentaries. But this means that the old distinction between high art and mass culture has also disappeared.

We can judge the possibilities by way of one of Brown's more paradoxical comments, on the way in which "*The Terminator* can be a work of art while *Avatar* is only an art commodity" (33). Inasmuch as both of these commercial films can share an identifiable genre (Science Fiction) and both are workmanlike products far enough from what has traditionally been thought of as "art," this statement might on first glance be dismissed as the expression of mere personal taste. Brown observes, however, that the time-travel narrative of which *Terminator* is an example has fairly strict generic laws and limits, beyond which it abolishes itself: the famous Bradbury moment in which the time-traveler steps on a prehistoric butterfly and changes the world leads to a universe in which otherness has ceased to exist—"I'm my own grandpa," as the old saw has it. The sub-genre thereby endows itself with laws which make it possible for James Cameron to "produce a solution to the problem of the time-travel film that at the same time produces the time-travel film as the problem to which the solution responds" (32). Its possibilities are "immanent to the logic of the genre rather than demands attributed to consumers."

(I actually think one could also make a case for the reflexivity of *Avatar*, in the way in which its gravity-defying flights comment on the Imax-designed three-dimensionality of its new medium; but let it pass.)

The deeper question raised by such analyses, and Brown's pathbreaking book consists of a stunning and varied series of them, lies in his failure to periodize all this and to situate his "social ontology of art" in late capitalism. The seemingly incongruous appearance of James Cameron among the art works whose "autonomy" is to be demonstrated here is enough to sound the knell of the old high art/mass culture opposition which was essential to modernism's self-definition. Spectacular conversions, like that of Michael Fried to photography, show that the traditional apologia for the canon no longer works in a situation of universal commodification; and that the appeal of the cultural-studies people to take mass culture seriously has unexpectedly been fulfilled by the high seriousness of contemporary art itself.

This is precisely what was meant, among other things, by the postmodern turn. One can avoid the term, as Brown, does here, only if one finds a better word for it, but one cannot avoid periodization. The widespread attempt, on the aestheticizing right, to substitute the slogan "contemporary" is a suspicious symptom in itself; one has to be the contemporary of something, a requirement that already demands some notion of historical trends if not of movements. Periodization certainly does not solve our political problems, but anti-periodization is just as surely a desperate attempt to flee them and to avoid confronting the evolution and future of capitalism in its current and historically original phase.

Let me add that to return to aesthetics as a discipline or field (along with the simultaneous "returns" to ethics or political science, or even Philosophy itself as a coherent subject in its own right) is equally regressive—a pastiche on the intellectual level on the order of all the other imitations postmodernism has tried on its now extensive life. A poetics, on the other hand, is a profoundly historical operation; and what we have before us are the materials of a poetics of postmodernity. This is a diagnosis, not a

manifesto; and *Autonomy* gives us an uncomfortable way of thinking about art in an impossible situation. Let's not hand it over to those who want to make themselves comfortable in it.

Author's profile: Fredric Jameson is Knut Schmidt-Nielsen Professor of Comparative Literature, Professor of Romance Studies (French), and Director of the Center for Critical Theory. Professor Jameson received his Ph.D. from Yale in 1959 and taught at Harvard, Yale, and the University of California before coming to Duke in 1985. He is the author many books, including *Marxism and Form* (1971), *The Political Unconscious* (1981), and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990, recipient of the MLA Lowell Award). His more recent works include *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013, recipient of the Truman Capote Award), and *The Ancients and the Postmoderns* (2015). His most frequently taught courses cover modernist literature and cinema, Marx and Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Zizek, as well as the modern French novel and cinema, and the Frankfurt School. Among Professor Jameson's ongoing concerns is the need to analyze literature as an encoding of political and social imperatives, and the interpretation of modernist and postmodernist assumptions through a rethinking of Marxist methodology. He received the 2008 Holberg Prize and the 2011 MLA Lifetime Achievement Award for his scholarship.