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Stranger than Fiction: Postmodernity and the Recent American Novel

The eighties will surely be remembered in Britain and America as the decade in which the Humanities were dominated by discussion of postmodernism and postmodernity. To survey that body of work from the vantage-point of the nineties is to be struck by the centrality of one contribution: Fredric Jameson's forty-page essay entitled "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". This piece appeared in *New Left Review* in the July/August issue of 1984, and while Jameson has so far chosen not to reprint it elsewhere, few subsequent discussions of postmodernity have failed to cite the essay (Jameson 1984; further page references will be given in the text). By 1989 its importance was established beyond doubt by the publication of a bulky volume of reactions and appraisals (Kellner 1989)—a compliment usually reserved for academic historians and not for commentators on cultural politics. In Part I of what follows I want to examine the main features of Jameson's account of postmodernity; in Part II I shall briefly consider their relevance to a discussion of recent American fiction.

I

Why has this essay occupied such a privileged place in contemporary discussion? The answer to that question lies partly in Jameson's way of re-situating a debate about contemporary culture which had been gathering momentum since the sixties. In American literary circles, "postmodernism" had initially been used by critics such as Irving Howe to designate a kind of falling away from the aesthetic achievements of High Modernism. That negative connotation of the postmodern had been bound up with a largely stylistic emphasis. Jameson's principal move in the eighties was to change this emphasis, focussing not on postmodernism as a predominantly formal category but on *postmodernity* as a cultural and socioeconomic phase.

Stylistic features, though, are what we tend to notice first about any distinctively new phase, and for this reason Jameson begins his discussion with a consideration of contemporary architecture, the field where the term "postmodernism" had first gained major currency. Here a new "historicist" is at work: not only is recent building characterised by its eclectic mingling of past architectural idioms, but the mixing of styles questions fundamentally the traditional divide between high and low culture. Postmodern architects are fascinated

with the forms of mass culture; "they no longer simply 'quote', as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate [these forms] into their very substance" (p. 55).

Such stylistic changes are not produced in a vacuum, however, and Jameson's essay attempts to situate them in relation to the large scale economic developments which have taken place since the Second World War. This carries us towards the "post" in "postmodernity", and places Jameson's account alongside other ways of conceptualising a decisive shift in the social formation since 1945. The sociologist Daniel Bell had already coined the best-known of the terms then current: what he designated as "post-industrial" society is one which has moved beyond the age of industrial production toward a new technology of electronics and information. Along with the idea of postmodernity as an age of advanced consumerism, Bell's thesis stressed the potential of pluralism and consensus in American society, with the old Marxist spectre of class-conflict in flight before them. For Jameson, however, the laws of classical capitalism not only still apply, but enforce themselves with a renewed rigour in a postmodernity which is actually best described as "a *purer* stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it" (p. 55). This is postmodernity defined as "Late Capitalism", a phrase which Jameson borrows from the Marxist economist Ernest Mandel.

What then of modernism and its relation to the new cultural forms? Jameson is well aware of the argument that many of the most striking features of postmodern art—its self-consciousness, its playfulness, its sceptical interrogation of truth and psychic unity, its intermingling of "high" and "low"—can also be found in modernist art (especially in continental tendencies such as Russian Futurism, Dada and Surrealism). But the shock tactics of these earlier modernisms have now been largely assimilated, at once institutionalised within the academy and absorbed into the mechanisms of consumer culture. In fact, one way of thinking the postmodern lies in this decline of art's scandalous potential, for, as Jameson concludes, "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (p. 56).

Not only does that "integration" weaken the critical power of art, it also denies a certain kind of affective response to the world which surrounds us. The Surrealists, for example, could still detect an aura in the commodity, even as they sensed its imminent disappearance. In the mid-twenties it was just possible to find excitement in a tin of boot polish, as we see from Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* (1926): "Shoeshine parlours breathe the very spirit of modernism: what decorative splendour invests the tins of polish, despite their Americanism and the lack of ingenuity shown in displaying them" (Aragon

1971, p. 82). The ornamentation of the tins bears the trace of a human investment—a trace which, as Jameson observes in another context, is obliterated in the products of late capitalism which are “utterly without depth; their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy... All libidinal investment in such objects is precluded from the outset” (Jameson 1974, p. 105).

We may no longer take the kind of pleasure Aragon did in everyday commodities, but what of the art-work? In his essay Jameson contrasts Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes with Andy Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes”. When we look at Van Gogh’s painting we respond to a certain “depth” in the image—by which Jameson means that the work “is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth”. In contrast, the Warhol image seems to register “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense—perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (p. 60).

This lack of “depth” suggests a bewildering absence of meaning—there is no invitation to interpret, to go beneath the surface, or beyond the text or image. How are we to explain this condition in which everything is exposed and visible? It is not, Jameson argues, “a matter of content any longer but of some fundamental mutation in the object-world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra—and in the disposition of the subject” (p. 60). The simulacrum—“the ideal copy for which no original has ever existed” (p. 66)—produces what Jameson calls a “derealization of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality” (p. 76). The modernist dichotomy of image and reality now begins to dissolve; as another postmodern theorist puts it, “Today *reality itself is hyperrealistic*... The old saying, ‘reality is stranger than fiction’, which belonged to the surrealist phase of the aestheticization of life, has been surpassed. There is no longer a fiction that life can confront, even in order to surpass it; reality has passed over into the play of reality...” (Baudrillard 1988, p. 146).

The world around us, then, has become inseparable from the signs and images through which we know it. And this “knowing” is also very different from that theorised by the older hermeneutic model, for postmodernity brings the “*decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche” (p. 63). In line with the main insights of poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida, Lacan and Althusser, Jameson sees the subject as the reflex of a structure which produces it as “identity” or “self” (a structure variously designated as “language”, the unconscious, and as “ideology”). The subject is therefore no longer conceived of as “a monad-like container” (p. 63), but as a set of tensions and contradictions strung out across a network of processes.

If postmodern art seems “depthless” it is partly because it no longer

bears the affect of expressivity. “Modernist *styles* thereby become postmodernist *codes*” (p. 65), and “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal *style*, engender the well-nigh universal practice of what may be called pastiche” (p. 64). Pastiche differs from parody and irony in its failure to posit a norm against which effects can be read—pastiche is “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (p. 65), a play of codes which is impassively eclectic in its refusal of hierarchical privilege.

II

We can now begin to see what effects Jameson’s theory of postmodernity might have for a reading of contemporary fiction. With “the disappearance of the historical referent” (p. 71), we find ourselves in “a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which remains forever out of reach”. If Jameson’s description of this moment as “original” seems somewhat paradoxical, the emphasis of his brief reading of E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975) is clear enough: the novelist now renounces any attempt to represent the historical past, acknowledging that “it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes ‘pop history’)” (p. 71).

This failure of representation is also the failure of conventional (or “realist”) narrative—here we may recall Jean-François Lyotard’s influential definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward meta-narratives” (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv)—and in its place we find a proliferation of fragmented or “schizophrenic” literary forms which struggle to register the new conditions of a culture “increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic”. This space—or “hyperspace”, as Jameson takes it from Jean Baudrillard—is that of “the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (p. 84). Our experience of the network which envelops us exceeds our available forms of representation, just as new buildings, like the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, leave us without spatial coordinates and points of reference (pp. 80-84). The inability to “map” one’s environment corresponds, in Jameson’s terms, to that staggering loss of a temporal sense which seems to underlie the permanent (“depthless”) present of postmodern art. While Jameson tries to hold fast to a dialectical view of the postmodern—to see it in both a positive and a negative light, as Marx saw bourgeois culture (p. 86)—the pull of his argument is toward “this whole extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space which is the ‘moment of truth’ of postmodernism” (p. 88), a moment in which we witness the disappearance of art’s

semi-autonomy and with it the "critical distance" which had been the assumed privilege of earlier avant-gardes (pp. 85-87).

To what extent is Jameson's richly suggestive view of postmodernity shared by contemporary American novelists? Certainly, it is clear that from William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* (1959) on into the sixties and seventies American fiction registered a growing scepticism about modes of narrative representation. Continental theories of language were beginning to have a powerful impact in academic circles in America, and those who attempted to theorise the new fiction often did so in terms comparable to those which Jameson uses. Thus in 1973 the novelist Richard Federman defined the aims of what he called "Surfiction" in orthodoxly structuralist fashion:

Since... no meaning preexists language, but meaning is produced in the process of writing (and reading), the new fiction will not attempt to be meaningful, truthful, or realistic; nor will it attempt to serve as the vehicle of a ready-made meaning. On the contrary, it will be seemingly devoid of any meaning, it will be deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and incoherent. (quoted in Karl 1983, p. 488).

Federman's prescription catches perfectly the flavour of much sixties and seventies writing, with its playful, self-reflexive interrogation of the fictional medium. In works as diverse as Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), Donald Barthelme's *Unnatural Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969), and Ronald Sukenick's *Out* (1973) we find the same wariness of narrative ("plot" was taking on connotations of a conspiratorial "network", as most notably in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).

Writers became much preoccupied with intertextual labyrinths, as in John Barth's *The Sotweed Factor* (1960) and his *Letters* (1979), novels which testified to the impact of Jorge Luis Borges's work on American fiction. Yet in the shadow of the Vietnam war, the individual seemed increasingly confined to what Saul Bellow described as "a shameful and impotent privacy" (Plimpton 1977, p. 194), unable to discover a moral and political language not already contaminated by the ideological clichés of public discourse. "[H]ow had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity", lamented Pynchon's Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*, a novella whose relentless plotting exposes a vision of landlocked homogeneity. To the idea of America as a kind of total system which threatened to stifle other cultures in its global embrace writers responded with ever more extreme gestures toward fantasy and irresponsibility: in the wake of novels like Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961) and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), an anarchic madness frequently seemed the only "sane" response to a violently crazy world.

For a while, then, it was relatively easy to speak of a postmodern fiction distinguished by modes of technical self-consciousness which tended to stress the individual's displacement in an increasingly unreal culture of codes and information. Yet that "canon" was no sooner visible than it seemed to be disrupted from within, as writers from the margins of American society began to occupy an increasingly prominent place. Here we may find Jameson's description of the postmodern subject less than adequate, since it shares with much poststructuralist theory a tendency to create a universal model of the self, one which disregards the specificities of race, class and gender. With the emergence of powerful new work by women and writers of colour the apocalyptic tendencies of postmodernism were partly checked by a return to the local, gritty texture of deftly *situated* lives. Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), along with her short stories and essays, staked out ground for a tense political fiction, while other black writers such as Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison coupled technical virtuosity with a complex regard for lost histories. Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) brings this set of developments to a fine intensity, showing that an intricately dislocated temporal narrative might be used as the very means to *recover* (or to "rememory") an occluded past.

America might seem homogenous, or "solid", to use Maxine Hong Kingston's word, but as her *Woman Warrior* (1976) vividly showed, the exploration of ethnic differences could produce remarkable fissures in that monolithic construction. The same might be said of much of the new writing by American women—writing which, as in the case of Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams* (1984) and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1987) explored the role of contemporary technology and consumerism in the social construction of gender.

In all of these novels, we may see how questionable is the loss of "critical distance" which Jameson takes as the distinctive feature of postmodern culture. And even more troubling to Jameson's briefly sketched outline of a postmodern, "schizophrenic" fiction is the emergence in America of what has been called "dirty realism", a term applied to the work of (amongst others) Phillips, Mason, Tobias Wolfe and Raymond Carver. This is a realism which takes full cognizance of the "pop images and simulacra" of a postmodern "history", but strives to reckon the effects of our displacement by an intensive regard for local experience. So, for example, in Phillips's *Machine Dreams* the full effect of the postmodern "sublime" (to use Jameson's word) is unravelled through interlocking images of myth, technology and war—images which, in turn, expose the deeply-laid foundations of masculinity and femininity. But Phillips's excavations are conducted in a prose which is finely attuned to the texture of her char-

acters' experience, producing a language which carries us toward the everyday world in precisely the same movement that it disabuses us of its familiarity, its secure and knowable concreteness. This is a realism, then, which can at once apprise us—in true postmodern style—of the constructedness of our world (forever mediated through signs and images) and yet remind us too of a sociality which postmodernity may occlude but cannot completely efface. In that sense, and with Jameson's essay in mind, we might well decide that much contemporary fiction is actually less "strange" than the world which postmodern theory presents to us.

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CURRENT RESEARCH

At the Stockholm School of Economics, Bill Harris is conducting a project in applied linguistics based on English texts produced by advanced non-native speakers. The purpose of the project is to gain insights into why certain collocations in this type of English may be identified as non-native, despite grammatical and even semantic validity. The results of the project will have applications both for teaching and for authentic business communication. Address: Bill Harris, Professional Communication Skills Unit, Stockholm School of Economics, Box 6501, S-113 83 Stockholm, Sweden.

In Gothenburg, Göran Kjellmer is finalizing a major project on collocations in the Brown Corpus of written American English. The purpose of the project, which covers the entire one-million-word corpus, is to present a multi-dimensional alphabetical list of all collocations in the corpus, supplied with syntactic taggings and various indices of collocational status. The final product is going to be a large dictionary of collocations which is estimated to be published in 1991 or 92. Address: Göran Kjellmer, University of Gothenburg, Department of English, S-412 98 Göteborg, Sweden.

Kerstin Westerlund Shands of the University of Örebro is working on a project called "The 'Wild Zone': Spatial Metaphors in Contemporary American Feminist Theory and Criticism". In 1990, she received a doctorate at the University of Uppsala for her dissertation, *Escaping the Castle of Patriarchy: Patterns of Development in the Novels of Gail Godwin* (Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia 1990). Address: Kerstin Westerlund Shands, University of Örebro, Department of Modern Languages, Box 923, S-701 30 Örebro, Sweden.

Mats Mobärg

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Early Continuity: The First Century of English-Swedish and Swedish-English Lexicography

Docent Arne Olofsson vid engelska institutionen, Göteborgs universitet, har under de senaste åren ägnat en stor del av sin forskning åt engelsk-svenska och svensk-engelska lexikon. Han har därvid behandlat såväl den historiska utvecklingen som dagens förhållanden på området. I den här artikeln beskriver han den engelsk-svenska/svensk-engelska lexikografin under perioden 1734-1832.

Cultural background

It is a commonplace that lexicography is greatly dependent on the support it can receive from the educational system of a language community. Therefore it is worth pointing out that English-Swedish and Swedish-English lexicography started without such support. In the Swedish school system, modern languages in general were not taught anywhere until late in the 18th century, and then only in very few places. French and German were considered the most useful and important languages, and English was hardly taught at all until towards the middle of the 19th century. For more details, see Bratt 1977.

Dictionaries and dictionary-makers

The first major work in English-Swedish lexicography is Serenius 1734. This dictionary translates English words into both Swedish and Latin. Etymologies (when given) and lists of related words in other languages are to be found in footnotes. The book was aptly dedicated to William IV of Orange, who was both the son-in-law of King George II of Great Britain and the nephew of King Fredrik I of Sweden. There were subscribers from Britain, France, Germany, Holland and Sweden (in addition to William of Orange).

Jacob Serenius (1700-1776) was a clergyman attached to the Swedish legation in London for 11 years during the period 1723-1735. His main source for the selection of English words seems to have been the English-French part of Boyer 1702, but his stay in London must have given him a considerable first-hand knowledge of English. After his return to Sweden he was a member of the Swedish parliament 1738-1772, and in 1763 he was appointed bishop of Strängnäs.

Before the dictionary proper the book has a preface in Latin by Benzelius, bishop of Linköping and a diligent dialectologist, which