

MARXISM AND RESISTANCE:
FREDRIC JAMESON
AND THE MOMENT OF POSTMODERNISM

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Jameson, Marxism, and Modern Theory

Throughout his career, Fredric Jameson has developed his own positions by bringing his Marxist critique to bear on the major critical theorists of this century. In this he resembles Marx himself, whose early works were critical engagements with Hegel and Feuerbach, and who wrote *Capital* primarily as an argument against Adam Smith, Ricardo, and bourgeois political economics in general. This "reactive" quality in Marx and Marxism anticipates the stress on inter-textuality in modern thought. As Jameson puts it himself in an early essay, "Marxism is a critical rather than a systematic philosophy." As such it presents "a correction of other positions ... rather than a doctrine of a positivistic variety existing in its own right."¹

In his three essays on postmodernism² — his most theoretically ambitious, fully developed, and polemically critical essays in the mid-eighties, arguably in his career — Jameson engages both the artistic and mass cultural "stuff" of our time and the modes of thought and perception in post-structuralist and other postmodernist theory. He foregrounds the conceptual operations of modern theory in order to model Marxist analysis and critique, and to assert the necessity to "periodize" — in the case of postmodernism, to see our own time historically — in the face of the various movements in contemporary thought and theory which would deny both the validity of any totalization, and thus of any historical view, and the value of any Marxist categories or concepts.

The very title of Jameson's most important article on postmodernism — "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" — asserts the validity and priority of the Marxist analysis, the ability of the Marxist to represent the social and the cultural, "to grasp the design of history as such." This phrase is from Walter Benjamin,³ who described his own project almost fifty years ago. Jameson, as well, announces by his title his intention to do what Benjamin does for Baudelaire, Paris and early high capitalism — "to demonstrate through example that only Marxism can apply high philology to the texts of the past century."⁴ Jameson defends and demonstrates the view that postmodernism is *the* cultural logic of late capitalism, which in turn implies that to describe our era (period, moment) as "late capitalist," is meaningful and correct and that it is possible to understand late capitalism in such a way as to be able to deduce its "cultural logic." Both the definite article in the title, and especially, the oppositional "or" aggressively challenge the anti-historicist tendencies in modern theory which Jameson is at pains to refute.

Jameson's view gives full weight to other aspects of postmodernism, such as deconstruction and other movements in modern theory which insist on heterogeneity, uncertainty, and indeterminacy in all meaning. Like the "post-marxism" of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau,⁵ Jameson's version of Marxism stresses that the social, political, and cultural phenomena we describe, discuss, and interpret as "postmodernist," like all historical products or "moments," are always overdetermined, and have many causes. Jameson's title, however, like all his work on the subject, insists that postmodernism be seen and represented in the light of history, and that in our historicizing we engage the political and ethical issues of desire, power and control, production and consumption, injustice and privilege, which have always been the concerns of Marxism.

Later in "Postmodernism" Jameson expands and modifies the title phrase to make its totalizing claims even more explicit: "The conception of postmodernism outlined here is a historical rather than a merely stylistic one. I cannot stress too greatly the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available, and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism"⁶ He describes the latter position (his own, of course, and one which he elaborates, demonstrates, and defends in all three postmodernism articles) as "a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History" (in "The Politics of Theory" the phrase is expanded to read "a present of time and of history in which we ourselves exist and struggle").⁷

Like Walter Benjamin, Jameson seeks to demonstrate that the totalizing vision of Marxist historicism constitutes the enabling conditions of the possibility of a theoretic, conceptualizations of culture which lay bare its social function, its meaning in history. At a recent conference session devoted to his work on postmodernism,⁸ Jameson insisted in discussion on a dis-

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inction between *totalizing* views of social and cultural practices and any view of society and culture as some fixed, essentialist *totality* — the straw-man position attributed to Marxism by those who oppose all totalization as totalitarian. The totalizing practice in Jameson's theory dialectically accommodates heterogeneity and difference, the rifts, gaps, and aporias disclosed by deconstruction, but not at the expense of the "it's all connected" idea, as he stated when criticizing theory which would "throw that out." The idea that "it's all connected" in ways which explain and indict the late capitalist present and carry a strong demand for social change has been a cornerstone of Jameson's theory since *Marxism and Form* (1971).

In the preface to that book Jameson characterized the liberal pluralism and "humanism" hegemonic in academia since the 1950s as his "conceptual opponent": "that mixture of political liberalism, empiricism, and logical positivism that we know as Anglo-American philosophy and which is hostile at all points to the type of thinking outlined here."⁹ The attempt to defeat that position constitutes, he says, "the tendentious part of my book." He describes the "ideological potency" and negative effects of his opponent like this: "the anti-speculative bias of that tradition, its emphasis on the individual fact or item at the expense of the network of relationships in which that item may be embedded, continue to encourage submission to what is by preventing its followers from making connections, and in particular from drawing the otherwise unavoidable conclusions on the political level."¹⁰ Later in the book, Jameson develops more fully his picture of liberal humanism as culturally dominant:

The dominant ideology of the Western countries is clearly that Anglo-American empirical realism for which all dialectical thinking represents a threat, and whose mission is essentially to serve as a check on social consciousness: allowing legal and ethical answers to be given to economic questions, substituting the language of political equality for that of economic inequality and considerations about freedom for doubts about capitalism itself. The method of such thinking, in its various forms and guises, consists in separating reality into airtight compartments, carefully distinguishing the political from the economic, the legal from the political, the sociological from the historical, so that the full implications of any given problem can never come into view; and in limiting all statements to the discrete and the immediately verifiable, in order to rule out any speculative and totalizing thought which might lead to a vision of social life as a whole."

The contemporary post-structuralist thought Jameson seeks to correct in the postmodernism articles is no longer as confident about verifiable meaning as was the liberal pluralism Jameson described in 1971, but as "radical" as such thought may seem to itself and to those in the "anti-theory" camp (vestigial "humanists," defending the embattled Arnoldian shrine of

what Marcuse called "affirmative culture"),¹² Jameson makes very clear how the insistence on absolute heterogeneity, the complete refusal of any totalizing thought, and the denial of all reliable signification, end up — in terms of the social function of such thought — at one with the liberal pluralism which it attempts to displace as cultural dominant. The denial of meaning in history places post-structuralism in alliance with more old-fashioned positions it supposedly opposes, especially in the refusal to make connections, the practice Jameson denounced in 1971, and again in Kansas in 1987.

In opposition to anti-historicist views, Jameson seeks to convince us that to analyze (to theorize successfully, to conceptualize) the world we live in — the personal, social, cultural reality we have to deal with in living human existence — is to understand the effects of capitalism. In full awareness of the enormous changes since the time of Marx, and in no way taking specific *words* of Marx as dicta or dogma, Jameson argues as a Marxist that extremely diverse phenomena are "symptomatic" of life under capitalism; that architecture, movies, rock music, literature, cultural phenomena generally (including, especially, the history of thought and of critical theory) can best be understood as historically specific manifestations of late capitalism, that such an understanding is necessary if other modes of interpretation or understanding are to be effective, accurate, and truthful.

The argument, as I see it in Jameson's thought (and in Marx's) is not that the politico-economic, social-cultural forces — some *totality* "out there," completely prior to and pre-existing, separate from any thought or writing about it — that are the central concern of Marxism constitute some sort of "master code" which has conceptual priority over all others, but rather that dialectical and historical materialism *does* provide a necessary, if not in and of itself sufficient, perspective for understanding reality. "Historical and dialectical materialism" will be discussed as three important and controversial signifiers (at the conference Jameson mentioned that some of the disrepute that has gathered around the phrase has its source in Althusser, for whom "Hegel" is a code word for Stalin, and "dialectical materialism" for Stalinism).

The "historical" is certainly crucial for Jameson's Marxism. *The Political Unconscious* begins with the words "Always historicize!"¹³ Thus for Jameson, as for Marx, the historical emphasis is on what humans have done and produced in response to necessity and desire, the resulting relations among people, between people and the rest of "nature," and on how all that has changed in time. To foreground such matters during capitalism and late capitalism (as to varying degrees, in different ways, in earlier eras) is to strike up against pain, suffering, exploitation, oppression, privilege and deprivation — so that indeed "history is what hurts."

"Materialism" is the "easiest" of the three, if the most misunderstood by non-initiates into this debate, who take it to mean an obsession with money and with ownership. The key meaning of "materialist" lies in its

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contrast with idealist philosophies, which since Plato always postulate an ideal, essential realm outside time and history, "above" and somehow radically separate from material existence. Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche are all materialist thinkers; they insist on a view in which all human practice and the world of matter or "nature" are one, are components in a material reality that includes all manifestations of the spiritual, the ideal, and the soul.

"Dialectical" is the hardest to describe. It can seem either silly, unrigorous, Romantic/mystical, or as erring in the opposite direction, as mechanistic, rationalistic, and shallow — in a simplistic version of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad. Nonetheless, it is an essential component in Jameson's thought and in Marxism in at least two ways: the sense that "it's all connected," Hegel's "the truth is the whole" (which includes, as I understand it, the later Frankfurt school's stunning inversion: "the whole is the untrue"); and the insistence on contradiction, on interaction, conflict, and change in any interpretation of data or fact, in any meaning. Taken together my "two senses" exemplify the character of dialectical thought, with the necessary but flawed and vulnerable — in danger of congealing into dangerous rigidities or dissolving into the undifferentiated oneness of idealist mysticism — *totalizations* of the first part countered by the active, developing movement of the second. The Marxist dialectic involves the use of the imagination to make connections *and* to discern gaps, breaks, discontinuities, and contradictions.

Marxism is linked to post-structuralism through a shared materialism which, in postmodernist thinkers, mainly appears as a Nietzschean materialist sociology (and history) of culture. The dialectic makes the same link; among other things it is the component in Marxism that links it to the self-critical, self-scrutinizing thought about thought in modern theory, as Jameson pointed out (without mentioning Marxism) in his famous 1971 PMLA essay "Metacommentary," the same year as the publication of *Marxism and Form*.¹⁴ A genuinely historical and dialectical materialist perspective is necessary for understanding reality; from that point of view Jameson insists that we recognize the effects of late capitalism in the phenomena we experience in daily life, in the social and cultural forms and practices that are the objects of our theorizing, and in the assumptions and demands of those theories themselves.

The position remains controversial, and that is why Jameson must engage in this battle. If he and Marx are right, then resistance, repression, and denial compose crucial elements in the refusal of his argument, in the power of Paul de Man's anti-historicism, and in the anti-Marxist current in Foucault's thought. Almost in an aside, Jameson discusses the way in which the "currently fashionable rhetoric of power and domination" in Foucault and others, with its "displacement from the economic to the political" is unsatisfactory, since "the various forms of power and domination ... cannot be understood unless their functional relationships to economic exploitation are articulated — that is, until the political is once

again subsumed beneath the economic.”¹⁵ The very title of Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* suggests the role that resistance plays in fixing what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the conceptual horizons of the belief systems within which the validity of the Marxist argument is assessed, so that both awareness of the historical specificity of the negative effects of capitalism and hope for socialism are repressed or denied. In the postmodernism articles, Jameson depicts a wide variety of phenomena, and of shapes or patterns of movement in different areas or “levels” (economic, political, cultural) within the “moment” of postmodernism as linked effects of and responses to late capitalism. To the extent that his argument is convincing, it breaks through repression and exposes the mystifications of hegemony.

Late Capitalism as Blinding Light: Postmodernism and Resistance

Every present is determined by those images which are synchronic with it: every now is the moment of a specific recognition. In it truth is loaded to the bursting point with time. (This bursting point is nothing other than the death of the intention, which accordingly coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) ... The image that is read, I mean the image at the moment of recognition, bears to the highest degree the stamp of the critical, dangerous impulse that lies at the source of all reading.

Benjamin, “Theoretics of Knowledge”

The matter of our resistance — why we disagree, don’t want to admit the value and validity of the Marxist view, why we bridle and claim that neither our intellectual approaches nor the “subject matter” we investigate have causal connections to economics generally or capitalism specifically — is of central significance for Jameson. As a guiding metaphor for the discussion as a whole, I will use a metaphorical passage from Benjamin. In the note book reflections on Marxist critical methodology from which I chose the above quotation, Benjamin greatly stresses “the dialectical image” in which, he says, “the past and the now flash into a constellation. In other words: image is dialectic at a standstill.”¹⁶ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” contains a passage with just such a dialectical image that figurally represents the resistance that is under discussion. Benjamin is exploring the philosophies of Henri Bergson and others who, at the turn of the century sought to better understand the nature of experience, to distinguish “true” experience” from “the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses.” (The problematics of experience, its debasement of attenuation in modern life, its inevitable collective nature, is a constant concern for Benjamin in this essay and in others from the mid-30s, and links his thought to Jameson’s and Bakhtin’s.) Ben-

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jamin says of Bergson that "he rejects any historical determination of memory:"

He thus manages to stay clear of that experience from which his own philosophy evolved or, rather, in reaction to which it arose. It was the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialism. In shutting out this experience the eye perceives an experience of a complementary nature in the form of its spontaneous afterimage, as it were. Bergson's philosophy represents an attempt to give the detail of this afterimage and to fix it as a permanent record.¹⁷

Along the same lines Jameson argues in "The 60s" that the movement in thought from existentialism to "structuralism" should be seen as a response to the discovery "of the opacity of the Institution itself as the radically transindividual," of "a realm of impersonal logic in terms of which human consciousness is itself little more than an 'effect of structure.'"

On this reading, then, the new philosophical turn will be interpreted less in the idealistic perspective of some discovery of a new scientific truth (the Symbolic) than as the symptom of an essentially protopolitical and social experience, the shock of some new, hard, unconceptualized, resistant object which the older conceptuality cannot process and which thus gradually generates a whole new problematic.¹⁸

The shock Jameson speaks of is Benjamin's blinding light — a reality from which we turn away, only to have it continue to dominate our perceptions, our ideological positions, and our assumptions about the possibilities of human life, about "human nature," but always in the unacknowledged, denied and distorted forms that result when our thoughts and perceptions must follow the twisted paths through the political unconscious demanded by the forces of resistance, in a process which Freud called "the return of the repressed."¹⁹ It is Jameson's task to restore this repressed material to conscious awareness, by showing us that what we have learned to think of as "apolitical," non-ideological, and especially, unconnected phenomena, such as developments in critical theory, the poems of John Ashberry in contrast to those of Wallace Stevens, or the new Bonaventura Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, are manifestations of a post-modernism which constitutes the cultural logic of late capitalism.

In both major postmodernism essays, Jameson is trying to conceptualize the historically specific features of our own era, of a world we have experienced as adults since the 1960s. In so doing, he is constantly engaged in battle with antihistoricist views, by asserting and demonstrating the possibility (and, therefore the necessity) of reading meaning in history. A key postulate he refutes is that we are no longer living under capitalism, that the mode of analysis suggested by the use of such terminology is hopelessly dogmatic and entirely out of date. This is one of the most

important positions in hegemonic anti-Marxism; it is a central tenet of liberal pluralism (of a writer like Daniel Bell) in North America at least since the 1950s, and it constitutes the most important link between such thought and "right" post-structuralism. Basing his historical analysis on that of Ernest Mandel in *Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues:

that late or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx's great 19th-century analysis constitutes on the contrary the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas. This purer capitalism of our time thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way ...²⁰

Jameson describes such enclaves as "the last vestiges of uncommodified or traditional space" that "are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment in which the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the third world and the unconscious."²¹ (Another interesting instance of the process is the case of the university, whose position as enclave has steadily eroded in this era, as the penetration and colonization described by Jameson takes place.)

What Jameson has in mind regarding the third world is the destruction of precapitalist patterns by the technological industrialization of agriculture known as "the Green Revolution," by means of which "capitalism transforms its relationship to its colonies from an old-fashioned imperialist control to market penetration, destroying the older village communities and creating a whole new wage-labour pool and lumpenproletariat."²² The "colonization" or, perhaps better, the "occupation" of the unconscious under late capitalism is Jameson's central focus. He is referring to "the mechanization of the superstructure, or in other words the penetration of culture itself by what the Frankfurt school called the culture industry," the ascendancy and proliferation everywhere of the media and the advertising industry. The reference to the Frankfurt school is another sign of the closeness of Jameson's argument to Benjamin, who speaks so often of the attenuation of experience in modern society, comparing newspapers unfavorably with oral tales and stories, and arguing that the new "linguistic usages of newspapers paralyzed the imagination of their readers."²³ Jameson's argument is that the technological and organizational developments since, say, Benjamin's time, are on such a scale as to constitute the basis of a new era in culture which we are calling the postmodern. Thus, changes in the relation between our experience and available forms of narrative discourse brought on with the rise of the newspaper develops with unprecedented scope and depth (or lack of depth) in the television industry.

Jameson's view is close to the dystopian vision — associated with Adorno, Horkheimer, and those of the more recent Frankfurt school — of the

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totally “managed” society in which a behaviorist, “instrumental” view of “human relations” holds total sway, or the pessimistic visions of a Foucault whereby a “total system” of authority and power creates an interlocking set of institutions which “discipline and punish” in order to achieve complete obedience and control. Jameson is actually closer to the thought of Raymond Williams or Bakhtin in recognizing the scope and power of hegemonic, monolithic authoritative discourse (Bakhtin’s “the word of the fathers”),²⁴ while concurrently insisting on the actual and potential strength of alternative and oppositional cultural formations.

According to Jameson, postmodernist cultural forms and practices tend to exhibit qualities like those Benjamin saw in Bergson’s philosophy, that is; symptoms of an experience which made him turn away, unable to face the historical truths about the “big scale industrialism” in reaction to which, says Benjamin, his philosophy arose. Faced with the awesome power and seemingly universal penetration of the processes of late capitalism into all aspects of our existence — from the consumerist commodification of daily life, in which desire is controlled and directed by television (not just advertising, marketing, teaching desire, what to desire, but all the “programming,” including the network news, whose definitions of reality prove so persuasive), even the unconscious can be said to have been penetrated and “colonized” with our plastic money. This signifies the apotheosis of the *interconnected* power of capitalism, the nightmarishly inter-woven global network that has been feared and represented by artists since Kafka. Now this power has a whole other level of penetration and of suffocating universality with computerization, electronically fused banks, and data banks (and the consequences, crushing personal debt, huge profits for finance capital), to the planetary level of this computerized interconnectedness, as symbolized by the “multinational corporation” and the relations among the superpowers, with the (again computerized) constant threat of nuclear war. Faced with all that, we shut our eyes and we turn away. Our cultural reactions, the patterns of our behaviour, our discursive practices and formations always exhibit traces of what we say we’re not talking about — patterns and preoccupations which constitute what I am tempted to term “reaction formations,” with their source in what Jameson discloses as the newly penetrated, colonized, and politicized unconscious.

Jameson shows that the forces of repression, resistance, denial, and distortion which helped shape high modernism in reaction to the rise of the monopoly capitalism that Benjamin calls “big-scale industrialism,” (a central concern of Jameson’s in *The Political Unconscious* being the illustration of the actions of such forces in canonical modernism) continue to constitute key features of postmodernism, in (non)reaction to late capitalism. Although given the vastly greater power, extent, and interconnectedness of the present world system, the various effects symbolized in Benjamin’s image of closing the eyes against a blinding light, with attempts to fix the details of the afterimage representing intellectual and cultural

production, are so intensified as to constitute a new stage in cultural history, the moment of the postmodern.

As I have indicated, Jameson's two most important postmodernism articles are filled with illustrations — clearly drawn deliberately from the most disparate areas of human social activity, from third-world agriculture, to the world-political history of decolonization and anti-imperialism to the far, windy reaches of philosophical and theoretical debate — of the historical specificity of late capitalism. In a long sub-section of "The 60s," called "The Adventures of the Sign," Jameson offers a definitive description and extended discussion of postmodernism as a whole, from the "death" of the subject, through the eclipse of depth and historicity, and the now classic "freeing" of the sign from meaning and reference. He argues that postmodernism differs from high modernism in terms of "the social functionality of culture,"²⁵ in that the earlier movement, "whatever its overt political content, was oppositional and marginal within a middle-class Victorian or philistine or gilded age culture," while postmodernism must be said to have achieved the position of "cultural *dominant*, with a precise socioeconomic functionality" — in the colonization of the unconscious by images from the spectacle, from Ronald Reagan to *Miami Vice*.²⁶

Jameson presents a brilliantly condensed and concentrated discussion of the source in resistance, in the denial of history, of the key (since Saussure) structuralist-poststructuralist radical separation of the sign from its referent (the insistence that the relation between them is entirely arbitrary), so that there are only texts and intertextuality and "freeplay" among signifiers, with the referent (history, reality) surviving only as "a ghostly residual aftereffect" — Benjamin's "afterimage."²⁷ The next stage, as Jameson describes it, after ridding the sign as a whole from its connection to and dependence on a referent, is deconstruction within the sign, the radical separation of the signifier from the signified, as part of the "liberation" of words and all the signifiers from signification, from meaning proper. Jameson associates the results with Lacanian notions of schizophrenic discourse, with the breakdown of all syntactic order and meaningful relationships in time, and concludes with this bravura sentence:

The break-up of the Sign in mid-air determines a fall back into a now absolutely fragmented and anarchic social reality; the broken pieces of language (the pure Signifiers) now falling again into the world, as so many more pieces of material junk among all the other rusting and superannuated apparatuses and buildings that litter the commodity landscape and strew the "collage city," the "delirious New York" of a postmodernist late capitalism in full crisis.²⁸

My argument is that this movement away from history, the problematizing of meaning and connection and privileging of heterogeneity and difference, is symptomatic of the blocking, repression, and resistance symbolized by Benjamin's image of shutting the eyes against a blinding light. In terms

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of the social functionality of culture, that movement away (De Man's "swerve"), is profoundly hegemonic. Born of reaction against, and aversion to a monolithic, authoritative reality, it becomes dominant and hegemonic itself. Culture under late capitalism, has lost the "semi-autonomy" it enjoyed in previous periods:

Culture itself falls into the world, and the result is not its disappearance but its prodigious expansion, to the point where culture becomes coterminous with social life in general: now all the levels become 'acculturated,' and in the society of the spectacle, the image, or the simulacrum, everything has at length become cultural, from the superstructures down into the mechanism of the infrastructure itself.²⁹

The acculturation of the mechanisms of the infrastructure is a major effect of what Mandel calls the "generalized universal industrialization" of late capitalism,³⁰ and is the main vehicle for a key task of any socio-economic order, what Henri Lefebvre terms "the reproduction of the relations of production."³¹

Throughout these essays Jameson takes great pains to demonstrate a dialectical point of view on postmodernism, which recognizes both its positive and negative, liberating and hegemonic aspects. The classic model for such thought is Marx's own analysis of the transformations that occur with the rise of capitalism. Jameson says that the famous analysis in the *Manifesto* demands:

a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously, within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgement. We are, somehow, to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst.³²

In *The Political Unconscious*, one of Jameson's chief concerns was to demonstrate a dialectical view of high modernism as, at once, a symptom of alienation and reification, and utopian compensation for it. In these articles on postmodernism, he takes great pains to show both the positive and negative in, for example, the "liberation" of language from history, and the liberation of the subject from the connection to past and present. Since "personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me," and "such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time,"³³ the poststructuralist (or schizophrenic) break in the signifying chain can result in "an experience of pure material signifiers," which certainly recalls art for art's sake, (especially in the non-representational visual arts) and "pure

and unrelated presents in time." Jameson then cites an account of actual schizophrenic experience and concludes:

The breakdown of temporality suddenly releases its present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescrivable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material — or better still, the literal — Signifier in isolation. This present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, the high, the intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity.³⁴

Jameson recognizes the attraction of the "ludic" moment of free-play, post-modernism's moment of *jouissance*, what Jameson labels in the title of a major section, "the Hysterical Sublime." It is dependent upon freedom, as a condition of possibility, from anything resembling a Kantian ethical imperative, Sartrean or Dostoevskian responsibility in/for history. It is a great relief when we turn away from the blinding light, when we are able to "block" successfully, to deny the very reality of "the nightmare of history." Nevertheless, as shown here, the repressed and/or the referent, does not disappear when denied, and its power and control may be greater if the effect of postmodernism as cultural dominant is to deny the reality of that power. Jameson says of the effects of the anti-historicist view:

There cannot but be much that is deplorable in a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past [into] visual mirages, stereotypes or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm — from visions of "terrorism" on the social level to those of cancer on the personal.³⁵

In an earlier article, Jameson describes this enabling retreat from meaning in history as "something like a defense mechanism, a repression, a neurotic denial, a preventive shutting off of affect, which itself finally reconfirms the vital threat of its object."³⁶ As symbolized by the movement within Benjamin's dialectical image, such resistance and repression is at the source of postmodernist cultural phenomena as a response to late capitalism. In the same discussion of the modern historical specificity of experience and consciousness under capitalism (with the work of Baudelaire in the foreground), Benjamin cites in a devastatingly laconic, matter-of-fact way Freud's observation that the main function of consciousness is to protect the organism from perception.³⁷ Specific distortions in perception and aware-

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ness which result from the protective gesture — in Benjamin's figure, the details of the afterimage — become key constitutive features of our culture, of our thought.

Let me conclude with an example of Jameson's analysis of postmodernism that is particularly close to Benjamin's image. I will cite it at length, without editing or commenting as it proceeds, in order to illustrate the movement within the thought, to show the depth and relevance of the argument. Jameson is discussing our mixture of fascination and horror with computers and other powerful, sophisticated means of "high tech" communication and reproduction as instances of "the hysterical sublime." He is separating his position from a view of technology itself as the "ultimately determining" social force:

Rather, I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating, not so much in its own right, but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp — namely the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself.

He illustrates of the popular culture manifestations of this vision with the "high tech paranoia" of movie thrillers about high-level business and political conspiracies to gain wealth or cause disaster in ways in which large, complex computer networks loom large. He then concludes:

Yet conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt — through the figuration of advanced technology — to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system. It is therefore in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that in my opinion the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized.³⁸

Throughout that analysis Jameson is aware of our powerful desire to block or resist awareness of the extent and power of late capitalism, in Benjamin's words to ignore or deny the "historical determinations" of our thought and experience. The move may even seem to be a progressive gesture, a liberation from complete indoctrination and imbrication in the apparatus of hegemony. Thus, the *jouissance* or delight in the play of signifiers: it feels like freedom. We feel relieved of the burden of intolerable awareness. Nonetheless, (to borrow, as does Jameson, Raymond Williams' distinctions between different social functions of culture) that "oppositional" impulse slides easily through the "alternative" to a position as a cultur-

al "dominant," as it allows the (only "dimly perceived") processes of penetration and colonization of experience and existence to take place unchecked. Thus, it has been the project of Jameson's career to show, not a retreat from meaning, nor from material and historical reality, but that a critical engagement with the forces of late capitalism offers the insight and understanding which might provide the basis for the success of the collective project to wrest the realm of freedom from the realm of necessity.

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Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 365. In a note on this page Jameson cites Sidney Hook's observation that "Marx came to critical self-consciousness by settling accounts with the varied intellectual traditions and attitudes of his day"
2. "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate, *New German Critique*, no. 33, Fall, 1984, pp. 53-65; "Periodizing the 60s," *The 60s Without Apology, Social Text*, 3(3) and 4(1), Spring-Summer, 1984, pp. 178-209; "Postmodernism, or the Culture Logic of Late Capitalism, *New Left Review*, No. 146, July-August, 1984, pp. 53-92. I have listed these in the ascending order of significance. Jameson describes the argument in "Postmodernism" as "definitive" in a note to "Politics of Theory." Most of my references will be to the latter two, which I will call "the 60s" and "Postmodernism," respectively.
3. "N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]," trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, *The Philosophical Forum*, 15(1-2), Fall-Winter, 1983-84, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p.25.
5. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack, (London: Verso, 1985). This book, with its revision of Marxism through a critique of the notions of the privileged place of the working class as historical subject and of any sort of historical inevitability, maintains the strengths of the Marxist tradition while ridding it of those features most often the object of anti-Marxist attacks. At many points their arguments are strikingly similar to Jameson's, with their incorporation into a new sort of Marxism of insights from Althusser, Lacan, and deconstruction.
6. Jameson, "Postmodernism" p. 85.
7. Jameson, "Politics of Theory," p. 62.
8. *Postmodernism: Texts, Politics, Instruction*, International Association for Philosophy and Literature conference, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, April 30 — May 2, 1987.
9. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p. x.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 367-68.

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12. Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 88-133. On several occasions Jameson calls attention to this brilliant essay, originally written and published in German in 1937.
13. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 9.
14. For more on my use of Jameson to see the dialectic, see my "Infinite Indignation: Teaching, Dialectical Vision, and Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," *College English*, Vol 48, No. 2, February, 1986, pp. 177-79. Jameson is most specific on the subject in *Marxism and Form*, especially pp. 8, 53-4, 308, and in the long concluding chapter, "Towards Dialectical Criticism." All his subsequent work assumes the value, significance, and necessity of dialectical thought that were spelled out fully in that early work.
15. Jameson, "60s," p. 184.
16. Benjamin, "Theoretics of Knowledge," p. 7. Much could be written on the significance of the image in Benjamin, as in dialectical thought generally. By its very nature the image stands as an alternative to the pseudo-transparency of the language and the scientific practices of the dominant discourse, which recognizes as valid only rationalistic demonstration through logical argument — Marcuse's "one-dimensional thought," Blake's "single vision." Jameson argues in *Marxism and Form* that "insofar as dialectical thinking characteristically involves a conjunction of opposites or at least conceptually disparate phenomena, it may truly be said of the dialectical sentence what the Surrealists said about the image, namely, that its strength increases proportionally to the realities linked [in the quotation from Benjamin which follows here, Bergson's philosophy and "big-scale industrialism"] are distant and distinct from each other," (pp. 53-4). Furthermore, I cannot refrain from citing Guy Debord's observation that "The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image." *Society of the Spectacle*, a Black and Red Translation, unauthorized, (Detroit, 1970), no pagination, paragraph no. 34.
17. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 157.
18. Jameson, "60s," p. 190.
19. Benjamin's image and Jameson's formulation strike very similar chords (or discords) as Arthur Kroker's "panic" positions in Arthur Kroker and David Cook *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). Kroker tends to see the phenomena of postmodernism as responses of shock, pain, and panic to the degraded, brutalizing "mediascape" of late capitalism, with the turning away or denial (what Jameson calls "a preventive shutting off of affect," see note 36) accomplished through his flip, sardonic, passionately dispassionate discourse, registering the murderous shocks of late capitalism, just for the hell of it. I see Kroker's lineage in Guy Debord (*Society of the Spectacle*) and the Situationists International counter-cultural politics of the late sixties in Europe (including their leadership role in May 68 in Paris, which, for well or ill, had a significant effect on the way events unfolded) to surrealism and Dada, and even to Alfred Jarry at the beginning of the century. Deconstruction through disrespect, offenses against decorum — including the alternately lofty pieties and down to earth earnestness of the academic essay or address after Arnold, which seeks to elicit enlightened assent. Jameson remains closer to such rhetorical strategies; Kroker leaves such paths entirely.
20. Jameson, "Postmodernism," p. 78.

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21. Jameson, "60s," p.207.
22. Ibid.
23. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 159.
24. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 342.
25. Jameson, "60s," p. 195.
26. When Jameson speaks of the "socioeconomic functionality" of culture here, and in his assumptions regarding his analysis as a whole, he is very close to Mouffe and Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, with their post-Marxist, post-Althusserian, neo-Gramscian sense of hegemony as absent cause, present only in terms of the specific articulations of discourse, as institutional practice producing subjects.
27. Jameson, "60s," p. 196. The sources and implications of that movement in thought form Jameson's central concerns in his *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University press, 1972).
28. Ibid., p. 201.
29. Ibid.
30. Cited in Jameson, "60s," p. 201.
31. Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism*, cited in Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory*, (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 97.
32. Jameson, "Postmodernism," p. 86.
33. Ibid., p. 72.
34. Ibid., p. 73.
35. Ibid., p. 85.
36. Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Autumn, 1979, p. 55.
37. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 161.
38. Jameson, "Postmodernism," pp. 79-80.

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