



The Cartographer's New Clothes Recent Jameson

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Rewinding the Reel

Signatures of the Visible
by Fredric Jameson

New York: Routledge, 1990.

Jameson's *Signatures* is a collection of essays on film written between 1977-1988. Part one of the book contains seven short essays ranging in topic from reviews of specific films to general theoretical pieces. A loner essay entitled "The Existence of Italy" occupies the book's latter half.

Signatures continues Jameson's investigations into the status and shape of mass culture in the era of postmodernism. It is an exercise in what Jameson calls "cognitive mapping." This spatial metaphor brings to mind images of the alienated urban individual without bearings in an increasingly complex, cultural, social and political landscape. The task of the cultural critic thus becomes the mapping of our individual relationships to the complex class realities of our society.

As a collection of occasional writings on film it does not purport to offer a full-fledged theory of contemporary cinema so much as offer a prolegomenon to one. In

this effort it is a fairly successful addition to the corpus of recent Marxist writings on the cinema.

One of the strands that runs through the various essays is an attempt by Jameson to construct a chronology of the development of the cinema. This approach is not dissimilar to the one taken in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), where he outlines a model for a Marxist literary criticism and then explores the historical development of narrative in the novels of some of the key writers of the 19th century.

Situating film in the history of aesthetics presents certain problems unique to the medium. One of which is the fact that film does not emerge until the epoch of aesthetic modernism is well under way in the other arts. Hence the development of the cinema cannot simply follow the trajectory of, say, the development of the modern novel.

Jameson, among others, maps the transitions of the novel's form through its realist, modernist and finally postmodernist stages as narrative articulations of corresponding economic stages. For Jameson, there are the early, the industrial, and the late stages of capitalist development respectively.

While the silent cinema did not, and arguably, could not emerge until the development of industrial capitalism and the mass market, it followed a consistently "realist" aesthetic through most of its history. It is only at the end of the silent era that a characteristically modernist moment develops (in the works of Eisenstein, Stroheim and others).

The emergence of the sound film, an entirely new medium, changed all that. The Hollywood films of the 1930s represented the emergence of a form of domestic realism which sought to reassure a middle class' collective despair over the effects of the Great Depression. This was reinforced with the development of the multiple genre system in Hollywood

which, while ostensibly a marketing strategy, revived the older formal traditions of novelistic realism.

The immediate post-war period gave rise to what Jameson labels a "legitimation crisis" in the Hollywood aesthetic, first in "auteur theory" and the actual filmic practices of the great auteurs (e.g., Hitchcock). This was represented, partly, through the end of genre (killed off in its traditional forms by the rise of the media society and television) and its replacement by "style," as well as the problematization of the older film genre conventions when they were still used.

It is with the emergence of late or multinational capitalism that the conservative culture, now called postmodernism, appears. For the first time there seems to be a loose temporal conjunction between film and the other arts. The postmodernist film, Jameson argues, is characterized by a glossiness in its appearance and a nostalgia in its sensibility. Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) represents its inauguration. In a sense, this "microchronology of film recapitulates something like a realism/modernism/postmodernism trajectory at a more compressed tempo."

Signatures of the Visible does not simply end with the neat schematicization just outlined. Jameson takes great pains also to problematize the categories of realism and modernism themselves.

The final and longest essay begins with an epigraph from Adorno and Horkheimer's famous essay on the Culture Industry. However, unlike the earlier pieces, Jameson's essay is not an attempt to theorize the character of the industry at a particular conjuncture and to extrapolate its possible developments. Rather, Jameson tries to lay the groundwork for a Marxist theory of film in light of previous attempts to theorize it.

In large measure Jameson attempts to show the inadequacies of some of the



▲ *The Conformist*
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conceptual categories that have been used to understand the medium. The term "realism," he argues, is an essentially unstable one. It suggests simultaneous but incompatible aesthetic and epistemological claims. On the one hand, the term invokes a set of historical aesthetic conventions (often associated with notions of passive reflection and copying). On the other hand, it is associated with the idea of the scientific representation of reality. Modernism, in contrast, has often been characterized as an aesthetic that draws attention to the conventionality of forms and hence has a critical reflexive standpoint.

It is Jameson's argument that realism as a category cannot be simply dismissed. In fact, in another essay in *Signatures*, he holds up the relatively new magic realist form (primarily in Latin American art but not limited to it) as a critical alternative to the sterile nostalgia of the Hollywood postmodernist film.

The argument turns on what he perceives to be an inadequacy of the Adorno and Horkheimer thesis that mass culture is a totally instrumentalized and reified phenomenon which can only be countered in the "autonomy" of high modernist art. The distinction is not as simple as they allow:

Both modernism and mass culture entertain relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material; only where modernism tends to handle this material by producing compensatory structures of various kinds, mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.



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This dialectical opposition and convergence of modernism and mass culture requires that film theory begin to look for new ways of situating its object. Jameson has recourse to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the "minor," which works within the dominant while appropriating from it and undermining it. It is on this basis that he values oppositional realist film making, including examples from the Third World cinema.

The other historical move that Jameson makes throughout the book is to continue the kind of critique of mass culture products begun by the Frankfurt School and others such as Ernst Bloch:

Our proposition about the drawing power of the works of mass culture has implied that such works cannot manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them rudimentary expression; ... that anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness.

In a number of essays, Jameson illustrates this by analyzing some of the popular films of the 1970s. His rather lengthy reading of *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) provides a "cognitive mapping" of shifting power relations in American society during this period. The various characters in the film articulate different and conflicting class and political positions. While the film tries to resolve the contradictions inherent in such relations, it must give voice to them.

It is precisely this phenomenon that provides the continuing fascination of the contemporary Hollywood cinema. ♦

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