Zuidervaart, Lambert. “Realism, Modernism, and the Empty Chair.” IN

Used in accordance with the publisher's copyright and self-archiving policies.

November 29, 2013.
POSTMODERNISM

JAMESON CRITIQUE

Edited By
Douglas Kellner

PostModernPositions, Volume 4

MAISONNEUVE PRESS

Publications of the Institute for Advanced Cultural Studies

Washington, D.C., 1989
Realism, Modernism, and the Empty Chair

Lambert Zuidervaart
Calvin College

The Echternach dancing procession is not the march of the World Spirit; limitation and reservation are no way to represent the dialectic. Rather, the dialectic advances by way of extremes . . . . The prudence that restrains us from venturing too far ahead . . . is usually only an agent of social control, and so of stupefaction.

—Adorno, Minima Moralia

Were it not for the dance of Fredric Jameson, Marxism and postmodernism might well seem incompatible. Both as storytelling and as the story being told, postmodernism subverts the central claims of Marxism. This is particularly so of Western Marxism, whose critique of capitalism relies on claims about totality, truth, and history. Such claims are of little use to a movement that celebrates the particularity of the present moment.

Jameson is not about to join the celebration, but he is not ready to condemn it either. His project is to enact a good story about the postmodernist feast. A good story will be a Marxist story, but it will give a new choreography to Marxist story-telling. The notion of literary import or meaning (Gehalt) is a case in point. By observing this notion at work among earlier Western Marxists such as Lukács and Adorno, one gains perspective on Jameson's attempt to update Marxist categories for a postmodern culture.
This discussion will show that reinterpretative dances are not always fluid. More specifically, Jameson's attempt to update Western Marxist aesthetics for a postmodernist audience threatens to render his project incoherent. Contrary to Adorno's advice, the argument for this conclusion will mimic the dance of Echternach, in form at least, if not in content. Taking three steps forward, the essay will situate "import" in the Lukács-Adorno debate about realism, present Jameson's view of this debate, and examine his attempt to reconstruct "import" into "symbolic act." Stepping backwards, it will next discuss Jameson's attitude toward postmodernism and then read the notion of "reification" as a code shared by all three authors. The final section will suggest that Jameson must revise this code if his story about postmodernism is to become coherent.

I. Import and the Privileged Subject

"Postmodernism" indicates our context for reading Jameson. A partial sign of current academic fashion, the concept styles itself after "modernism," itself a multivalent concept. Rather than review recent debates about how the two concepts connect, let me pick out an aspect that helps one read Jameson's project. This aspect is the dialectic between subject and object in Western culture since the seventeenth century. "Subject" refers to the human knower or actor, whether individual or collective. "Object" refers to whatever the human knower or actor is thought to constitute or generate. The relevance of this subject-object dialectic is suggested by a comment on the "hyperspace" of postmodernism in Jameson's conversation with Anders Stephanson:

We used to talk about this in terms of subject-object dialectics; but in a situation where subjects and objects have been dissolved, hyperspace is the ultimate of the object-pole, intensity the ultimate of the subject-pole, though we no longer have subjects and objects. ("RPM," 47)

"Postmodernism" can be regarded as a movement toward abandoning the subject-object dialectic.
Deep in this movement is the impulse to deprive the subject of its privileged position. In philosophy, this impulse toward deprivation opposes the constitutive knower first clearly articulated in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. In the arts, this impulse either destroys the privileged position of the artist or highlights a destruction that has already occurred. In literary criticism, the deprivation of the subject undermines both the authority of the author and the criteria of the critic.

The tendency to deprive the human subject of its privileged position is neither sudden nor arbitrary. It emerges gradually from modern Western culture, which is itself tied to the history of capitalism and industrialization. Astute historians such as Perry Anderson in his *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* and Martin Jay in *Marxism and Totality* have found a similar tendency growing within Western Marxism. If they are correct, then a struggle over the subject's position may well be central to Western Marxism—central not as the center, but as an unavoidable struggle upon which depends much of its credibility and strength. Given the emphasis on subjective agency in traditional Marxist politics, the question of the subject's position has implications far beyond the fields of philosophy, art, and literary criticism. The implications become clearest at an intersection that one can label "cultural politics."

The transition from middle Lukács to late Adorno is particularly instructive in this regard. According to Martin Jay, Western Marxism begins by emphasizing a sociohistorical totality and by privileging a collective subject that can transform this totality. Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) gives the classic presentation of this approach. Although spawned in part by Lukács' book, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) appears to have demolished both the emphasis on totality and the privileging of a collective subject:

No longer could a Western Marxist defend an expressive view of the whole in which a meta-subject was both the subject and the object of history. No longer could history itself be seen as a coherent whole with a positive conclusion as its telos. No longer could totality ignore the
non-identity of the historical and the natural and subordinate the latter to human domination. [Marxism and Totality, 274]

Yet one cannot ignore Adorno's expectation of a human transformation of society and his hope for a new relationship with nature. His abandonment of Lukács' meta-subject does not entail a complete anti-subjectivism. In paradoxical fashion, Adorno tries to give an immanent critique of the privileged subject. His philosophy tries "to use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity" [Negative Dialectics, xx]. The subject is to be deprivileged, but a privileged subject must carry this out.

The paradox here lets one characterize Adorno's cultural politics as one of paradoxical modernism. A good example of his cultural politics, and a relevant one for understanding Jameson, occurs in Adorno's debate with Lukács over realism and modernism. In a well-known polemical review, Adorno once accused Lukács of re-enacting Hegel's "reconciliation under duress". A few years later, Lukács charged Adorno with moving into the "Grand Hotel Abyss." The occasion for these pleasantries was Lukács' Realism in Our Time, published less than ten years before Adorno's Negative Dialectics. Ostensibly the Adorno-Lukács debate concerns the political merits of realism and modernism in twentieth-century literature. Read from the vantage point of Jameson's recent writings, however, the debate also enacts a struggle over the position of the epistemic subject relative to the import of the literary work. A brief reading from this angle will help introduce the dance of Fredric Jameson.

Lukács distinguishes three main streams in twentieth-century literature: modernism, critical realism, and socialist realism—represented by Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Maxim Gorky, respectively. One can simplify Lukács' descriptions as follows. Modernist literature is bourgeois literature that is characterized by ahistorical angst in the face of monopoly capitalism. Critical realism, although ideologically bourgeois, displays sober optimism and does not reject socialism. Socialist realism is similarly historical and optimistic. Unlike critical realism,
however, it uses a socialist perspective "to describe the forces working towards socialism from the inside" ([Realism in Our Time], 93). Whereas critical and socialist realism can form a common front against the cold war, modernism inadvertently supports the forces of destruction.

Adorno rejects this system of classification and tries to subvert it case by case. He touts "modernist" works as genuinely realistic, in the sense that they provide "negative knowledge" of sociohistorical reality ("Reconciliation," 158-161). So-called "critical realist" works are claimed to be less "realist" and more "modernist" than Lukács thinks. So called "socialist realist" works are said by Adorno to be historically out of date and technically regressive. Their regressiveness originates in backward social forces of production and serves to hide oppressive features of Soviet society. In effect, Adorno declares socialist realist works to be both less modern and less realistic than the "modernist" works that Lukács condemns.

Behind these dramatically opposed interpretations lie different understandings and evaluations of the import of twentieth-century literature. For Lukács, the import of modernist works has at its heart an incorrect view of humanity. This literary worldview has profound formal and ideological ramifications. For Adorno, by contrast, the import of modernist works does not have any worldview at its heart. Nor does he consider import to be "form-determinative" ([Realism in Our Time], 16). Although seeming to share the category of import, Lukács and Adorno construe it differently. Both construals concern the manner in which a work presents social reality; both provide overarching standards of literary criticism; yet the two are incompatible, with Adorno's construal being much less subject-centered than that of Lukács.

As others have noted, Lukács' approach to literary import is problematic; Adorno registers some of the problems without pinpointing their source. These problems do not result from Lukácsian blindness to form or technique; instead, they stem from what Adorno vaguely identifies as inadvertent subjectivism ("Reconciliation," 153). More precisely put, the main difficulties arise from a double expectation that literary import originates in
the knowing subject and that this epistemic subject provides the key to interpreting literary import.

One can label this expectation a version of epistemic subjectivism. "Epistemic subjectivism" refers to a tendency to privilege the human knower as the ultimate source of "meaning," literary or otherwise. This privileged epistemic subject may be either individual or collective. The epistemic subject in literature may be the author, the reader, or the critic. It is not entirely clear which of these Lukács considers most important. It does seem clear, however, that he locates the ultimate source of literary import in the human knower. For Lukács, literary import originates in subjective worldviews, mediated by literary works; subjective worldviews provide the key to interpreting literary import.

Lukács' emphasis on worldview embodies a nineteenth-century expectation that meaning can ultimately be found in the subject's global outlook on life and society. His assessments of twentieth-century literature continually assume that authentic works will express such a global outlook. Adorno does not share this expectation. His emphasis on technique embodies a typically twentieth-century concern, and he rejects any attempt to locate the ultimate source of meaning in the epistemic subject. Adorno does not privilege the epistemic subject as a constituter of meaning, nor does he think of literary import as deriving from a subject's worldview.

Thus the realism-modernism debate turns out to enact a struggle over the position of the epistemic subject relative to the import of a literary work. This struggle reaches a new stage in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. The new stage becomes clear from his stance on the realism/modernism debate as well as from the category of "symbolic act" that informs his stance.

Jameson's work as a literary theorist and cultural critic owes much to both Lukács and Adorno, as well as to other prominent Western Marxists such as Bloch, Benjamin, Marcuse, and Sartre. In recent years, Jameson has also been in conversation with structuralist Marxists such as Louis Althusser and various French poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault,
Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard. Along with this conversation has come a turn toward mass mediated art and the culture of postmodernism. Like Lukács and Adorno, Jameson is concerned with the political implications of twentieth-century art and literature. Unlike Lukács and Adorno, however, Jameson does not privilege either realist or modernist works. Instead, Jameson seems opposed to assigning unusual political merit to any past or present cultural phenomena. Later his opposition will be described as an attitude of ambiguous postmodernism. First, however, we should consider his criticisms of his predecessors.

II. The Empty Chair

Jameson’s criticisms take their cues from an orientation toward the future. Jameson concludes *The Political Unconscious* by trying to set the stage for “conceiving those new forms of collective thinking and collective culture which lie beyond the boundaries of our own world.” Jameson’s staging reserves “an empty chair . . . for some as yet unrealized, collective, and decentered cultural production of the future, beyond realism and modernism alike” (*PU*, 11). These general stage directions prompt three observations. First, Jameson is announcing a political task that remains unfulfilled in *The Political Unconscious*. While acknowledging the urgency of projecting a vital political culture, Jameson steps back to explore preconditions for doing so. Second, it seems no actual body of works can count as elements of a vital political culture. “An empty chair” is reserved for some future cultural production. Third, the vital political culture that Jameson awaits will be “beyond realism and modernism.”

Recalling earlier Western Marxist debates, one surmises that Jameson is attempting to go beyond Lukács and Adorno. Lukács had tried to reinstate realism and dethrone modernism; Adorno had tried to install certain modernist works; Jameson wishes to unseat both realism and modernism in favor of some future culture. Whereas Lukács and Adorno see realism and modernism respectively as the best political culture for the present. Jameson
wishes to hold the position open for some future culture. His book
does not say how this culture would be connected with past and
present cultural phenomena. Nor does it say what kind of culture
would be politically preferable under current conditions.

Jameson’s hesitation on the last score contrasts strongly with
the militant tone of Adorno’s essay on “Commitment.” The
contrast is not surprising, however, since Jameson questions
Adorno’s militancy. Indeed, he calls Adorno’s essay an “anti-
political revival of the ideology of modernism” (“RIC,” 209).
Jameson credits Adorno with noting how consumer capitalism
can turn even the most dangerous didactic works into mere
commodities. This fact cuts more than one way, however. It also
speaks against seeing modernist works as prototypically political.
According to Jameson, consumer capitalism has rendered
modernism innocuous.

Having thus begun to dethrone literary modernism, Jameson
decodes it in The Political Unconscious. He does so by employing
the concept of reification to “transcode” literary modernism and
social life within monopoly capitalism (see PU, 40-42, 62-63, 225-
237). Jameson applies the concept of reification to all modernist
literature. Not only has consumer capitalism rendered modernism
innocuous, but also modernism has always had reification as its
precondition. In principle, then, no modernist work will be more
capable than any other work of penetrating the reified façades of
contemporary society. One cannot assign special political merit to
authentic modernist works.

At the same time, however, Jameson questions Lukács’ use of
“reification” to repudiate various modernist styles. According to
The Political Unconscious, no literary work, no matter how
“reactionary” in intent, is “mere ideology” in the sense of being
false consciousness pure and simple. The Marxist critic needs to
examine the “strategies of containment” whereby all sorts of
works repress deeply political impulses. When it comes to such
strategies, modernism and realism are more intricately inter-
woven than Lukács thinks. Indeed, Jameson insists that realism
has its own strategies of containment (PU, 193).

While acknowledging an affinity with Lukács’ emphasis on
reification, Jameson distances himself from Realism in Our Time:
We must . . . place some distance between our use of the concept [of reification] and that to be found in Lukács' various later accounts of modernism, in which the term reification is simple shorthand for value judgment and for the repudiation by association of the various modern styles. Yet Lukács was not wrong to make the connection between modernism and the reification of daily life: his mistake was to have done so ahistorically and to have made his analysis the occasion for an ethical judgment rather than a historical perception. (PU, 226-227)

According to Jameson, Lukács' failure to historicize leads him to ignore the "Utopian vocation" of modernist phenomena. The increasing abstraction of visual art, for example, does more than express the reification of daily life; such abstraction "also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in . . . the development of capitalism" such as the place of quality, feeling, and sheer color and intensity (PU, 63, 236-237). Here Jameson comes close to Adorno's notion of art as "the promise of happiness, a promise that is constantly being broken," even while he refuses to privilege those modernist works whose colorlessness Adorno regards as a "negative apotheosis" of color. The fact that there is a utopian impulse is not peculiar to modernism nor to any specific works of modern art. One may expect to find a utopian impulse in every literary work: "all ideology in the strongest sense . . . is in its very nature Utopian" (PU, 289).

Jameson's concern in The Political Unconscious is not to promote those recent works which seem to have greatest political merit, but to hold open a chair for some future culture beyond realism and modernism alike. This culture will be "collective and decentered" in ways that realism and modernism, with their links to capitalism, never could have been. Having come earlier in the development of capitalism, realism may not have had such elaborate strategies for containing the utopian impulse as modernism displays. Realism may also not have had reification as its precondition. Yet realism is no less ideological than modernism, just as modernism is no less utopian than realism. Furthermore, both realism and modernism are dated literary
movements. Their political implications were conditioned by earlier stages of class struggle and cultural revolution. To ask which of these movements has greater merit today would be to misunderstand the present from which the questioner asks. It is the present of postmodernism and consumer capitalism.

Jameson's criticisms of Adorno's modernism and Lukács' antimodernism involve a clear departure from their emphases on literary import and indicate a new phase in the struggle over the epistemic subject. One way to illustrate this shift is to consider the category of "the symbolic act" in Jameson's literary theory.

III. The Symbolic Act

Jameson's notion of the symbolic act upstages the category of import in Lukács and Adorno. Despite their disagreements about the political merits of realism and modernism, both Lukács and Adorno promote comprehensive evaluations of the import of specific works. For Lukács, who favors realism, the key to such evaluations is the work's literary worldview. For Adorno, who favors modernism, the key to evaluating import is the work's literary technique.

Rather than coming down on either side, Jameson proposes a different, three-horizon model for literary criticism. Each horizon of interpretation is nested within the next. On Jameson's model, any literary text can be read as a symbolic act within a class discourse. The class discourse occurs within a more or less revolutionary social formation. The relationship between the symbolic act and its referent is one of text and subtext. There is a social reality from which the text emerges. When emerging, however, the text not only draws social reality into its own texture but also transforms that reality into a subtext and thereby hides the independent existence of its own social situation. The literary critic must rewrite the literary text "in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting . . . of a prior . . . subtext [which] must itself always be [re]constructed after the fact" (PU, 81).
Jameson affirms with Kenneth Burke that the symbolic act is both a genuine act, albeit symbolic, and a genuine symbol, albeit active. "Symbolic" has the force of "projective," in the manner of dreams when subjected to psychoanalysis. The projection is of the political history of a specific time and place. Within the first horizon of interpretation, a Balzac novel, for example, would be read as a projective resolution of social contradictions in France after the failure of the Napoleonic revolution, during the demise of the country aristocracy. Formal or aesthetic contradictions in the text itself would be taken as imaginary and unavoidably incomplete resolutions of social contradictions in nineteenth-century France. Like the dream that hides the unconscious, the text hides its subtext until successfully analyzed (Dowling, 123). As a symbolic act, the text is a projection that tends to deny what it projects.

If one now asks whether there is an actor for this act, a projector for this projection, the best answer seems to be that the only actor is the act itself. Or perhaps one should say with Mohanty that "like the text, the author is seen as a node of interaction, as the criss-crossings of ideology, desire and the intransigence of history" ("History at the Edge of Discourse," 45). Jameson shares with structuralist Marxism the tendency to disregard questions of subjective agency. This tendency continues in his account of the other two horizons of interpretation. Jameson links the text to the structure of class discourse and proposes to read the text as the intersection of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production. In spite of his talk of class conflict and cultural revolution, Jameson makes little attempt to address the traditional problems of human agency for these processes.

Texts are like dreams that occur and await interpretation. What counts for Jameson's interpretations is not the comprehensive evaluation of some import that is linked to an author's worldview (Lukács) or to an author's social experience and expertise (Adorno). What counts is a self-activating act, which is to be reactivated through interpretation. The author seems to have vanished along with the task of political evaluation. The text and its interpretation remain. On a larger scale, the epistemic subject
not only seems to have lost its privileged position but also appears to have faded from the scene.

Jameson's reasons for upstaging the category of import and downplaying the role of the author are linked to his understanding of current historical imperatives. Two imperatives are especially high on his agenda. One is "the need to transcend individualistic categories and modes of interpretation" [PU, 68]. Jameson argues that "only the dialectic provides a way for 'decentering' the subject concretely, and for transcending the 'ethical' in the direction of the political and the collective" [PU, 60]. The notion of a symbolic act is one way to transcend the apparently individualistic category of import and to move beyond the "ethical" judgments traditionally attached to this category. The second imperative, closely related to the first, is to maintain a sense of collective agency without reviving Lukács' meta-subject. The notion of import, with its implication of representative expression or effort, seems either outdated or premature ["RMC," 140].

Lukács and Adorno disagree over the political merits of modernist works, but they agree that these merits must be evaluated and that such evaluations hinge on literary import. The notion of a symbolic act lets Jameson change the rules of their game. He uses the debate about modernism to show how he would historicize individualistic, ethical categories such as good/bad and progressive/regressive by looking for the "ideological" and "Utopian" features of any given phenomenon [PU, 234-237]. A similar procedure governs his interpretations of postmodernist phenomena. He points out their ideological and utopian features, but does not assess their relative political merits.

Given the need to transcend individualistic categories and ethical judgments, and given the need to maintain a sense of collective agency, one might wonder why Jameson does not give up the project of interpretation, which seems to emphasize the interpreter as an individual center of judgment. Must not the decentering dialectic itself be decentered?

It is clear from Jameson's criticism of postmodernist "ideologies of the text" that he wishes to retain the project of interpretation [PU, 17-23]. He tries to retain the project of interpretation by decoupling his historiographic analysis of
ideological and Utopian features from comprehensive evaluations concerning the political merits of cultural phenomena. Nevertheless, these decoupled judgments tend to coalesce in claims about his own project of interpretation. Jameson's claims about his own project are of a sort that he refuses to make about other cultural phenomena. Even though he assigns priority to the political perspective in interpretation, for example (PU, 17), he hesitates to do something similar with respect to literary production. So too, whereas Jameson expects that his own interpretations will prove to be "stronger" than others (PU, 13), he seems not to expect something similar with respect to specific texts. He ends up reserving an empty chair for some future culture, even though he is not willing to give up the task of making this reservation in the present.

The result seems to be a cultural politics within which lurks a strong potential for incoherence. This potential concerns three problems, all of them related to the apparent evaporation of the epistemic subject. To pose these problems and to examine Jameson's cultural politics more closely, it will be useful to return to his reasons for rejecting Adorno's "anti-political revival of the ideology of modernism."

IV. Ambiguous Postmodernism

Jameson has three reasons for rejecting Adorno's militant modernism. The first is that consumer capitalism has rendered modern art innocuous. The second is that modern art employs reifying strategies of containment. The third reason is that the presence of a utopian impulse is not peculiar to modern art. At first these reasons may seem convincing. Upon further reflection, however, one wonders whether any of these facts is peculiar to modern art. If none of them is, then some problems may arise for Jameson's own project.

Jameson's writings on postmodernism suggest a negative answer. His path-breaking article on this topic—"Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"—identifies postmodernism as the cultural dominant of consumer capitalism.
Jameson follows Ernest Mandel in positing three dialectical stages of capitalism: market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, and late, multinational, or consumer capitalism. Parallel to these stages are the cultural stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism. Just as consumer capitalism is the purest stage of capitalism, so postmodernism is the virtual apotheosis of reification in culture. The clear implication of this periodization seems to be that under current conditions virtually every oppositional form of culture has been rendered innocuous and must employ reifying strategies of containment simply to survive. Furthermore, even if one can identify utopian impulses within an oppositional form, their existence will not be peculiar to such a form. Thus it seems that Jameson’s reasons for rejecting Adorno’s modernism are also reasons for expecting little genuine and effective opposition within postmodern culture. This would be an undesirable consequence for Marxist cultural politics. The question is whether Jameson has found ways to avoid it.

To show that genuine and effective opposition can be expected, Jameson would have to solve three problems tied to his reasons for rejecting Adorno’s modernism. The first concerns the relationship of his interpretation to the postmodern culture in which it takes place. This is the problem of the precondition for a critique of postmodern culture. The second problem concerns the relationship of Jameson’s interpretation to whatever oppositional forces exist within postmodern culture. This is the problem of the relation of theory to praxis within cultural politics. The third problem, which encompasses the other two, pertains to the possibility of a new political culture within the space of postmodernism. This is the problem of the empty chair.

An illustration of the first problem occurs in Jameson’s discussion of recent debates about postmodernism in architecture. In “The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate,” Jameson distinguishes four different positions. There are those like Charles Jencks and Tom Wolfe who are anti-modernist but pro-postmodernist, in contrast to Manfredo Tafuri, who opposes both modernism and postmodernism. There are others like Jean-François Lyotard who are both pro-modernist and pro-postmodernist, in contrast to Jürgen Habermas and Hilton
Kramer, who oppose postmodernism for pro-modernist reasons. Jameson regards all such positions as ethical judgments rather than historical perceptions. Since "we are within the culture of postmodernism," the point is neither to condemn nor to celebrate postmodernism but to give it "a genuinely historical and dialectical analysis" ("PTI," 62-63). Thus Jameson insists on his own location within postmodern culture but takes distance from postmodernist affirmations of postmodern culture. His approach is one of ambiguous postmodernism—postmodernist in the sense that it locates itself within postmodern culture, but ambiguous in the sense that it refuses to condemn or celebrate that culture.

The problem here is that Jameson's location within postmodern culture is ill-defined. His desire to give "a genuinely historical and dialectical analysis" is not a postmodern impulse. According to his own analysis, postmodern culture displays sheer discontinuity and the loss of historical depth. If Jameson's analysis is correct, then one may wonder whether there exist sources or tendencies within postmodern culture that make such an analysis possible. Perhaps the analysis is living on borrowed time, so to speak, drawing upon a Marxist tradition amidst the death of all traditions. If so, then the political prospects for such an analysis seem bleak. Or perhaps the analysis is made possible by certain oppositional forces alive within postmodern culture. If this were so, however, one would expect Jameson to show more sympathy for the traditional Marxist project of evaluating the political merits of existing cultural phenomena. The inappropriateness of condemning or celebrating postmodernism as whole need not mean that the Marxist interpreter should refrain from a political critique of specific phenomena.

Here one begins to see a second problem tied to Jameson's critique of Adorno. It is a problem not unlike one facing Adorno's paradoxical modernism, namely the problem of relating theory to praxis within cultural politics. What exactly is the relationship between Jameson's interpretation and whatever oppositional forces exist within postmodern culture? Jameson posits a certain homology between his theoretical project and the aesthetic task of "cognitive mapping." He also suggests that his empathetic critique of postmodernist "theories" is analogous to a homeo-
pathic critique which, like Doctorow's work, would "undo postmodernism by the methods of postmodernism" ("RPM," 59). Nevertheless, homologies do not establish that there is an interaction between the two homologous fields, nor do analogies establish exactly how such interactions would proceed.

The first two problems are both manifestations of the problem of the empty chair. Given the space of postmodernism, which Jameson has analyzed in such an instructive fashion, what are the possibilities of a new political culture? This question encompasses both the preconditions for a critique of postmodern culture and the preconditions for oppositional forms of postmodern culture. To the question of oppositional forms, Jameson's article on postmodernism gives an excruciatingly tentative answer:

the new political art—if it is indeed possible at all—will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is, to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale. ("PCL," 92)

Jameson's answer is a delicate dance, calling for a new political culture while declaring it all but impossible under current conditions. The answer revives the theme of subjectivity while pointing out what militates against subjective initiative. The problem of the empty chair remains.

Obviously, Jameson is not unaware of this problem. A good deal of his energy in recent years has gone into addressing it. Absent to date, however, is a systematic re-examination of certain tendencies that make this problem a potential source of incoherence for his project. The move to reserve an empty chair at the end of The Political Unconscious may be more than a promise
Realism / Modernism / The Empty Chair • 219

to project a vital political culture in subsequent writings. Reserving an empty chair might also be the inevitable outcome of troublesome tendencies noted by various commentators on Jameson's book.¹⁰

One tendency is of particular importance in the present context. It is the tendency to absolutize the concept of reification. After observing this tendency at work in The Political Unconscious, one can see Jameson's ambiguous postmodernism as the setting of a new stage for Western Marxism's struggle over the position of the epistemic subject. One can also suggest ways in which this staging must be modified if Jameson's project is not to become incoherent.

V. The Code of Reification

Jameson's book describes the concept of reification as a mediation. By "mediation" he means the analyst's inventing of a code that is applicable to two distinct objects or structural levels (PU, 40, 225). Jameson considers "reification" to be a most useful device for transcoding literary modernism and social life. Reification is not "a mere methodological fiction," however; society is assumed to be "a seamless web" despite its fragmented and multidimensional appearance. At the same time, this assumption about society has a "merely formal" appeal, except insofar as it provides "the philosophical justification" for the analyst's "local practice of mediation" (PU, 40).

There are some troubling aspects to Jameson's account of reification. One is the weakness of his rationale for using this specific mediation rather than others. The assumption of totality, which justifies the practice of mediations, needs some justification beyond the fact that mediations require this assumption. Furthermore, even if Jameson is successful in his attempt to give additional justification, the assumption of totality does not in itself justify the specific mediation of "reification." It is not clear that Jameson ever does argue convincingly for using "reification." Since this concept yields insightful results in specific interpretations, however, the apparent lack of a convincing argument
may not be a serious problem. One thinks in this connection of Jameson’s highly illuminating discussion of Joseph Conrad.

A more troublesome aspect of Jameson’s account of reification is its circularity. When Jameson explains the need for mediations, of which reification is one, he does so in ways that already employ reification as a mediation. Consider the following passage:

Mediations are thus a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the various regions of social life . . . is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a particular analysis. (PU, 40)

In positing that social life has undergone fragmentation, autonomization, and so on, Jameson is already invoking a global theory of reification. Although he never clearly presents this theory, Jameson continually aligns such phenomena as the “privatization of contemporary life” and the dehistoricizing of contemporary consciousness with reification. He also subsumes psychic fragmentation and the “autonomization of sexuality” under the dynamic of reification. Similar alignments or subsumptions occur with respect to professionalization, Taylorization, scientific specialization, the autonomizing of art works, the rationalizing of social institutions, and the instrumentalizing of “values” (see PU, 20, 62-64, 160-161, 190, 220-222, 225-227, 249-253, 260-261). From a purely methodological perspective, it seems disingenuous to explain the need for mediations in terms that already assume the legitimacy of an assumed theory of reification. In addition, because the theory is assumed rather than elaborated, there is a strong possibility that the concept will become a master code for twentieth-century culture in the West, even though reification is supposed to be just one mediation among many. The tendency of such a master code is to become more suggestive than precise.

The most troublesome aspect of Jameson’s use of “reification,” however, is that it tends to make irrelevant all attempts to decide which phenomena are more or less resistant to reification. The long-range effect is to render problematic any attempt to give a political critique of contemporary culture. In
this respect, Jameson's ambiguous postmodernism shares a code with Adorno's modernism and Lukács' anti-modernism but takes it one step further. The code is "reification."

Both Lukács and Adorno see reification as the central mechanism whereby the commodity form permeates the entire culture of capitalism. Both authors also treat certain works of art as privileged opponents of reification. For Lukács, realism provides the requisite works. The literary worldview in realist works ensures that these maintain a grasp on the sociohistorical totality and penetrate reified social life under capitalist conditions. For Adorno, certain modernist works have sufficient experiential depth and technical progressiveness to resist the commodification of consciousness and to expose the hidden contradictions of capitalism.

Jameson also sees reification as a central mechanism in the culture of capitalism. Under the conditions of consumer capitalism, however, reification seems to have reached the point where no works and no authors provide a strategic challenge to reification. For Jameson, one structural peculiarity of consumer capitalism is the nearly total colonization of consciousness by the process of commodification. His book assumes that we live in a society where reification has become nearly total both on the side of the subject and on the side of the object. In the hyperspace of postmodernism, "subjects and objects have been dissolved" ("RPM," 47). Thus it is understandable why the evaluation of relative political merits has become irrelevant. The difficulty for Jameson is to explain the possibility of any political consciousness today, whether in the producer, the consumer, or the text itself. The attempt to balance "ideology" and "Utopia" in all cultural phenomena seems to indicate precisely this difficulty. In consumer capitalism no specific "strategy of containment" has greater political liabilities than any other. So, too, no specific "perspective on the future" ("RPM," 52) has greater political prospects than any other. The reservation for something beyond realism and modernism is made from a highly reified present.

Here the question of the subject's position returns with a vengeance. If the present is as highly reified as Jameson suggests, one must wonder about the viability and legitimacy of any
attempt to give a political interpretation of contemporary phenomena, including Jameson’s own attempt. If the interpreter is indeed located squarely within the highly reified culture of postmodernism, how can the interpreter maintain political consciousness and make defensible claims about the legitimacy of the interpreter’s own construal of culture? The same reasons for reserving an empty chair for some future culture seem to argue for vacating the present chair of political interpretation. Jameson’s project threatens to become self-referentially incoherent.

Rather than accept this conclusion, one could just as easily argue against assuming that reification has become as pervasive as Lukács, Adorno, and Jameson seem to think. This argument need not claim that “reification” is a bogus concept. The concept can function as an illuminating theoretical construct with a basis in empirical research. Problems arise when this construct is made the key to a totalizing theory of sociohistorical reality. When this occurs, the specificity of Marx’s economic critique evaporates, and the critique of culture gradually loses its point, whether through dogmatism, irrelevance, or indifference.

Dogmatism is clearly visible in Lukács’ a priori rejection of modernist literature because of the supposedly reified and reifying character of its worldview. Dogmatism is also evident in his inattention to the socio-economic basis of realist literature, whose worldview supposedly penetrates reified social life. Adorno’s approach is less dogmatic but no less problematic. The inescapable question raised by his defenses of modernist works is “So what?” Why is it important, for example, that Beckett’s Endgame powerfully presents the final history of subjectivity? What real contribution can such a work make to the liberation of consciousness, if capitalist culture is as monolithic as Adorno assumes?

Jameson avoids the dogmatism of Lukács and the irrelevance of Adorno, but he does so at the price of indifference. Jameson employs the concept of reification in such a way that it seems no longer useful to discriminate among phenomena that are more or less resistant to reification. Given the three problems noted earlier, however, it is hard to see how Jameson’s project of political interpretation can avoid incoherence unless the concept
of reification is relativized. The presumed pervasiveness of reification throughout postmodernism would eliminate the preconditions for a critique of postmodern culture, interrupt the relationship of Jameson's interpretation to any oppositional forces, and prevent the growth of a new political culture within the space of postmodernism.

Obviously the concept of reification cannot be relativized by fiat. One would have to rely on an empirically based structural and historical analysis of consumer capitalism and its culture. In theory, however, one can think of two ways in which to relativize the concept of reification. The first way would be to restrict its scope to a primarily economic meaning and to adopt a more refined vocabulary for analogues or extensions of the commodity form outside the strictly economic arena. Another way would be to suggest that reification either has not become as pervasive as Jameson thinks or has reversed itself in important respects during recent years. Either way would require a rethinking of the role of the subject in cultural politics.

VI. An Unfinished Project

Jameson himself has begun to move in this direction. Perhaps the best indication is his recent article on Georg Lukács, "History and Class Consciousness as an 'Unfinished Project.'" Jameson argues that the theory of reification provides the philosophical basis for Lukácsian aesthetics, just as "the consciousness of the proletariat" did in History and Class Consciousness. Jameson finds particularly significant the way in which Lukács' theory connects the logic of capitalism with the possibility and necessity of a counter-logic: "This allows us to imagine a collective project not merely capable of breaking the multiple systemic webs of reification, but which must do so in order to realize itself" ("HCC," 52). Equally significant is the fact that Lukács does not pursue this connection in the direction of a conventional subject-object synthesis but in the direction of a collective subject's de-reifying "aspiration to totality."
While one could quibble with aspects of Jameson’s interpretation, it is more important to see what he makes of Lukács’ theory. Jameson highlights two implications for the postmodern context. One is that the aspiration to totality points toward “a collective project” (“HCC,” 60). The second implication is that particular social groups, classes, or class fragments have an epistemological priority in capitalist society. Both implications point toward the re-privileging of a collective subject, albeit not the proletarian consciousness on which Lukács pinned his hopes for a systemic transformation of society.

Jameson suggests that distinctive “moments of truth” can be found in feminist theorizing as well as in the group experiences of women, Blacks, and Central European Jews. To grasp a group’s “moment of truth” is not only to see how the group’s social constraints make possible an otherwise unavailable experience of society but also to translate such experience “into new possibilities of thought and knowledge” (“HCC,” 70). Under current conditions, then, Lukács’ theory turns into a “principled relativism” with a specific presupposition:

The presupposition is that, owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups. (“HCC,” 65)

Does Jameson’s “principled relativism” sufficiently relativize the concept of reification to keep his project of political interpretation from becoming self-referentially incoherent? Certainly he has begun to relativize the concept. Lukács’ “reification” and “proletarian consciousness” give way to “the variable structures of ‘constraint’ lived by . . . various marginal, oppressed or dominated groups.” The de-reifying aspiration to totality makes room for an acknowledgement that each group’s experience produces its own view and its own “distinctive truth claim” (“HCC,” 71). The task now is to make an inventory of the
variable structures of constraint, always acknowledging, however, distinctive truth claims.

Translated into cultural politics, such language suggests that various cultural phenomena arising from various group experiences can provide strategic challenges to what was once called reification. Also suggested is the fact that a political interpretation of postmodern culture will receive instruction from such groups, even while it tries to provide a cohesive framework for understanding their experience.

At the same time, however, Jameson refers to "late capitalism" as the "absent common object of such 'theorization' from multiple 'standpoints'" ("HCC," 71), thereby once again indirectly invoking a non-relativized concept of reification. He also fails to address the question of how the truth of various claims will be determined and how the relative merits of conflicting truth claims will be adjudicated. An answer to either question would have to appeal to a systematic theory of the culture of capitalism. Inevitably the question would then arise as to the experiential base for such a theory. More pointedly, from what group standpoint will the distinctive truth claims of various groups be grasped? Does the systematic theory itself arise from the experience of a genuine collective subject—genuine in the sense of living common constraints in a way that produces shared illumination?

It seems that a non-relativized concept of reification continues to operate at the level of this last question. Jameson seems to hold that reification permeates postmodern culture, but that it releases various types of de-reifying consciousness in various groups occupying marginal or oppressed positions within late capitalist society. A dialectic occurs between the reifying structure of capitalism and various subsidiary structures. These subsidiary structures exist by virtue of the structure of capitalism, but they render transparent its reifying tendencies. It is to such groups or subsidiary structures that one must look for the vision and initiative to accomplish systemic transformation. One no longer sees an empty chair, but rather several that are occupied. But the position from which one sees these occupants is not yet transparent.
Jameson's appeal to a collective subject alleviates the threat of incoherence but does not eliminate it altogether. Much work must still be done to illuminate the preconditions for a critique of postmodern culture and to specify the relationship between such a critique and various oppositional forces within postmodern culture. Even if many chairs replace the chair of modernism, the positioning of these chairs remains a crucial question. Their place relative to each other, their contributions within postmodern culture, and their references to a postcapitalist culture must still be decided. This is an unfinished project and a collective project, one for which Jameson's reinterpretative dance is emblematic.

Notes

I wish to thank Lisa De Boer and Christopher Eberle for their research assistance on this article.


4. The author has discussed the Adorno-Lukács debate at greater length in "'Reconciliation Under Duress'? Realism in Our Time

5. Fredric Jameson's first major attempt to derive a methodology of "dialectical criticism" from these sources is in Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature, 1971.

6. See in particular Jameson's "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture"; "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate"; and "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." The latter article incorporates most of a talk given in the Fall of 1982 and published as "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." See also "On Magic Realism in Film" and "Cognitive Mapping."


9. On the same page Jameson says this need is "in many ways the fundamental issue for my doctrine of the political unconscious."
