

Fredric Jameson

By Douglas Kellner

<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>

Fredric Jameson is generally considered to be one of the foremost contemporary English-language Marxist literary and cultural critics. Over the past three decades, he has published a wide range of works analyzing literary and cultural texts, while developing his own neo-Marxist theoretical perspectives. In addition, Jameson produced many important critiques of opposing theoretical schools and positions. A prolific writer, he has assimilated an astonishing number of theoretical discourses into his project, while intervening in many contemporary debates and analyzing a diversity of cultural texts, ranging from the novel to video, and from fairy tales to postmodernism.

Jameson's first published book analyzed the literary theory and work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1961; rep. 1984). Written as a doctoral dissertation at Yale University, *Sartre* was influenced by Jameson's teacher Erich Auerbach and by the stylistics associated with Leo Spitzer. The text focused on Sartre's style, narrative structures, values, and vision of the world. It is devoid of the Marxian categories and political readings characteristic of Jameson's later work, but read in the context of the stifling conformism and banal business society of the 1950s, Jameson's choice of his subject matter (Sartre) and his choice of an intricate literary-theoretical writing style (already the infamous Jamesonian sentences appear full-blown) can be seen as an attempt to create himself as a critical intellectual against the conformist currents of the epoch. One also sees him already turning against the literary establishment, against the dominant Anglo-American modes of literary criticism, seeking alternatives in European theory. Indeed, all of Jameson's subsequent works constitute critical interventions against the hegemonic forms of literary criticism and modes of thought regnant in the Anglo-American world and throughout his career he has heavily drawn on continental European methods, modes of thought, and discourses to provide alternatives to the more prosaic literary and cultural theories dominant in the United States.

After intense study of Marxian literary theory in the 1960s, when he was influenced by the New Left and anti-war movement, Jameson published a book, *Marxism and Form*, which introduced a tradition of dialectical neo-Marxist literary theory to the English-speaking world (1970). After engaging the structuralist project in *The Prison House of Language* (1972), Jameson concentrated on developing his own literary and cultural theory in a series of works which include *Fables of Aggression* (1979), *The Political Unconscious* (1981), and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). He has also published several volumes of essays, including *The Ideologies of Theory*, Vol. 1 (*Situations of Theory*) and Vol. 2 (*Syntax of History*), both published in 1988, as well as *Signatures of the Visible* (1991), which collects some essays on film and visual culture, and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), a collection of essays on American and world cinema. Jameson has also published a book on Adorno, *Late Marxism* (1990), where he presents this great cultural critic of the Frankfurt school as a key theorist for our time.

Throughout his work, Jameson privileges Marxism as the most all-encompassing and

comprehensive theoretical framework, within which other methods function as local or sectorial tools. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson argues for the primacy of Marxism on the grounds that its horizon -- history and the socio-economic totality -- provide the most comprehensive framework in which gender, race, class, sexuality, myth, symbol, allegory, and other more limited concerns can be explored and interpreted. In his later works which reach out to grasp the elusive world-system as a whole, Jameson argues that it is capitalism and its processes of commodification and reification which provide the motor and matrix of today's world-system, especially after the collapse of Soviet communism. Consequently, his work as a whole should be read as a series of attempts to provide a Marxian method of interpretation and aesthetic theory.

Yet Jameson has characteristically appropriated a wide range of theoretical positions ranging from structuralism to post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis to postmodernism into his theory, producing a highly eclectic and original brand of Marxian literary and cultural theory. Thus, Jameson's Marxism is far from conventional. He utilizes a dual hermeneutic of ideology and utopia to criticize the ideological components of cultural texts while setting forth their utopian dimension, which includes those visions of a better world that provide perspectives from which to criticize existing society. For Jameson, even conservative texts often project visions of a better world and thus criticize the organization of existing society and its values. Influenced by Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch, Jameson thus has developed a hermeneutical and utopian version of Marxian cultural theory.

Jameson's focus on the utopian dimension interests him in fantasy, science fiction, and other forms of popular culture which he believes contains utopian and critical moments. Yet he is also deeply attracted to realist texts which he believes provides both knowledge and criticisms of existing capitalist society. Georg Lukacs' work on realism and on the historical novel strongly influenced Jameson's way of seeing and situating literature. While he never accepted Lukacs' polemics against modernism, he appropriated key Lukacsian categories such as reification, the process through which human beings and their products being thinglike, to describe the fate of culture and human beings in contemporary capitalism. The Lukacsian-Hegelian markers of Jameson's work include the contextualizing of cultural texts in history, the broad historical periodizing, and the use of Hegelian-Marxian dialectical categories and methods.

Dialectical criticism for Jameson involves the attempt to synthesize competing positions and methods into a more comprehensive theory as he does in *The Prison-House of Language*, where he incorporates elements of French structuralism and semiotics, as well as Russian formalism, into his theory. Dialectical criticism also involves for Jameson thinking which reflexively analyzes categories and methods, while carrying out concrete analyses and studies. Categories for Jameson articulate historical content and thus must be read in terms of the historical environment out of which they emerge. Dialectical criticism thus involves reflexive thinking which reflects on categories and methods while carrying out concrete analyses and studies; relational and historicizing thinking which contextualizes the object of study in its historical environment; utopian thinking which compares the existing reality with possible alternatives and which finds utopian hope in literature, philosophy, and other cultural texts; and totalizing, synthesizing thought which provides a systematic framework for cultural studies and a theory of history within which dialectical criticism can operate.

Jameson thus develops in his early 1970s work a totalizing, synthesizing thought which provides a systematic framework for cultural studies and a theory of history within which dialectical criticism can operate. All of these aspects would continue to be operative in Jameson's later works with the totalizing element coming more prominently (and controversially) to the fore as his work evolved. It is in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) that Jameson's theoretical synthesis finds its most systematic articulation. The text contains an articulation of Jameson's literary method, a systematic inventory of the history of literary forms, and a hidden history of the forms and modes of subjectivity itself, as it traverses through the field of culture and experience. Jameson employs a Lukacsian-inspired historical narrative to tell the story of how cultural texts contain a "political unconscious," buried narratives and social experiences, which require sophisticated literary hermeneutics to decipher. One particular narrative of *The Political Unconscious* concerns, in Jameson's striking phrase, "the construction of the bourgeois subject in emergent capitalism and its schizophrenic disintegration in our own time" (p. 9). Key stages in the odyssey of the disintegrating bourgeois subjectivity are articulated in Gissing, Conrad, and Wyndham Lewis, a story which will find its culmination in Jameson's account of postmodernism.

Indeed, Jameson's studies on postmodernism are a logical resultant of his theoretical project. In *Postmodernism -- or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) -- which updates his earlier 1980s studies, Jameson interprets postmodernism in terms of the Marxian theory of capitalism as a new "cultural dominant." Within his analysis, Jameson situates postmodern culture in the framework of a theory of stages of society -- based on a neo-Marxian model of stages of capitalist development -- and argues that postmodernism is part of a new stage of capitalism. In developing his concept of postmodernism, Jameson (1984 and 1991) tends to underscore the rupture with modernism, claiming that postmodern culture implodes high culture and mass culture, while exhibiting a "new depthlessness" that resists interpretation; involves pastiche and not parody; reduces history to historicity, to a stereotyped and cliched set of images that pander to nostalgia rather than genuine historical understanding; and that ruptures narrative and subjects in a "schizophrenic" dispersal of fragments. This postmodern culture loses its critical distance and is an embellishment to existing society. Indeed, he claims that postmodernism is a new "cultural logic of capitalism," that its fragmented image culture and aestheticization is part of a shift to a new global capitalism and that postmodernism is therefore not just another aesthetic style besides modernism but is a new cultural dominant.

Jameson's analysis of postmodernism has been submitted to many sharp criticisms. Linda Hutcheon (1988 and 1989), for example, argues that he has a one-sided conception of postmodern culture, missing its engagement with history, parody, and double-coded distance and complicity with mainstream culture. Many critics claim that Jameson's conception is too totalizing and object to his correlation of stages of culture with stages of capitalism. Yet others claim that he excessively privileges class and does not play sufficient attention to race and gender. Moreover, almost every claim that he makes in his now classic analysis of postmodernism has been subject to detailed polemic and discussion (see the studies in Kellner 1989 for some examples).

Jameson thus emerges as a synthetic and eclectic Marxian cultural theorist who attempts to preserve and develop the Marxian theory while analyzing the politics and utopian moments of a

stunning diversity of cultural texts. His work expands literary analysis to include popular culture, architecture, theory and other texts and thus can be seen as part of the movement toward cultural studies as a replacement for canonical literary studies. Nothing cultural is alien to his synoptic grasp and his restless and wide-ranging studies continue to illuminate our contemporary culture and to map its future, while elaborating valuable methods for the study of culture and society.

Bibliography

Primary Texts

Jameson, Fredric (1961) *Sartre*. The Origins of a Style. New Haven: Yale University Press, second edition: New York Columbia University Press, 1984.

_____ (1971) *Marxism and Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

_____ (1972) *The Prison House of Language*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

_____ (1978) *Fables of Aggression*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____ (1981) *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

_____ (1984) "Postmodernism--The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146,

_____ (1986). "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15.

_____ (1988). "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Larry Grossberg and Cary Nelson.

_____ (1990) *Late Marxism. Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 1990.

_____ (1990) *Signatures of the Visible*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.

_____ (1991) *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Secondary Texts

Best, Steven, and Kellner, Douglas (1991) *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. London and New York: MacMillan and Guilford Press.

Dowling, William C. (1984) *Jameson, Althusser, Marx. An Introduction to "The Political Unconscious"*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Foster, Hal, editor (1983) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press.

Hutcheon, Linda (1988) *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York and London: Routledge.

_____ (1989) *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York and London: Routledge.

Kellner, Douglas, editor (1989) *Postmodernism/Jameson /Critique*. Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press.

Sprinker, Michael (1987) *Imaginary Relations*. London: Verso.

Diacritics 12 (Fall 1982); *Critical Exchange* 14 (Fall 1983) and *New Orleans Review* (1984) have special issues on Jameson's work.