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Fredric
Jameson

Adam Roberts

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FREDRIC JAMESON

Widely recognised as one of today's most important cultural critics, Fredric Jameson's writing addresses subjects from architecture to science fiction, cinema and global capitalism. His 1981 work *The Political Unconscious* remains one of the most widely cited Marxist literary-theoretical texts, and 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism' is amongst the most influential statements on the nature of postmodernity ever published.

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Adam Roberts is Lecturer in English at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of *Science Fiction* in Routledge's *The New Critical Idiom* series and his science fiction novel *Salt* (2000) is published by Victor Gollancz.

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FREDRIC JAMESON

Adam Roberts



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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The books in this series offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities. The *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series provides the books you can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies.

Each book will equip you to approach a key thinker's original texts by explaining her or his key ideas, putting them into context and, perhaps most importantly, showing you why this thinker is considered to be significant. The emphasis is on concise, clearly written guides which do not presuppose a specialist knowledge. Although the focus is on 'particular figures, the series stresses that no critical thinker ever existed in a vacuum but, instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history. Finally, these books will act as a bridge between you and the thinker's original texts: not replacing them but rather complementing what she or he wrote.

These books are necessary for a number of reasons. In his 1997 autobiography, *Not Entitled*, the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote of a time in the 1960s:

On beautiful summer lawns, young people lay together all night, recovering from their daytime exertions and listening to a troupe of Balinese musicians. Under their blankets or their sleeping bags, they would chat drowsily about the gurus of the time. . . .What they repeated was largely hearsay; hence my lunchtime

suggestion, quite impromptu, for a series of short, very cheap books offering authoritative but intelligible introductions to such figures.

There is still a need for 'authoritative and intelligible introductions'. But this series reflects a different world from the 1960s. New thinkers have emerged and the reputations of others have risen and fallen, as new research has developed. New methodologies and challenging ideas have spread through the arts and humanities. The study of literature is no longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems, novels and plays. It is also the study of the ideas, issues, and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. Other arts and humanities subjects have changed in analogous ways.

With these changes, new problems have emerged. The ideas and issues behind these radical changes in the humanities are often presented without reference to wider contexts or as theories which you can simply 'add on' to the texts you read. Certainly, there's nothing wrong with picking out selected ideas or using what comes to hand – indeed, some thinkers have argued that this is, in fact, all we can do. However, it is sometimes forgotten that each new idea comes from the pattern and development of somebody's thought and it is important to study the range and context of their ideas. Against theories 'floating in space', the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series places key thinkers and their ideas firmly back in their contexts.

More than this, these books reflect the need to go back to the thinker's own texts and ideas. Every interpretation of an idea, even the most seemingly innocent one, offers its own 'spin', implicitly or explicitly. To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that thinker, is to deny yourself a chance of making up your own mind. Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is not so much its style or content as the feeling of not knowing where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and works and by guiding your further reading, starting with each thinker's own texts. To use a metaphor from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), these books are ladders, to be thrown away after you have climbed to the next level. Not only, then, do they equip you to approach new ideas, but also they empower you, by leading you back to a theorist's own texts and encouraging you to develop your own informed opinions.

Finally, these books are necessary because, just as intellectual needs have changed, the education systems around the world – the contexts in which introductory books are usually read – have changed radically, too. What was suitable for the minority higher education system of the 1960s is not suitable for the larger, wider, more diverse, high technology education systems of the 21st century. These changes call not just for new, up-to-date, introductions but new methods of presentation. The presentational aspects of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* have been developed with today's students in mind.

Each book in the series has a similar structure. They begin with a section offering an overview of the life and ideas of each thinker and explain why she or he is important. The central section of each book discusses the thinker's key ideas, their context, evolution and reception. Each book concludes with a survey of the thinker's impact, outlining how their ideas have been taken up and developed by others. In addition, there is a detailed final section suggesting and describing books for further reading. This is not a 'tacked-on' section but an integral part of each volume. In the first part of this section you will find brief descriptions of the thinker's key works: following this, information on the most useful critical works and, in some cases, on relevant websites. This section will guide you in your reading, enabling you to follow your interests and develop your own projects. Throughout each book, references are given in what is known as the Harvard system (the author and the date of works cited are given in the text and you can look up the full details in the bibliography at the back). This offers a lot of information in very little space. The books also explain technical terms and use boxes to describe events or ideas in more detail, away from the main emphasis of the discussion. Boxes are also used at times to highlight definitions of terms frequently used or coined by a thinker. In this way, the boxes serve as a kind of glossary, easily identified when flicking through the book.

The thinkers in the series are 'critical' for three reasons. First, they are examined in the light of subjects which involve criticism: principally literary studies or English and cultural studies, but also other disciplines which rely on the criticism of books, ideas, theories and unquestioned assumptions. Second, they are critical because studying their work will provide you with a 'tool kit' for your own informed critical reading and thought, which will make you critical. Third, these thinkers are critical

because they are crucially important: they deal with ideas and questions which can overturn conventional understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted, leaving us with a deeper understanding of what we already knew and with new ideas.

No introduction can tell you everything. However, by offering a way into critical thinking, this series hopes to begin to engage you in an activity which is productive, constructive and potentially life-changing.

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The four lines from Noel Coward's 'The Stately Homes of England' are © the Estate of Noel Coward, and are quoted by permission of Methuen Publishing Ltd.

WHY JAMESON?

Fredric Jameson has been called ‘probably the most important cultural critic writing in English today’ (*GA*: ix). He has an extraordinary range of analysis, which takes in everything from architecture to science fiction, from the nineteenth-century novel to cinema, from philosophy to experimental avant-garde art. This range, allied to a powerful and penetrating critical intelligence, constitutes the most exhilarating thing about reading Jameson.

This study aims to provide a compact and comprehensible introduction to the work of Jameson, and explain why he is crucial to our understanding of contemporary literature and cultural studies. If we want a sense of why Jameson is important, and of the influence he has had on literary-cultural studies, we need to hold two key terms in mind at once: Marxism and postmodernism. For many, Jameson is the world’s leading exponent of Marxist ideas writing today; and his work on postmodernism has been the single most influential analysis of that cultural phenomenon. Anyone working in these two fields will almost certainly find themselves engaging with the ideas of Jameson.

Marxism is a system of beliefs based on the writings of Karl Marx (1818–83) concerned with analysing and changing the inequalities and injustices in the world in which we live. It has been extremely influential in many areas of culture and thought, and has had a particular impact in literary criticism and cultural studies: a fuller definition and discussion of Marxism can be found in Chapters 1 and 2. ‘Postmodernism’, on the other hand, is the term often used to describe the logic of contemporary culture and literature. It is the ‘style’, or to some people the historical period, in

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which a great deal of art is currently being produced; a similar use of terminology sees 'Victorianism' used to describe the style of art produced during the later nineteenth-century, or 'Modernism' to describe the work produced at the beginning of this century. There have been a great many attempts to define 'Postmodernism' more precisely than this, and Chapter 6 of this study explains these in more detail. In both these crucial areas, Jameson's work has been centrally and powerfully engaged. His two most famous works are *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and *Postmodernism* (the first part of which appeared in 1984): the first of these is powerful elaboration of Marxist literary criticism, the second a ground-breaking analysis of postmodernism that set the terms of much of the debate. These two emphases of Jameson's work do not represent any shift in interest. As we shall see, Jameson's penetrating analyses of the postmodern are actually only the elaboration of his lifelong Marxist attitudes.

It is as a Marxist that Jameson first came to prominence. His insights derive from and always relate to a left-wing perspective on culture and literature, but he is never doctrinaire, and his appeal is by no means limited to those who share his political views. In everything Jameson has written, it is the range and flexibility of his critical approach, as much as the penetration of his insights, that have won him so wide an audience. Anybody interested in the cultural forms of the 1980s and 1990s, the diverse manifestations of that much-contested term 'postmodernism', will find his diagnoses of that cultural logic essential reading.

JAMESON'S CAREER

Jameson's biography goes some way towards explaining the variety of his interests. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1934, he studied French and German at Haverford College in the early 1950s, travelling in Europe and studying also at Aix-en-Provence in 1954–5 and Munich and Berlin in 1956–7. This Continental European perspective deepened his sense of his own anglophone heritage, and gave important contexts to his readings in English and American literature. He took his MA at Yale, and went on to complete a PhD on the French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80). Sartre worked with the ideas of Marx and of the German thinker Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and helped shaped the

movement known as ‘Existentialism’, a school of thought which puts great emphasis on the individual’s experience of existence as the benchmark of value. For Sartre, individuality carries with it the difficult freedom to choose, and being aware of the burdens of that freedom and the commitment to live with them is the hallmark of ‘authentic’ existence. Few can achieve this authenticity, though, and instead fall in line with insincere, uncreative roles of living. This perspective is important when considering Jameson’s academic career: his own determined individuality, his adherence to a Marxist philosophy in a country (America) that has been at times hostile to such beliefs, even his unique and particular style of writing, are all symptoms of his commitment to an ‘authenticity’ in the difficult business of interpreting the world and its literature. As this study focuses on Jameson’s key ideas, I will not examine his PhD thesis on Sartre (which was later published as a book). However, one point worth stressing here is that Sartre is a figure who focuses Jameson’s particular interests: both a literary figure and a thinker in the Marxist tradition. Literature and philosophy are the main areas in which Jameson has worked.

In the 1960s Jameson worked as an Instructor and Assistant Professor at Harvard University, moving to the University of California, San Diego in 1967. From 1971 to 1976 he was Professor of French and Comparative Literature at San Diego; and from 1976 to 1983 he was a Professor in the French Department at Yale University. Since then he has been Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Duke University. But his academic emphasis on French literature should not obscure the fact that throughout the 1960s and 1970s Jameson was writing on an enormously wide range of topics, from Western literature and cultural studies to philosophy. His first book to win him a major reputation was *Marxism and Form* (1971), which includes detailed readings of a number of continental theorists and thinkers in the Marxist tradition. Jameson was one of the first critics of stature to introduce the now influential critical perspectives associated with these figures to an American academic audience; but *Marxism and Form* also includes a thesis of Jameson’s own – that critics need to concentrate on the *form* of literature as much as the content, that form is not a mere ‘trapping’ of the work of art but embodies powerful ideological messages. This influential argument is discussed in Chapter 3. The following year Jameson published another ‘critical account’ of a school of associated theorists

and thinkers: *The Prison-House of Language: a Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (1972).

Throughout the 1970s Jameson published many brilliant articles as well as a number of book-length studies. A critique of modernist writer Wyndham Lewis (*Fables of Aggression*, 1979) elaborated the way Jameson could find interesting and valuable things in apparently reprehensible material that others have seen as hopelessly tainted by the subject's fascism and misogyny; an influential critical position that opens up the possibility of reading *through* the surface of any text into hidden depths. This critical approach was elaborated and exemplified in one of Jameson's most famous works: *The Political Unconscious* (1981). This classic work makes up the focus of my Chapter 4.

If *The Political Unconscious* marks the high point of Jameson's contributions to Marxist literary theory, and remains to this day one of the most influential and widely cited Marxist literary-theoretical texts, then the 1980s saw him increasingly drawn to the phenomenon of postmodernity. An article published in the British left-wing journal *New Left Review* in 1984 called 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism' is amongst the most influential statements on the nature of postmodernity. Many critics were surprised by Jameson's intervention in this area, because it was assumed by some that a Marxist ought to be hostile to many of the things that 'postmodernism' was thought to stand for. But Jameson's work on postmodernism builds on his rich Marxist intellectual heritage. Jameson published widely on postmodern phenomena throughout the 1980s, broadening his range into films and other sorts of cultural production. *Signatures of the Visible* (1990) is a reading of cinema and cinematic texts. At the same time, his interest in and commitment to Marxist theory and practice did not wither. A study of Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno (*Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*) was published in 1990, and in 1991 the 'Postmodernism' article, slightly revised, together with an enormous mass of other materials, much of it published in journals throughout the 1980s, appeared in book form as *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

Since then, Jameson's groundbreaking interventions in the debate on postmodernity have continued, interspersed with more traditional Marxist studies. In fact it is not really possible to separate out these two aspects of Jameson's thinking. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and*

Space in the World System (1992) is a critical account of cinema and postmodernism that looks at the way certain films have attempted to embody the totalising ‘world system’ that Jameson, as a Marxist, equates with global capitalism. Jameson’s critical position has also become more global, with interests in Third World literature and culture, although some critics have expressed reservations about Jameson’s work in this area. *The Seeds of Time* (1994) is a sophisticated reading of postmodernism and ideas of Utopia; and *Brecht* (1998) is an account of one of the century’s most famous Marxist dramatists.

THE CHALLENGES OF JAMESON’S WORK

In general terms the difficulties faced by a reader new to Jameson are twofold: the first is the often complex and always wide-ranging critical context that Jameson inhabits, about which I have just been talking. The second is the sheer difficulty of reading Jameson’s own ornate, elaborate prose style.

Any detailed discussion of Jameson’s texts needs to be grounded in the contexts out of which they have been produced. This is important for any thinker, of course, but it is particularly crucial for Jameson because he invokes so many and such complicated traditions. This is in fact an advantage of studying Jameson: in exploring his work we necessarily learn about some of the most influential critical movements in literary theory. These movements include Marxism, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. In discussing Jameson’s key ideas, I will summarise the aspects of these critical traditions which have specific relevance to his work. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce some of the key Marxist concepts crucial to an understanding of Jameson; and Chapter 3 engages with the psychoanalytical contexts of Freud and Lacan.

The first thing that many readers new to Jameson note is that he is ‘difficult’. This issue – Jameson’s distinctive writing style – may or may not constitute a barrier to a reader who wants to access these books. Some readers love the Jamesonian style: fellow Marxist Terry Eagleton, for instance, considers it ‘unimaginable that anyone could read Jameson’s. . .magisterial, busily metaphorical sentences without profound pleasure, and indeed I must acknowledge that I take a book of his from the shelf as often in place of poetry or fiction as literary theory’ (Eagleton 1986: 66).

The critic Colin MacCabe admits that the style is ‘difficult’, but rather sternly insists ‘this difficulty must simply be encountered’ (*GA*: ix). Other critics have found it tiresome, burdensome, awkward; Douglas Kellner has gone so far as to call Jameson’s style ‘infamous’ (Kellner 1989: 7). The obvious question, particularly for new readers is: why does he have to write in such a difficult style?

Jameson himself suggests two answers to this question: answers that have to do with *resistance* and *pleasure*. Indeed, these two concepts have a wider relevance than just the business of reading Jameson: they are central to his theoretical approach to reading any literature. In the ‘Preface’ to *Marxism and Form*, Jameson defends the difficult style of another celebrated Marxist critic, Theodor Adorno, and presents thereby a defence of his own writing. He notes, first of all, a hostility of many critics and readers to a particular type of critical prose which gets attacked as ‘obscure and cumbersome, indigestible, abstract’. Certainly, says Jameson, Adorno’s writing ‘does not conform to the canons of clear and fluid journalistic writing taught in the schools.’ But, he asks, what if ‘journalistic’ writing were a bad thing, what if these ideas of ‘clarity’ and ‘fluidity’ actually work as distractions, encouraging readers to skim over texts rather than think deeply about them? He goes on to argue that:

In the language of Adorno. . . density is itself a conduct of intransigence: the bristling mass of abstractions and cross-reference is precisely intended to be read in situation against the cheap facility of what surrounds it, as a warning to the reader of the price he has to pay for genuine thinking.

(*M&F*: xiii)

In other words, reading should be difficult: if it isn’t hurting, it isn’t working. Whether we agree with the assumptions behind this kind of thinking is open to question. We might, at the very least, wonder about a Marxist work which implies that paying a high ‘price’ for something guarantees its value as ‘genuine thinking’; which believes that popular is bad because superficial, that difficult is good because ‘genuine’ or ‘deep’.

But there is another aspect to Jameson’s appreciation of Adorno’s style: the pleasure to be derived by reading it. ‘I cannot imagine anyone . . .’ he says in the same Preface to *Marxism and Form*, ‘remaining

insensible to the purely formal pleasures of such sentences'. In a 1982 interview with the theory-journal *Diacritics*, Jameson talked about his own writing in similar terms:

There is the private matter of my own pleasure in writing these texts: it is a pleasure tied up in the peculiarities of my 'difficult' style (if that's what it is). I wouldn't write them unless there were some minimal gratification in it for myself, and I hope we are not too alienated or instrumentalised to reserve some small place for what used to be called handicraft satisfaction.

(Jameson 1982: 88)

The implication is that writing in a difficult style is, in a small way, a radical act. It carries with it the implication that difficulty *is* pleasurable, that we find pleasure in resistance, in engaging ourselves, rather than in simply surrendering ourselves sheep-like to the flow of things. More than this, Jameson says he hopes 'we are not yet too alienated' to 'reserve some small place for what used to be called handicraft satisfaction'. This is an invocation of a classic Marxist idea. For Marx, a worker became 'alienated' from his labour with the increasing industrialisation of the nineteenth century. We might imagine a rural craftsperson making chairs; this craftsperson collects the wood, carves and fits it together, beginning and ending the process of producing each chair. The chair directly embodies the work the craftsperson put in. Contrast this, Marx might say, with the same man forced (by economic necessity) to take a job in a chair factory. Now the worker has only one small, repetitive job – say sticking the arm rests into the body of the chair. He is not involved in the complete process; he no longer finds much satisfaction in his work; and the amount of work he puts in no longer has a straightforward relationship with the finished product. In all he has become *alienated* from his labour. Jameson's use of 'alienated' here suggests, without actually saying it, that he is like the old-fashioned craftsperson: that his writing is individual, unique, it has quirks and rough edges that reflect his own investment of labour in it. This is set in opposition to the mass-produced product, the machine-tooled writing that is free from the rough edges, but lacks the humanity. It is an appealing model, but we can suggest at least tentatively that it is not the *only* way in which we might think of the Jamesonian style.

We might, for instance, think of Jameson as a highly respected and highly paid part of the critical-academic machine, an industry that earns