

Capitalism, modernism and postmodernism



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Eagleton's essay, *Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism*, was first published in the *New Left Review* in 1983 in which his post Marxist analysis of literature is exposed. He accounts for capitalism influence on art and its role. The capitalist and late capitalist areas have seen two new forms of literature appear: modern and postmodern. The modern, Eagleton explains, "In bracketing off the real social world, establish[es] a critical, negating distance between itself and the ruling social order" ^[1], while postmodern works accepts the fact that it is a commodity and thus conflicts between its material reality and its aesthetic structure. Capitalism has turned art into a commodity, and after analysing this claim, the characteristics of modern and postmodern genres will be analysed, so as to understand literature's role.

Eagleton explains how "High modernity [...] was born at a stroke with mass commodity culture." ^[2] Capitalism, as defined by Marx is the bourgeois doctrine by which they are in possession of the modes of production and manufacture goods, sold for a profit. According to most Marxist thinkers, including Eagleton, art became one of the goods that the bourgeoisie wants to monopolise, produce and sell. Art has become a commodity, dissolved into social life. Eagleton denounces the effects of late capitalism on art: "if the artefact is a commodity, the commodity can always be an artefact. "Art" and "life" indeed interbreed" ^[3]. Eagleton points out that that the "performative principle", which he redefines as the deliverance of goods, also applies to the capitalist conception of art. The use of "best seller" as criteria of advertisement for literature proves that literature has become a mass commodity good.

Art and literature have been influenced by some characteristics of late capitalism, such as virtual reality based on mass consumerism. Our society focuses on commodities sold to and ideologically integrated by the consumer: “ The commodity is less an image in the sense of a “ reflection” than an image of itself, its entire material being devoted to its own self-presentation” [4] . Art has become centred on its own image, role and place within society, because it has somehow lost its utopian role of mirroring the world, as if capitalism has perverted its function: “ If the unreality of the artistic image mirrors the unreality of its society as a whole, then it is to say that it mirrors nothing real and so does not really mirror at all.” [5]

Modernism and postmodernism are genres that emerged in the capitalist and late capitalist stages. They seem to have a common point: to focus on their role and concentrate on self identity. Eagleton uses de Man’s deconstructivist theory to define modernism: “ Literature defines and pre-emptly its own cultural institutionalisation by textually introjecting it, hugging the very chains which bind it, discovering its own negative form of transcendence in its power of literally naming, and thus partially distancing, its own failure to engage in the real.” [6] Modernism attempts at representing the real, but cannot do so and raises a paradox: it “ resists commodification” [7] but is nonetheless part of it, thus part of the social and cultural superstructure of society, which it denies. Denying being part of the capitalist mass commodity is the very core of modern failure to represent the real.

Postmodernism appears as a more cynical genre. Some of its features are the blurring of boundaries, pastiche and grotesque. It does not attempt to represent the world, since it is virtual, and would thus fail to describe it. Postmodernism seems to be very different from modernism on the ground that: “ If the work of art really is a commodity, it might as well admit it” [8] and “ become aesthetically what it is economically” [9]. Eagleton also suggests that postmodernism aims at parodying the commodity production, without adding any meaning in it; if meaning was added in the pastiche, making it parody, it would serve to alienate the self from reality, and according to postmodern thought, there is no reality it can be alienated from. All these features aim at emptying the social content of art.

Eagleton assessed the features of literature genres characteristic of capitalist stages, in order to draw a critical and theoretical approach of literature. He seems to focus on its ideological role, which is, more than its representational value, its only role left. Modernism deconstructs the “ unified subject of bourgeois humanism, draws upon key negative aspects of the actual experience of such subject in late bourgeois society, which often enough does not at all correspond to the official ideological version.” [10] Indeed, literature acts as an ideology denouncing ideology. Capitalist ideology professes that mass consumption finally fulfils libidinal desires, when in fact, as modernism exposes, takes us away from our self and reality, from the “ unified subject”—a harmonious society—that late bourgeoisie claims to have reached. Postmodernism, despite not embracing the reality of society, draws upon ideological inconsistencies of the bourgeois discourse, thus rendering itself ideological. It shows the incapacity of complying with

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the capitalist ideology: “ the subject of late capitalism is neither simply the self-regulating synthetic agent posited by classical humanist ideology, nor merely a decentred network of desire, but a contrary amalgam of the two.”

[11] The impossibility for the self to comply with all its obligations—familial, consumering, working—in the late capitalist society is denounced by postmodernism. It seems that Eagleton places literature at the centre of ideology, as a resistance to bourgeois ideology. De man explains that “ the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars and revolution” [12] ; literature is at the heart of our knowledge, ideologically built, and seems to remain so, decades after the end of ideology was proclaimed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Modern Criticism and Theory, a Reader. Ed. D. Lodge. Eagleton, “ Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism”. Longman: London and New York, 1988.

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Footnotes

[1] *Modern Criticism and Theory, a Reader*. Ed. D. Lodge. Eagleton, “ Capitalsim, Modernism and Postmodernism”. Longman: London and New York, 1988. p 392.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. p386-387.

[4] Ibid. p. 387.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid. p. 391.

[7] Ibid. p. 392.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid. p. 393.

[10] Ibid. p. 395.

[11] Ibid. p. 396.

[12] Ibid. p. 390.