

AFTER THE CATASTROPHE: POSTMODERNISM AND HERMENEUTICS

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Crisis Theory and the Politics of Periodization

In a certain way all this still exists, and yet in other aspects it is all disappearing.¹

Jean Baudrillard

Postmodernism is premised upon a radical break from the historical epoch known as modernism, or modernity. As theorized by Baudrillard, Kroker, and others, this break is understood as a "catastrophe," a cataclysmic emergence of a new order inaugurated on the death of all the classic philosophical referents — Subject, Society, Power, Reality, and Meaning itself.

The immediate root of this collapse of Western Logos is to be found in the death of God, that is, of the metaphysical center of the lifeworld. As Nietzsche saw, the unhooking of this foundational link in the chain of human knowledge and values would lead to a general cultural crisis and a widespread nihilism which would allow for and demand a transvaluation of all values. Of course, the Nietzschean transvaluation never appeared. Instead, for postmodernists, a more dramatic event occurred, an altogether different kind of transvaluation, even higher on the Richter scale of cultural transformation. More profound than the death of God was the birth of electronic media, new idols consecrated with divine powers, secular icons for a secular age, and, in the form of television, the transcendental Subject of a decentered world.

Departing from McLuhan's premise, postmodernists such as Baudrillard and Kroker assert that the electronic media society reverses the age-old

Western dynamic of differentiation and explosion, and inaugurates a new era of dedifferentiation and implosion.² They see the media as a tremendous catalyst to the evacuation of cultural meaning and the final triumph of nihilism. In a process already well begun with the emergence of the consumer society, the media erode the distinctions between signifier and signified and sign and referent, nullify linear thought and rational discourse by proliferating an alternative universe of images and montage, and isolate human beings in serial relations. The "catastrophe" then is not just the death of the modernist era, but of the Enlightenment project itself, of the ideology and possibility of freedom and progress.

Thus, this discourse of catastrophe attempts to alert us to portentous events in our present world, but it is misleading to the extent that it posits an unbridgeable chasm between modernity and postmodernity and theorizes this passage only in terms of discontinuity. Rather than speak in millennial terms of catastrophe, I suggest that the Marxist discourse of "crisis" is more appropriate in understanding our situation today. By employing the term crisis as a diagnostic tool, we can theorize both the lines of continuity and discontinuity which characterize the relationship between modernity and postmodernity.³

This suggests, in other words, that we are in a *transitional* stage, a passage from an old industrial modernity into some new type of society, indeed, but where the familiar demons of class and capital continue to haunt us. To the extent that our present situation can still be called "capitalism," whatever qualifying prefix one wishes to add to this, to the extent that this old order stubbornly persists — in alienated wage labor, in exploitation, in the hegemony of exchange value and reification, in the brutality of imperialism — then it makes sense to speak of recent developments in terms of a "crisis" rather than a "catastrophe."⁴ This suggests that new developments throw the old system into *disequilibrium*, but do not completely undermine or totally transform it; that the system is still beset by perhaps irresolvable contradictions, and not that "the schemes of control have been fantastically perfected."⁵

Thus, the sorts of qualifications that Jameson makes in his conceptions of postmodernism — as a "cultural dominant" where "subdominant" counter-tendencies exist and cannot be subsumed under the rubric of "postmodernism" — are lacking in the work of many postmodernists. "Postmodernism" is a useful concept, but only as an *organizing*, rather than a *totalizing*, term, helping to map out new social and cultural phenomena. Jameson's concept of "waning of affect," for example, is qualified in such a way as to not apply to all possible cases. "Of course, it would be inaccurate to suggest that all affect, all feeling, or emotion, all subjectivity has vanished from the new image."⁶

A key issue in this instance is the politics of periodization. As Jameson has made clear, any stance on postmodernism as a specifiable historical period is "a political stance on the nature of multi-national capitalism to-

FREDRIC JAMESON

day,"⁷ a position on whether or not this capitalism still exists, its nature, and the possibilities for its transformation or elimination. Thus, where "crisis" has the empowering effect of suggesting that the system is vulnerable, making intervention and change possible, "catastrophe" has the paralyzing effect of suggesting that the present upheavals are over and done with, irreversible, and so it obviating any intervention.

Furthermore, "catastrophe" is a strictly one-sided term which fails to see, as Marx did with the emergence of capitalism, that this new transition brings with it, all at once, both negative and positive features, progress and regress. Thus, just as an earlier, modernist capitalism greatly developed the productive forces of society and had "pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,'" such that "man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life,"⁸ the later, post-modernist capitalism has continued to follow the contradictory logic of commodification. Not only does it implosively erode the boundary between reality and unreality, thereby allowing the substitution of spectacle and simulacra for history and social reality, it also extends the denaturalizing and demystifying movement of modernity and dismantles traditional racial, sexual, and political hierarchies, in addition to deconstructing all fixed identities,⁹ thereby creating "schizo-subjects" whose decoded flows of desire can find either radical "lines of escape" (Deleuze and Guattari), or can be repressively reintegrated into commodity logic and consuming practices.

Ironically, the catastrophe discourse of postmodernism has its roots in the apocalyptic hyperbole of certain religious systems and certain versions of Marxism. It differs from other millennial systems in its rejection of teleology, any guiding historical subject, and the belief in historical progress. Indeed, voicing only a sense of ending and exhaustion, defeat and decline, postmodernism is frequently characterized by an unremitting pessimism toward the possibility of any future that is not simply an intensification of totalitarian control. I should think, however, that if capitalism has taught us anything, it has shown us that it is a very resilient and protean system and that the heralding of its death, and hence the critical discourse of Marxism, is most premature. While postmodernity may be the twilight of the old political project, it is also the dawn (*Dammerung*) of new possibilities.

Postmodernism and The Critique of Hermeneutics

The idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.¹⁰

Susan Sontag

Interpretation is our modern way of being pious.¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari

Whatever differences postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard, Kroker, or Jameson might have, they all understand postmodernism as a radically implosive society: a culture of spectacle, signs, images, and codes that proliferate to such an extent as to overtake reality as we know it, where signs have definite referents, meaning has stable supports, and clear distinctions exist at the social and ontological level. In place of this old referential reality, postmodernity has substituted a new signifying and experiential order, a "hyper-reality" where signs are self-referential, connotations permutate endlessly, information devours meaning, reality and illusion are increasingly inseparable, and cultural simulacra are more real than the world they replace.

As an implosive system, postmodern society is said to reduce everything to a depthless one-dimensionality. From architecture to subjectivity to theoretical production itself, depth models are said to be obsolete, that behind the signifier there is only another signifier, that reality is as deep as the mirrors on the downtown hotels or the punk's sunglasses, and that meaning itself has evaporated in a puff of smoke.

Prima facie, this nullifies the very possibility of interpretation and cultural criticism. Traditionally understood, the project of interpretation has been premised on the distinction between surface and depth, manifest and latent meaning, falsehood and truth, illusion and reality. It has been based on the belief that there is more to the world than is immediately given to the senses or the understanding. This general assumption has held for all interpretive projects, from Plato to Jameson.

Beyond the shared belief that things are other than they appear, there are significant philosophical differences which can be categorized under the rubric of realism and anti-realism. A traditional realist understanding involves appearances that mask a true reality, an "essence," which, when grasped, will tell us how the world really is. The anti-realist conception, as can be found in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, holds that there is no essence behind the appearance and that we can never know the "things-in-themselves" because all understanding is perspectival or historically conditioned and mediated in nature.

This is a common and simple distinction, but an important one that needs to be restated and retained. The employment of a depth model by no means commits us to a "metaphysics of presence" and a "transcendental signified" as defined and refuted by Derrida and others. The distinctions between surface and depth, manifest and latent, do not entail that third opposition between appearance and essence, and are therefore separable from metaphysics and classical realism. The postmodern argument, however, is more radical than that. Rather than claiming a sophisticated reform of the depth model, it demands a rejection of it in all forms and explicitly declares itself to be "against interpretation."

Perhaps the most influential attack on hermeneutics was written by Susan Sontag over two decades ago. Her seminal essay, "Against Interpreta-

FREDRIC JAMESON

tion," can be seen as an early "postmodern" statement in numerous respects: its critique of Enlightenment reason as terroristic; its rejection of the classical theory of representation; its celebration of populist camp and aestheticized play in textual surfaces; its apoliticism and tacit nihilistic rejection of the socialist project; its sense of decline, detritus, and panic in a culture based on "excess and overproduction"; and its privileging of textual form over content.

Sontag's attack is not, as she states, against interpretation in the Nietzschean sense ("There are no facts, only interpretations"), but against the "modern" view that every text has a single, specifiable meaning, a buried content that needs to be recovered, and then aggressively attempts to elicit this meaning by subsuming textual complexity to rigid theoretical schemes.¹² "In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capacity, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art ... To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world — in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.'"¹³ While repudiating interpretation as a violent and repressive practice, Sontag wants to recover the complexity and fullness of texts and experience. "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."¹⁴

A similar position informs Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Like Sontag, they reject hermeneutics as a repressive imposition of a monolithic model on a complex and incommensurable reality. Seeing desire as inherently "revolutionary" in its primordial "nomadic" state, they decry its "territorialization" in all possible forms, which includes not only the violence of the state, but the violence of reason, "crushing the whole of desiring-production, replacing it with a system of beliefs" such as Oedipus.¹⁵ Hermeneutics belongs to the classical framework of representation that they see as "a social and psychic repression of desiring production."¹⁶ Like Sontag, they pursue a strictly formalistic — albeit politically radical — approach to texts. For them, the "sole question" is not "what does it mean?"; but "how does it work?" The text that concerns them, the unconscious, has no content (and so, one surmises, no psychic life whatsoever), it is just a machine in continual production. A key task of schizoanalysis, for example, is to discover how this machine works, to locate the social forces impeding it, and to liberate its productive intensities for dissemination throughout the field of partial objects.

Similarly, the new postmodern media theory tends to be a formalist mode of criticism that concentrates exclusively on how television works, as a signifying system, rather than on what it says, as an ideological apparatus.¹⁷ Anchored in the postmodern social theories of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, and in McLuhan's "the medium is the message," this new media theory is part and parcel of the new "post-" ideologies which deny the possibility of significant social opposition and transformation. For postmodernists, television is a purely imagistic environment whose only "message" is the visual medium itself. Its visual environment negates or absorbs

any content and so is nothing but surface. Thus, as the title of a recent book suggests, there can only be a "watching" of television in terms of images and montage, and not a "reading" of television in terms of symbols, myth, or ideology. In a word, television is signification, not socialization, and so demands a strictly formalist analysis.

There are numerous problems with the post-structuralist and post-modern critique of hermeneutics. First, there is a radical erasure of the distinctions and differences between the many types of hermeneutical projects. Sontag rightly critiques a dogmatic rationalism which sees texts as nothing but objects to be colonized by interpretive models and which search for *the* meaning of a text. To be sure, certain interpretive schemes are false and reductive. One needs only think of the ludicrous Freudian or Marxist models which see in everything a direct expression of the economy or the phallus.

Sontag, however, wrongly generalizes from such extreme cases to every possible type of interpretive method. Against this indiscriminating conflation of diverse problematics — which itself is totalizing and "terroristic" — it needs to be emphasized that the hermeneutic projects of such theorists as Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Jameson (who explicitly seek to construct a "new hermeneutic"), are significantly different in that they are based precisely on an attentiveness to difference — both historical and cultural — and define their fundamental methodological problem as how to properly grasp the full radicality of the "Other."

As stated by Gadamer, a genuine hermeneutical understanding proceeds through dialogue with the "Other" — be it a person or a text — and seeks to establish a "fusion of horizons" which, far from dissolving separate horizons, brings them into such a close proximity that genuine understanding becomes *possible*, in that one *overcomes* a universalizing, subject-centered understanding and learns to understand and respect the language of this "Other."¹⁸ I would argue that the possibility of totalizing interpretation is limited, if not forestalled, by a hermeneutic emphasis on polysemy (Ricoeur), ambiguity (Jameson's dialectic of ideology and utopia), and undecidability (Derrida and Gadamer). A genuine hermeneutical encounter begins with the acknowledgment of a "surplus of meaning" (Gadamer) that requires a permanent hermeneutical revolution of a multi-perspectival approach.¹⁹

As soon as she states it, Sontag abandons her distinction between a valid Nietzschean sense of interpretation and an invalid hermeneutics of suspicion (equated with a totalizing impulse), and nostalgically longs for a return to pre-theoretical and non-rational expressive immediacy of life (a position that Baudrillard and every other thinker aligned with the Romantic tradition espouses). She fails to see how even reductive interpretive systems have provided powerful insights into art and social life and the extent to which interpretive rules and methods are needed. Kafka, for example, may have been ravaged by various "armies of interpreters,"²⁰ but

these interpretations have also shed important light on his work, which a formalist method necessarily could not. In fact, one might argue that a sensitive and sophisticated hermeneutics is necessary in order to let the text "be" at all. In Hayden White's words, "Far from reducing the work, [interpretation has], on the contrary, enflowered it, permitted it to bloom and caused it to display its richness and power as a symbolizing process."²¹ Rather than rejecting interpretation for a mystical "luminousness of the thing in itself,"²² we should also see the values and deficiencies of each different type of interpretation, while appreciating the force of Sontag's insistence on the text as a sensual form in its own right (*le plaisir du texte*).

Sontag's excessively irrationalist position becomes politically reactionary when she espouses an indulgent play in textuality indifferent to political ideologies and their critique. By unqualifiably rejecting content, meaning, and interpretation, and espousing an aestheticized immersion in textual form, she occludes an ideological analysis of texts at the level of their production (both by the "author" and within social relations in general), distribution (within commodity circuits), and consumption (the "aesthetics of reception"), and so depoliticizes precisely what demands politicization and critique.

This privileging of form over content replicates the error of traditional content analysis at another level. Ultimately, the problem lies in a one-sided analysis that theorizes one aspect of the text in abstraction from its dialectical counterpart and fails to incorporate both aspects within one coherent theory of aesthetic production. The formalist argument is correct insofar as the important aspect of understanding *what* textual content means is *how* it is produced. Social meaning is not directly transmitted or reflected through the text, it is mediated through specific technologies, textual styles, genres, and codes that need to be theorized on their own terms. As seen by Brecht, for instance, radical art needs to understand how certain the kinds of form, genres, or representational styles (e.g., realism) can militate against progressive encoding, insofar as critical content can be short-circuited through a spectacular dramatic form that stifles critical thought.

If it is fallacious, however, for hermeneutics to exclude or devalue a formalist analysis, it is equally as false for formalism to ignore content analysis. Formalism fails to see how textual form is itself a type of "content," historically determined and ideological in nature, and which can promote — or prevent — specific beliefs and worldviews (e.g., the way filmic genres, conventions, and techniques can suggest a neutral depiction of an unchanging world).²³ It reifies texts as things, rather than cultural artifacts with a distinct "political unconscious" that requires critical excavation. This means that we must not abandon "interpretation," but "prolong interpretation" to the point where the text speaks to the socio-historical conditions

of its production, to issues such as "the irreconcilable demands and positions of antagonistic classes" inscribed in the text by the "author."²⁴

Thus, a much more complex and multi-dimensional interpretive model is needed. Television, for example, is not simply the cultural arm of rightist ideology, nor of postmodernism for that matter. Rather, it is a complex and contradictory site of signification *and* socialization, of formal effects and ideological conditioning (e.g., the ways films were crucial in indoctrinating millions of immigrants into American values, the multiple ways mainstream film and TV supports conservative values, etc.). One of the most insidious "ideologies" of a show like *Miami Vice*, for example, generally understood as only "about" its visual environment, is the ideology of the images themselves. The fast-paced montage, the cars, clothes, and cocaine, the Big Signifiers of Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll — are all signs of conspicuous consumption proffered for visual and libidinal pleasure and all translate into and reproduce consumerist ideology. The postmodern opposition between signifier and signified, signification and socialization, form and content, fails to recognize how the formal organization of the signifiers is itself an ideology and is translated into specific ideological positions.

Post-Modern Representation

Who could say what the reality is that these signs simulate?²⁵

Jean Baudrillard

Another argument against interpretation, as stated by Baudrillard and Kroker, and also by Jameson, is that depth models are historically obsolete, no longer applicable within a postmodernity where subjects lack affective depth, where literary and artistic texts are sheer surface, and signs are self-referential. In its most extreme form — Baudrillard's vision of total "obscenity" — there is no content whatsoever to be interpreted ("content is neutralized")²⁶; there are signifiers, but no signifieds; no scene or mirror and the distinctions and depths they imply, only "the smooth operational surface of communication."²⁷

While there is much truth to the claim that postmodernism is an era of extreme superficiality and flatness on various levels, I find it too totalizing and insensitive to the actual complexity and plurality of contemporary culture and society. This position is best understood as one that clarifies certain present-day *tendencies*, rather than a completed, totalized state without exceptions, differences, contradictions, and significant counter-tendencies.

There can be no question that the conceptual world, as described by Foucault where language stands within a dense web of resemblances organized by God, or mirrors a world of nature, is gone, eclipsed, never to return. It is indeed true that the relation between language and the world is a historical one and that signs today no longer "represent" a world in the classical sense.²⁸ Our contemporary world is very much shaped by

FREDRIC JAMESON

media, fashion, and advertising, and a new type of sign structure has emerged where signifiers float in an unstable and infinitely manipulable vertical series which *can* indeed confine subjects to the prisonhouse of language or the castle of the hyperreal.

As pervasive as this type of experience may be, it is not an irrevocable, necessary, or universal one. To the extent that subjects reject mass media and consumerist ideology and learn to reshape their world apart from the codes of the consciousness industry, an analysis such as Baudrillard's is inadequate and determinist. This suggests that the "commutating" sign structure of late-capitalism does not dissolve social reality, rather social reality dissolves it when the subject gains a critical and interpretive grasp of the social structures and relations behind the production of commodities/signs.

Jameson's example indeed demonstrates a vast difference between the world represented by Von Gogh's peasant's shoes and the one we find, or don't find, in Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes." For Jameson, this painting suggests some "fundamental mutation" in the subject and object world; it shuts the viewer out of its world, that is to say, it doesn't speak of any world at all, and therefore gives us "no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture" and situate it in a larger context.²⁹

Nevertheless, what is being said here? Do we really mean that such an object has no "referent" in any sense? Do we really believe that this painting is hermetically sealed in an inscrutable universe that somehow defies "interpretation"? Postmodernists have accurately described a mutation in the production of aesthetic texts, a new aesthetic where "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces."³⁰ Their mistake is to move directly from the phenomenology of surface to the surface of phenomenology and to claim that at the interpretive level — rather than the level of the text — there is nothing but surface when the distinctions between surface and depth, manifest and latent, remain valid to the extent that things are not directly and self-evidently given.³¹

Thus, rather than saying that there is no depth or referent, it is more accurate to say that there is a general, specificable reality or referent configured by such an object which, most generally, is late- or techno-capitalism. Postmodernity does not erase reality and install some inscrutable hyper-reality, that reality is only more mystified and more obscure, so much so, in fact, that it leads Baudrillard and others to write as though materiality no longer existed in any form, vaporized in its semiurgic processing. The semiotic idealism of some postmodern theory takes the linguistic turn of structuralism and poststructuralism to its extreme conclusion. Where language once referred to a world, now the world refers to language, nothing but a semiotic mirage. Jameson helps to forestall this very idealist confusion when he writes that although history is "inaccessible to us except in textual form," it is, nevertheless, "*not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise."³² Rather, "History is what hurts" and its

"alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them."³³

Therefore, the issue is not that fetishized postmodern artifacts nullify or invalidate any type of cultural interpretation and critique, it is rather that they necessitate the most incisive and complex hermeneutic we can develop, one which accounts for the historical changes in the nature of aesthetic production, subjective experience, and the linguistic sign, but rejects the Berkeleyian idealism of some versions of postmodernism, and locates the material forces which condition the relative autonomy of aesthetic production and determine the nature of signification.

Most immediately, then, it is true that Warhol's painting is flat, superficial, without a depth or resonance of sorts, a rupture from the old surrealist world of thick spatial symbols. In a more general context, however, it becomes a hermeneutic clue to the nature of a social reality where fragmentation, flatness, and blankness become culturally dominant (Jameson) and normatively celebrated (Lyotard and Baudrillard). It is significant, therefore, that as Jameson remarks on the supposed inscrutability of Warhol, he simultaneously presents us with a powerful dereifying interpretation that historically situates Warhol's work as a cultural practice of "late-capitalism," and whose suppressed thematic is commodification and commodity fetishism.³⁴ Rather than, with Baudrillard, consigning the image to the inscrutable realm of the hyperreal, it is better to see it, with Debord, as the highest phase of commodity reification and produced within specifiable social conditions and relations.³⁵

To draw from my earlier point, we should see postmodernism not as the catastrophe of representation, its convulsive involution in the form of simulation, but rather as a crisis in representation, the widespread inability to "map" the totality of social relations and networks hidden below the axiomatic and gleaming surfaces of everyday life.³⁶ Thus, I find Jameson's category of cognitive mapping, however vague and undertheorized, useful and politically empowering, unlike the postmodernist conception of the "end of representation" and the politics, or lack thereof, implied.³⁷ "Cognitive mapping" is a rewriting of "representation" that takes into account the problems that arise with the old concept of representation while trying to maintain the valid aspects of this problematic, namely the attempt to theoretically configure the complex forces and relations that structure the social and natural world. [Surely we should not too quickly equate (critical) reason with conceptual and political domination.]

There is no escaping interpretation; as Jameson has observed, the supposedly anti-hermeneutic positions of poststructuralism and postmodernism are nothing but calls for and practices of *alternative* hermeneutic positions, and their validity should be judged accordingly.³⁸ To the extent that postmodern theorists say anything beyond conventional wisdom, they are doing interpretive work and so rely on some sort of depth model.

FREDRIC JAMESON

It would be perverse, for example, to say that Deleuze and Guattari are not “interpreting” capitalism as a distinct type of social machine, or that Kroker is not offering specific readings of Fischl and Magritte. The anti-hermeneutical argument, taken at its word, is *self-contradictory* insofar as it cannot account for its own historicity and interpretive status. Are we to believe that the anti-hermeneutics position is not itself an interpretation? There are two unacceptable responses to this aporetic position: either it is *not* an interpretation, and so must be a realist metaphysics which it wishes to reject; or it *is* an interpretation, and so again becomes what it claimed not to be.

Obviously, it *is* a kind of interpretation and the argument pivots on the meaning of “interpretation.” In its historical inception and development, hermeneutics has been associated with religious values, founding subjects, stable unitites, and transcendental signifieds. If these remain necessary elements of a theory of interpretation, then it is best indeed that we become anti-hermeneutic. If, as I have argued, these traditional aspects of hermeneutics are by no means necessary to the general project of hermeneutics — a reflexive elucidation of the pre-theoretical meanings, historically and linguistically mediated, embedded in texts and experience — then we can develop a sophisticated theory of interpretation which sidesteps the metaphysical lures of the “being” of the text, and gets down to the real *work* of decoding.³⁹ Hermeneutics is fully compatible, for example, with a Derridean philosophy insofar as its principle of “always already” is a statement of *différance*, a philosophy, of course, worked out in part through a critical appropriation of the hermeneutic tradition.

Thus, we must not let the deconstruction of some hermeneutical positions carry over into the total rejection of this problematic, so that nothing is left but the apolitical and aestheticized formalism of Sontag, Paul de Man, or Harold Bloom. This is, alas, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. To the degree that meanings are not directly given, interpretation is needed; and since social and textual meanings are prejudicial and never innocent, interpretation immediately entails ideology critique.

The Politics of Interpretation

The political interpretation of literary texts ... [is] the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.⁴⁰ Frederic Jameson

Ultimately, there’s nothing new in the postmodernist/post-structuralist argument against hermeneutics. Its roots reach deep into the positivist tradition and the rejection of any reality beyond empirical “facts” and observational statements. Poststructuralists and postmodernists certainly are not empiricists, but they both hastily reject hermeneutics and depth models. Anti-hermeneutics becomes a reactionary philosophy insofar as it occludes any attempt to decipher social ideology and mystification. The problem, however, as Jameson states, is that a that “no society has ever

been quite so mystified in quite so many ways as our own, saturated as it is with messages and information, the very vehicles of mystification".⁴¹ Therefore, some postmodern theory is a depoliticizing practice which precludes other ways of reading texts in terms of the ideological tendencies, conflicts, and contradictions within a culture.⁴²

The alternative method I espouse is a political hermeneutics which draws from the philosophical problematics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, and synthesizes aspects of Ernst Bloch, Guy Debord, and Fredric Jameson. This political hermeneutics has a two-fold task: a (positive) hermeneutics of recollection and a (negative) hermeneutics of suspicion. Negatively, a political criticism interprets the production and reproduction of political ideologies in cultural texts that are by no means ideologically innocent (e.g., the way a film like *Top Gun* aggressively promotes militarist values). With Jameson, it would seek to uncover those "strategies of containment" by which a text attempts to position itself outside of social history and to resolve real social contradictions at an imaginary level. Insofar as postmodern theory prevents this important ideological analysis, it too must be seen as a strategy of containment, complicit with ideological mystification and reification.

Since texts are not just negative and reactive, however, nor simple manifestations of ideology and false consciousness, a political hermeneutic must also thematize their utopian longings, reveal how they advance desires for a better world, critically contrast these moments to the actual poverty of everyday life under consumer capitalism, and politicize the difference between what is and what could be.

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Notes

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1. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 126.
2. For McLuhan's use of implosion, see *Understanding Media* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).
3. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between modernity and postmodernity, see Steven Best, "The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Jean Baudrillard and Postmodernism," forthcoming in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, 1988; and "Jameson, Totality, and the Post-Structuralist Critique," forthcoming in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, ed. Douglas Kellner, 1988.
4. The strongest statement of the irrevocably crisis-ridden nature of the capitalist mode of production remains Ernst Mandel's *Late Capitalism*, (London: New Left Books, 1975).
5. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 111.

FREDRIC JAMESON

6. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism," *New Left Review* #146 (July-August, 1984), p. 61. It could be argued that Jameson himself frequently misreads cultural phenomena which seem to belong more properly to modernism as "postmodern". See my "Jameson,"
7. *Ibid.*, p. 55. Also see Jameson's "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate," *New German Critique*, #33 (Fall 1984), where Jameson maps out various political positions entailed by different attitudes toward modernism and postmodernism.
8. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, quoted in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp. 475-476.
9. For an analysis of how the media has worked to erode traditional hierarchies, see Joshua Meyerwitz, *No Sense of Place*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
10. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, (New York: Dell, 1961), p. 15.
11. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 171.
12. Fredric Jameson's aggressive Marxist hermeneutics could be seen as an ideal example of what Sontag decries. For Jameson, "a criticism which asks the question 'What does it mean?' constitutes something like an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically *rewritten* in terms of some fundamental master code or 'ultimately determining instance'. For Jameson, then, all 'interpretation', in the narrower sense, demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code" *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 58. While I believe Jameson has produced some powerful and convincing Marxist readings of literary and cultural texts, it is also clear that his interpretations are sometimes too reductive and "forcible," too quick to draw mediating links to economics and class. For further discussion, see my "Jameson"
13. *Against Interpretation*, p. 17.
14. *Ibid.* p. 23.
15. *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 178.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
17. The most pronounced examples of postmodern media criticism are Arthur Kroger and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene*, and the essays by Todd Gitlin, Pat Aufderheide, Mark Crispin Miller, and Michael Sorkin in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1987). For a critique of this latter book and an elaboration of the position stated in this paper, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "(Re)Watching Television: Notes Toward a Political Criticism," in *Diacritics*, (Summer 1987), and Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "Watching Television: The Limitations of Postmodernism," in *Science as Culture* #4.
18. See Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Crossroad, 1962). Ricoeur provides a good formulation of this *decentered* hermeneutic: "The very work of interpretation reveals a profound intention, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the reader to a text that has become foreign, thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension man is able to have of himself." *The Conflict of Interpretations*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 4.

STEVEN BEST

19. In a later essay, Gadamer moves very close to a semiotic and post-structuralist problematic. See his "Text and Interpretation," in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press), pp. 377-398.
20. *Against Interpretation*, p. 18.
21. *The Content of the Form*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), p.213.
22. *Against Interpretation*, p. 23.
23. For the best examples of an approach which sees aesthetic form as an important ideology in its own right, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious, Marxism and Form* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), and Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
24. *The Political Unconscious*, p.85.
25. *Simulations*, p. 152.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
27. "The Ecstasy of Communication," p. 177.
28. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970).
29. "Postmodernism," p. 60.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
31. In Marx's famous words, "science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided." Quoted in Alex Callinicos, *Althusser's Marxism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1976), p. 25.
32. *The Political Unconscious*, p 35.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
34. "Andy Warhol's work in fact turns centrally around commodification and the great billboard images of the Coca-cola bottle or the Campbell's Soup Can, which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital," "Postmodernism," p.60.
35. See my "Commodification ..."
36. A concrete and dramatic example of this is the whole problem of the verification of nuclear weapons.
37. See Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347-357.
38. *The Political Unconscious*, p. 23.
39. Even Heidegger opposed the naive idea that hermeneutics could rely only on un-theoretical intuitions, rather than a sophisticated methodology. His theory of "destruction" is premised on this assumption.
40. *The Political Unconscious*, p. 17.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
42. See Kellner and Ryan, *Camera Politica*.