

Jameson's Perelman Reification and the Material Signifier

George Hartley's essay on Fredric Jameson's reading of Language writing, specifically Bob Perelman's nonnarrative poem "China," challenges the critic's association of language-centered poetry with a litany of postmodernism's symptoms—depthlessness, the loss of historicity, the waning of affect, even "schizophrenia." Jameson's well-known essay "Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (first given as a talk in 1981) is now a touchstone of postmodern theory, but his use of Perelman's poem remains a much debated component, with potentially negative implications for avant-garde poetry. In carefully working through the theoretical (Marxist and psychoanalytic) assumptions of Jameson's essay, Hartley shows that the unconscious automatism of schizophrenic language and the conscious deployment of material signification by artists are utterly unlike: "There is a world of difference between the schizophrenic's *inability* to get beyond the material signifier and the artist's creation of one." This distinction permits Hartley to show how Perelman's aesthetics—and that of others in the avant-garde—may share common political motives with Jameson: a critique of the reification of language under capitalism and a turn toward art as a necessary corrective, through what Jameson terms "cognitive mapping." Hartley's essay was a cornerstone of his book-length study of Language writing, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (1989), the first—and still essential—account of the aesthetic and political aims of the movement in its emergence.

In *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984), Fredric Jameson published his by now notorious essay "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." In that essay he compares Lacan's description of schizophrenic language to the writings of what he refers to as the Language Poets. He points out in particular that Bob Perelman, in his poem "China," seems to have made schizophrenic language the basis of his aesthetic. Prior to Jameson, John Ensslin [...] also pointed out the striking similarities between clinical accounts of schizophrenic language and recent poetry, but he offered "one precaution: don't confuse schizophrenic speech with poetic language.... To treat [schizophrenic speech] as a freakish bit of literature is to overlook the fact that these bizarre turns of language are the products of a torturous state of mind." Jameson's problem is the opposite of this—confusing poetic language with schizophrenic speech.

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To be sure, Jameson is careful to explain that he is using Lacan's account only as a useful description, not to imply that Perelman is in any way a clinical schizophrenic. But even if such is the case—I will later argue against his claim to innocent description—the usefulness of such a comparison is far from obvious, especially in the way he uses it. Nevertheless, the positive value of the Lacanian notion of schizophrenia, if there is one in this context, is its bringing into focus two conflicting accounts of the effects of reification on language use, as well as two conflicting aesthetics. At the heart of the debate is the material signifier—the signifiatory unit (whether the phoneme, the word, the phrase, or the sentence) isolated from standard syntactical patterns, drawing attention to itself as much as, or more than, to any concept it may point to. The question comes down to this: what are the political effects of the use of the material signifier? [...]

The key to evaluating Jameson's comments about postmodernism is to grasp the basic concept behind his periodization. That concept, based on Nikos Poulantzas's extension of Althusserian theory, is *social formation*.

In *Political Power and Social Classes* Poulantzas writes that the "mode of production constitutes an abstract-formal object which does not exist in the strong sense of reality. . . . The only thing which really exists is a historically determined social formation, i.e. a social whole, in the widest sense, at a given moment in its historical existence: e.g. France under Louis Bonaparte, England during the Industrial Revolution" (15). "Mode of production" is to be viewed as a methodological concept, not as some real discrete object. The social formation may ultimately be determined by a mode of production, but it can never be reduced to one. Poulantzas explains further that "a social formation . . . presents a particular combination, a specific overlapping of several 'pure' modes of production" [leading to] the expanded view of historical determination [that] follows:

The dominance of one mode of production over others in a social formation causes the matrix of this mode of production . . . to mark the whole of the formation. In this way a historically determined social formation is specified by a particular articulation (through an index of dominance and overdetermination) of its different economic, political, ideological and theoretical levels or instances. (15-16)

The key phrase in the above passage is "index of dominance and overdetermination." Rather than crudely reducing the complex network of various social determinations to the economic, we can now take into account the influences

of many relatively autonomous levels or instances at one time, each level's relative autonomy stemming from its own determined placement within a network of competing modes of production. Raymond Williams refers to these competing influences as the residual (the remaining influence of past modes), the dominant, and the emergent (nascent modes struggling for dominance; 121-27). One problem we avoid, at least in part, by focusing on the particularity and relative autonomy of the various levels of the social formation is the positing of homologies between different levels. The Hegelian notion of an expressive totality—in which each analytically distinguished level of society is seen as an expression of some essence and thus structurally similar to all other levels—often leads to the conclusion that cultural objects are expressions of the economic base. This is not to say that the Althusserians reject the concept of totality, just that they define it differently. "The structure is not an essence outside the economic phenomena," Althusser explains,

which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, absent because it is outside them. The absence of the cause in the structure's "metonymic causality" on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the very form of the interiority of the structure . . . in its effects. (188; his emphasis)

The reasons for this discussion of the Althusserian concept of social formation should become clear when we turn to Jameson's notion of a cultural dominant in his definition of postmodernism. From the concept of social formation Jameson develops an important analogy on the cultural plane—which we presumably could call the *cultural formation*, an analogy that becomes clear when Jameson writes that "it seems to me essential to grasp 'postmodernism' not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant" ("Postmodernism," 56). [...] Once he substitutes cultural dominant for structural dominant (or "structure-in-dominance"), the rest of the analogy falls into place, the cultural formation being seen as determined by the various conflicting cultural modes of production at a given moment. After doing so, he can then (theoretically, at least) avoid many of the problems that surround all attempts at periodization, especially the problem of explaining how an artist from what we determine to be the modern period can look quite like those artists we associate with an earlier or later period—just as the concept of social formation helps to explain the existence of typically feudal features, for example, in the capitalist era [...]: "I am very far from feeling that all cultural production today is 'postmodern'

in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term. The postmodern is however the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—'residual' and 'emergent' forms of cultural production—must make their way" (57).

Such a formula allows him to write, for example, that "Gertrude Stein, Raymond Roussel, or Marcel Duchamp ... may be considered outright postmodernists, *avant la lettre*" (56). He goes on to qualify this statement, however, in what may be the most important point in his essay.

What has not been taken into account by this view is ... the social position of the older modernism. ... [Modernism and postmodernism] still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function, owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capitalist, and beyond that, to the transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society. (56-57)

Literary form, in other words, takes on its particular political meaning from its position within a specific historical context. Having said this, however, Jameson then overgeneralizes the political context of postmodernism, neglecting to sort out the various contexts which Poulantzas's conception of social formation posits. The social positioning of a particular form may have a different political charge depending on its relationship not only to the period but also to its overdetermined location within the social formation. [...]

It is when Jameson fleshes out this very promising outline by describing what he sees as the political effects of postmodernism in the present social formation that problems arise, most notably as a return to the very homologies that he has elsewhere warned us against. Specifically, his importation of Lacan's discussion of schizophrenia leads him to the traditional Marxist denunciation of modernist (and now postmodernist) fragmentation, rather than to an appreciation of Perelman's particular use of the material signifier as a political critique. Jameson frames his discussion of Perelman's "China" in such a way that he prematurely forecloses any other avenues of a more positive analysis. That frame begins with his discussion of what he sees as the constitutive feature of postmodernism: its new depthlessness.

By contrasting Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes with Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* Jameson illustrates one of the major differences he sees between modernism and postmodernism. While Van Gogh's shoes must be seen as the result of the reification of the senses—in this case, sight—due to the increased division of labor under capitalism, Jameson also draws attention

to its utopian side, in which "the most glorious materialization of pure colour in oil paint is to be seen as ... an act of compensation" (59) for precisely that fragmented life in capitalist society. The painting speaks to us, imparts its meaning as it "draws the whole absent world and earth into revelation around itself," representing the wretched life of the peasant woman. The problem with Warhol's shoes, however, is that they don't speak to us at all. Instead "we have a random collection of dead objects, hanging together on the canvas like so many turnips, as shorn of their earlier life-world as the pile of shoes left over at Auschwitz, or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dancehall" (60). The images of Auschwitz and a tragic fire are not incidental here. Even though Jameson has just stressed the need to see the utopian value of Van Gogh's reified impressionism, he expends very little of such dialectical thought on his postmodern examples. Although later in the essay he will try to rescue his argument from a "pre-Marxian" moralism, it remains clear here that Warhol *ought* to do something other than present dead and meaningless objects on a canvas.

At any rate, this passage from Van Gogh to Warhol, Jameson claims, illustrates "perhaps the supreme formal feature" of postmodernism—its anti-hermeneutical, superficial depthlessness. The "deep" works of the modernists have been succeeded by the slick TV surfaces of the simulacrum, the image. Jameson describes one problem with the simulacrum as follows:

The simulacrum[s] ... particular function lies in what Sartre would have called the *derealization* of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality. [...] The world thereby momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density. (76-77)

The simulacrum's derealization of everyday life affects not only spatial but temporal depth as well. Jameson argues that "what was once, in the historical novel as Lukács defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project ... has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum. ... In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (66). Postmodernists substitute a nostalgic cannibalization of past styles for an older attempt to come to terms with "real" history. This crisis in historicity appears in a formal innovation of postmodernism, namely the transformation of the time-bound narrative sentence into the "finished, complete, and isolated punctual

event—objects which find themselves sundered from any present situation” (70)—the material signifier.

In order to make sense of these “heaps of fragments,” Jameson next resorts to Lacan’s account of schizophrenia “as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning” (71–72). The function of the sentence is to form our personal identity: “If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence,” Jameson claims, “then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life” (72). (The key word here which he seems to ignore in his analysis is “unable.”) What makes all this relevant for Marxism is that such a meaningful grasp of historical time is necessary for political praxis. Without it we cannot recognize the historical determination of present conditions which we need to change. But it is Jameson’s extension of all this to cultural production to which I object.

My first objection is that his description of the signifying chain does not convey the full import of Lacan’s conception. Lacan is not talking about individual sentences when he uses this term, although sentences do illustrate on a manifest level what he is describing; rather, “signifying chain” refers to the structure of the unconscious as a whole, which can be compared to a sentence but cannot be reduced to one. [...] “That the dream uses speech makes no difference,” Lacan writes, “since for the unconscious it is only one among several elements of the representation” (161).

The signifying chain constitutes the unconscious. But this occurs only after the primal repression of the Imaginary phase, during which the subject cannot distinguish its own body from that of others, seeing instead “a world of bodies and organs which in some fashion lacks a phenomenological center and a privileged point of view” (Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” 354). The failure to complete this process of repression leads to the various forms of psychosis. Lacan refers to this failure as the *foreclosure* or *foreclosure* of the Other, the refusal or inability to enter the Symbolic Order of signification. “Foreclosure effects neither the judgment of existence nor the negation; only the symbol remains, but, because of the absence of its relation to the signified, it loses its true value as a signifier, as a symbol. It is no longer any more than an image taken for reality. The imaginary has become the real” (Lemaire, 233). In other words, the schizophrenic is left with material signifiers. [...]

According to Lacan, schizophrenic discourse is binary, while Symbolic discourse is ternary. The schizophrenic remains at or reverts to the Imaginary

state of unmediated fusion of self and other, of subject and signifier. Only in the Symbolic Order do these two poles become mediated by a third—language. There is no meaning engendered by the schizophrenic’s material signifier; the question arises, however, whether such is the case with the poet’s material signifier. In other words, does the poet’s signifier signify? This question brings me to my second and major complaint against Jameson’s use of *schizophrenic* even as a descriptive term (although it is obviously more than that for Jameson). There is a world of difference between the schizophrenic’s *inability* to get beyond the material signifier and the artist’s creation of one: whereas the schizophrenic could be said to operate on a pre-Symbolic level of discourse, poets such as Perelman operate on a meta-Symbolic plane. Jameson implies that the effect of the material signifier, whether produced by the psychotic or the artist, is the same in either case. But in order to reach this conclusion, he has to ignore his own argument about the variability of formal effect within different contexts.

I would argue that Jameson’s brief commentary on “China” does not entirely constitute his analysis of the poem. The actual analysis of “China” and, by illegitimate extension, of all Language writing, lies in his inserting the poem at a specific moment of his essay. While Jameson claims that he mainly wants to show that “schizophrenic” writing has no necessary relationship to psychosis, the momentum of the essay necessitates just that relationship; adopting the Lacanian apparatus at such a key moment in the essay is not merely descriptive but ascriptive. The use of the label *schizophrenia*, in other words, is no innocent gesture but instead a strategic form of guilt-by-association.

Now to Jameson’s discussion of “China.” “Many things,” he begins, “could be said about this interesting exercise in discontinuities: not the least paradoxical is the reemergence here across these disjointed sentences of some more unified global meaning” (74). [...] Jameson goes on to say that the poem “does seem to capture something of the excitement of the immense, unfinished social experiment of the New China.” The important unstated point is that the claim of schizophrenia may not hold here precisely because of this reemergent unity. But Jameson next assures us that “we have not thereby fully exhausted the structural secrets of Perelman’s poem, which turns out to have little enough to do with the referent called China” (75). Pointing out that Perelman’s lines in the poem were written as captions to photographs in a Chinese book, Jameson contends that the unity of the poem lies outside it in the absent Chinese text. Perelman’s poem is thus a text about a text, just as photorealism works are pictures of pictures, or simulacra.

Once Perelman's poem becomes reduced to the simulacrum, it has the same political effect for Jameson as the schizophrenic signifier. In both cases we confront free-floating signifiers with little or no connection to the "real world," serving at best as decoration but more often more negatively as distraction from the real work to be done—symptoms and perpetuations of reification. There seems to be a naive mimeticism at work here that exposes the problem behind Jameson's attack on the simulacrum. Is the authenticity or political efficacy of a work really dependent on the immediacy of its model? And are a text's model and its referent identical? How Perelman generated his text is in any case irrelevant to our understanding it. Jameson here outdoes Plato by attacking Perelman for creating a copy of a copy of a copy.

Using Ernest Mandel's conception of Late Capitalism, or the period of multinational capital which has transformed society into a "whole new decentred global network" beyond representation, Jameson posits that the corresponding technological analogue is the machine of reproduction—the television, the camera, the computer—whose processes are also beyond representation. Modernist artists, excited by the "sculptural nodes of energy" of the electric and combustion motors (machines of production), represented that kinetic energy in their art. But postmodernists, Jameson continues, are more concerned with "the processes of reproduction . . . [such as] movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum" (79).

Depending on how it is used, such a formula of homological relations could become a technologism and a Marxism at its crudest. When one thinks of some recent artistic creations such as Max Headroom, then Jameson's formula can be seen to have a legitimate specific application (or "local validity," as he might say), the capitalist appropriation of art forms being especially clear. But when the search for the "logic of the simulacrum" is overgeneralized, it not only leads to oversimplification but also blinds us to those contemporary works of art which challenge such a logic. Jameson is aware of this:

In the most interesting postmodernist works . . . one can detect a more positive conception of relationship [than the censure of fragmentation] which restores its proper tension to the notion of difference itself. This new mode of relationship through difference may sometimes be an achieved new and original way of thinking and perceiving; more often it takes the form of an impossible imperative to achieve that new mutation [in perceptual organs] in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness. (75)

Jameson all too quickly discards the possibility of a positive conception of re-relationship through difference for the latter negative critique of postmodernism throughout most of his essay.

As we have seen, Jameson implicitly attributes Perelman's schizophrenic aesthetic to the process of reification in late capitalist society. It is interesting, therefore, to find Perelman and others claiming that their aesthetic is based on a critique of precisely that same fragmenting process. When Steve McCaffery writes, for instance, that "Marx's notion of commodity fetishism . . . has been central to my own considerations of reference in language," we at least have to examine this claim before characterizing the poetry. Such an examination reveals that foregrounding the materiality of language, far from a schizophrenic disorder or an hallucinatory escapism, is intended instead, according to Bruce Andrews, as "a political writing practice that unveils demystifies the creation & sharing of meaning." Words are never our own, Ron Silliman reminds us, "rather, they are our own usages of a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization" ("Political Economy of Poetry"). The unveiling of this determinate coding and the ways in which that coding reinforces the capitalist power structure lies behind the "schizophrenic" poetry of Perelman, McCaffery, Andrews, Silliman, and others.

"The essence of commodity-structure," Georg Lukács explains, "is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (83). Evidently for Jameson the material signifier exemplifies just this process of fragmentation and "thingification," as Marx called it. Even Jackson Mac Low asks, "What could be more of a fetish or more alienated than slices of language stripped of reference?" (23). Indeed, if all that these poets were doing was isolating language from its social context, then they would be perpetuating reification. But is that what Perelman and others are doing? Reification, we should remember, is an effect of an historically determined mode of perception, not a formal quality residing in the commodity or the signifier. A material signifier by itself neither perpetuates nor liberates us from reification. How we perceive the social relations inscribed within the signifier will determine its particular political effect. [. . .]

What is missing from "China" are the standard syntactical conjunctions and explicitly coherent subject matter common to everyday speech. But when have these components been necessary for poetry? At least since Pound's "In a

Station of the Metro," parataxis has seemed to many the "poetic" form of juxtaposition, with its demand that the reader fill in the gaps between the lines, as we have been doing with "China." Unlike those in Pound's poem, however, the gaps in "China" are not metaphoric but, as in Stein's *Tender Buttons*, metonymic. The meaning of the poem develops along the axis of contiguity, the sentences establishing an interlocking, sometimes contradictory and polysemous, series of semantic frames which continually qualify and redirect the overall narrative movement. "China" is "certainly not something that tries to throw you off the track," Perelman has suggested to me in conversation, "like playing train as a kid, whipping from side to side until someone falls off." The foregrounded structuration of this poem, far from obliterating the meaning of its content, adds a formal dimension of meaning quite consistent with the content's insistence on change, perceptual renewal, and self-determination. The structure of the poem itself can be seen as a metaphor for the historical process that Poulantzas describes in his complex, conflictual model of the social formation.

Contrary to the implications of Jameson's schizophrenia analogy, Perelman isn't suggesting that we can do without narration, only that 1) the particular narrations into which we are inserted are coded justifications for the status quo, and 2) there are alternative ways of structuring (constituting) our experiences. Such alternatives foreground our social relations, not reify them. [...]

The foregrounding of the materiality of the signifier at this time is meant to draw attention to the socially inscribed gestural nature of language, the dialectical consciousness of which capitalism seeks to repress by valorizing what Ron Silliman calls the "disappearance of the word / appearance of the world syndrome" of realism. Seen in this context, poems like "China" must be seen as critiques of and utopian compensation for the reification of language in late capitalism.

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