

# Revisiting Postmodernism

*An Interview with Fredric Jameson*

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**Conducted by Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young,  
and Genevieve Yue**

*Editors' Note: This interview was conducted with Fredric Jameson on 13 March 2014 in New York City and has been lightly edited for clarity. On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of "Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in the New Left Review, Jameson looks back at the essay and considers the current state of capitalism, theory, art, and culture in relation to the concepts he adopted in 1984. Jameson is Knut Schmidt-Nielsen Professor of Comparative Literature, professor of romance studies (French), and director of the Institute for Critical Theory at Duke University. He is the author of many books, including The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (1981), Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present (2002), and, most recently, The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the Historicity of Forms (2015).*

**Social Text:** *If you were to think through the project of defining postmodernism today, following the basic framework in the 1984 essay or the 1991 book, which constitutive features would you emphasize? Are there aspects you emphasized thirty years ago that seem less relevant today, and have others emerged as more significant in recent decades? If there has been a shift, how do we account for it?*

**Fredric Jameson:** The first thing I would do is to separate these terms *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*, because people have often thought that my first description of it was a sort of aesthetic inventory of stylistic features. In part it was that, but I had understood it in terms of periodization and social structure. And now I realize that it would have been much clearer

had I distinguished *postmodernity* as a historical period from *postmodernism* as a style. I should say that I don't care what people call these things. It seems to me that everybody recognizes some kind of postmodern break, whatever name they give it, that takes place around 1980 or so, in the Reagan/Thatcher era, with the advent of economic deregulation, the new salience of globalization, and so on. I still call it *postmodernity* because it does seem to mark the end of the modern in all kinds of ways, from communications technologies and industry all the way to forms of art. I don't think that postmodernity is over. You can say that postmodernism is over, if you understand postmodernism in a narrow way, because art has certainly changed in many respects since the '80s. But I don't think that you can say that the whole historical period—the third stage of capitalism, I would like to call it—has come to an end, unless you are able to specify what has followed it.

To take art: what I was ascribing to the postmodern period was a kind of art that wished to escape from the high seriousness of modernism, in favor of the entertaining and the relaxing and so on. We're probably beyond that stage in art, and what strikes me about recent art is that, in a sense, everybody's political. But that does not mean that our "political" art *works* as politics. I don't think anybody knows what a successful political—truly political—art would be, one that would have an effect. But I think that everybody nowadays recognizes that capitalism is an omnipresent form of our existence, and I would say it's a continuation of the process that was called, in the famous missing chapter of *Capital*, a "subsumption." That is, everything has been subsumed under capital to a much greater degree than ever before. Remember that in the '80s there was still such a thing as a socialist block, not that it was very successful as a form of resistance or as an alternative to capitalism; and there were other forms of art or of experience itself that seemed to exist outside the system, that resisted commodification, however provisionally or temporarily. Indeed, whole aesthetics, from Adorno's notion of the negative to Left ideas of subversion, were based on the premise that there could be some kind of noncommodified art. Now everything seems subsumed, in that sense; people seem resigned to the idea that everything is commodified.

It seems to me that capitalism—or late capitalism, if you like, or perhaps finance capital is a better way of naming it, or globalization—at any rate, it seems to me that everyone has had to come to terms with the omnipresence of this far more wholly subsumed kind of social and economic structure. And that, I think, leaves its traces on or in art, much of which wants to be oppositional; but do we know any longer what oppositional means in this total system, or what might "subvert" it, or even function as its critique? Those were the synonyms for Adorno's negativity in the modern period, and I don't think anyone really understands what form

they would take today. Just as there was a struggle over the meaning of the word *political* itself (in recent French theory), so there is today a feeling that even the negative has been co-opted by the system—indeed, that the system needs negative critiques to keep itself going (this is the meaning of the ingenious saying, communism is the dream of capitalism). So that's one basic change. I would call it cynicism, this totalized form of awareness of capitalism. I don't think I mean quite the same thing as what Sloterdijk meant, because that book of his was really a book about Weimar [*Critique of Cynical Reason*], but I do think this is an age of generalized cynicism, in the sense that everybody knows what the score is. There is nothing surprising to anybody about this system, and in that sense, maybe *cynicism* is the best term for it.

As for other features, one of the things I have written about is the effects on temporality. The French have invented this word *presentism*—I don't like it very much, but it fits. I have written a lot about the disappearance of history, of historicity, about the becoming simulacrum of the past, the reduction to the present. I also call it a reduction to the body, because if you're in the present that's really all you have. This has its effect on all kinds of artistic forms, which used to be able to draw on longer and larger temporalities but which now seem incapable of doing that. I have given the example of action films, but there could be many other examples.

One way I've thought of characterizing such changes has to do with theory or interpretation—namely, the predominance (and everybody in art history talks about this; it's not new with me) of the curator. We have conferences on the curatorial. Curators' shows are a little bit like derivatives: they put all these different elements or entities together, they last for a minute, and then they're gone again; the individual work is no longer very significant. Those ephemeral connections in the present correspond to a new form of the collective, which you can call, if you like, the "multitude." Baudrillard already wrote long ago about how the very nature of the museum has changed, and we know that in the old days you could go to the great museums and nobody was ever there. Nowadays these are big shows, you pay a lot of money, you sometimes have to make a reservation—so there's a transformation in the way museums have become public, and that has to do with shows and the rise of the curatorial.

Theory is also essentially a curatorial process. We've got various texts from the past, say Aristotle or Kant, and we put them all together in an ephemeral combination. Deleuze is the great master of this. You have a theoretical show in which these various things are plugged into each other, and then another one comes on line later on. Since theory is not philosophy—something I want to insist on—the question of what it is becomes an interesting one; it approaches the situation of art as much as it does anything else. But if you put it that way you can see that what's

collective about the public in museums, and about the fashions in theory I suppose, is itself really the multitude. That is, these big demonstrations like Tahrir Square, and so forth, are also ephemeral. It's pretty clear from many of these examples that they are not enduring; they are not political events in the old sense: they don't produce constitutions, they're not political events with lasting institutional consequences. They are "events" in the stronger philosophical sense of that word, and like events, they then disappear, so they too are in the present. This "presentism" has to do with finance, too, and with communications. That would probably be the major feature that I would try to examine in terms of the evolution of what once was postmodern or what was art after the modern.

*Since you brought up the theory/philosophy distinction, we wanted to ask about how these terms are viewed today. In the preface to Singular Modernity, you referred to "regressions of the current age," including, for example, the return to "ethics." You end that section by asking: "Can metaphysics be far behind?" It seems to us that the last decade has, as you anticipated, seen a metaphysical turn in the kinds of English language theory or philosophy that have their origins in Continental thought. And it seems to us that, increasingly, there's a sense that people no longer like this word theory much anymore.*

Just as in postmodern art there was a recourse to the pastiche of older forms of art, so that finally there's a pastiche of the modern itself, a lot of what constitutes the reaction against theory has become a pastiche of philosophy, which I continue to think is not really possible. Let me put it this way, because I think it's a better way of talking about it: I want to say philosophy has to be metaphysics, or else it remains theory. You have a metaphysics in Deleuze that is a kind of vitalism. It comes and goes in his various books, but it's always there. And his attacks on idealism are part of a philosophical framework, and he was professionally linked to philosophy—philosophy departments, philosophy books, the form of the philosophical treatise, and books like *What Is Philosophy?* stage an apologia for philosophy as such. Nonetheless, I think we read the other part of his work as theory.

Why don't people like this word, *theory*? Little by little there's been a return to various forms of empiricism; this is no doubt related to a reaction against so-called high theory, but I would put it another way. As I said, it seems to me that any proper philosophy, anything that really is philosophy, is a metaphysics. That's why Nietzsche is so ambiguous, because it's not clear whether that's a philosophy or not. Nietzsche was, in that sense, maybe the first theorist.

You have a metaphysics when you try to answer two questions: what is the meaning of life, and what is the meaning of nature or the world or something to that effect. Any attempt to give either of those things an answer

becomes metaphysical or, to use another word, ideological. Ontology, unless it's a description of these brief flashes of being and so forth that you get in Heidegger, is necessarily a kind of ideology or metaphysics. And theory is something which attempts maybe vainly to avoid that, because probably we can't avoid ideology or metaphysics. We can try to evade it. Derrida evades it by never really taking positions. One of the remarkable, formal characteristics of Derrida's work is that it always was parasitical on another text, which it took apart or deconstructed without constructing any positive terms. Now when you take the analytic terms or neologisms of Derrida, like "writing" or "logocentrism," and turn them into slogans, you've turned them back into a system, into a metaphysics, into a philosophy. Derrida was struggling to *not* have a philosophy, but it's something that's very difficult to avoid, because of intellectual reification. It is almost impossible for any systematic work not to get reified in the terms of slogans and in terms of some form of basic thematics or metaphysics. That's the logic of the commodity system: it's virtually impossible for us to escape it, except for brief moments.

In the past, philosophers have been tempted to turn their own philosophies into systems. It seems to me that's what finally happened to Hegel. He invents something called "Hegelianism." And he makes it into his own system and his own metaphysics, which incidentally climaxes not so much in "absolute spirit" but in "life" at the end, and so we have there the beginnings of some kind of vitalism. In the case of Marx, it's Engels who creates Marxism as a philosophy, and then Stalin. So dialectical materialism is not in Marx, but it is a philosophy. Marx and Freud are each one what I would call a unity-of-theory-and-practice. That is, they're not philosophies or systems. You want to call them theories? Well, I don't know. Contemporary theory is a very unique form in which you attempt to de-ideologize your positions by relating them to your situation or your practice in both of those cases; that's not something that one can do on any permanent basis. I think both Marx and Freud had their metaphysical moments. But those were rather different kinds of "thought assemblages," let's say. Although that's not a good word either because *assemblage* is another word for what I earlier referred to as the curatorial. You curate an assemblage. In modern times whether you like it or not, it's been rather difficult to escape this dilemma.

Now as for ontology, I should say that I am constantly rediscovering I'm still a Sartrean rather than a Heideggerian. I do believe there's an experience of being. Sartre calls it "nausea." It is also an experience of not-being which some call anxiety or freedom. In Heidegger, I think there is a lot of metaphysics, but Sartre did not really make a mysticism out of his philosophy as I think Heidegger did. So finally, my own position is closer to Sartre. Or, let's say Vico: the *verum factum*. I don't think we can know nature. That is to say, I think that life and the world are meaningless

accidents. On the other hand, we can know history, that history, society, events, the human world are meaningful. And that's the way I would define myself with respect to ontology, or metaphysics, or philosophy.

*Your own work has stood for the persistence of dialectical thinking, which includes the persistence of negativity and more broadly of critical thought, as well as the call for both historicization and interpretation. At the same time, in the attempt to register the novelty of contemporary aesthetic or cultural forms, you have also suggested that the works worth paying attention to tend to formally avoid negativity, the requirement of interpretation, or the sense of historical time found in the great modernist works. Increasingly, theory itself has followed this trend, and there appears to be an emphasis on affirmation and an increasing resistance to hermeneutics. Do you see this as merely a negative symptom of post-modernism itself? Or can you consider a point at which the categories such as interpretation, historicization, and critique really do become outmoded in light of current cultural realities?*

It's paradoxical, because after all, let's say you want to think very crudely of art as somehow reflecting the real. Okay. And let's say that the real has become ahistorical, has been reduced to the present, has lost its historicity, and so on. Well then, the art that reflects it is also going to be reduced to the present, ahistorical, and all the rest of it. We can only take an ambiguous relationship to this. In order for contemporary art to have some profound relationship to lived reality—David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, for example—it has to reflect that reality. The mode of interpretation required for a representation like that necessarily changes. When years ago I talked about surface, lack of depth, and so on, well then, in order to be a proper reflection of social reality, the art has to be a surface art without depth, and therefore the older hermeneutics of depth analysis—whether they're of a Freudian or Marxian kind—are no longer appropriate. But I do think that one can interpret this art in another way as a kind of diagnosis whose form can be described, and whose description is then itself a kind of clue to the weirdness of contemporary social reality. I consider that still a form of interpretation. Does a diagnosis still find some deeper meaning behind the surface? Or does it simply register a new reality?

I think we can still specify relationships to an underlying social situation. In *The Political Unconscious*, I tried to isolate three levels of such interpretation. One would have to do with historical events. I once heard a wonderful Hong Kong film critic who showed how each one of a group of Hong Kong films that we think of as completely cinematic products reflected a certain year in the crisis that was leading up to '97. So there is a case in which actual historical contexts and events themselves leave their mark in the work and—even if they are not exactly the meaning of the work—we

can find the trace of a symbolic event or response. On a second level, we can often detect a more generalized struggle of groups and classes. And on the third level, it's the pattern of the mode of production itself that becomes legible; that is, it's this third moment of capitalism that gets inscribed in the work, and one can recover that inscription and use the work to explore it in new directions. That's still what I call interpretation. Now, the attacks on interpretation—Deleuze is again one of the great examples—those attacks also reflected a situation in which we didn't want any more depth, realities, and essences; we wanted surfaces. And therefore Deleuze's—how can I say—his method, his polemics, and so forth, were themselves a faithful recognition of the turn that history itself or that social reality had taken. The old kind of ideological analysis where one attacks a certain kind of ideology or idealism in the name of a certain kind of materialism or vice versa—I don't think that's what ideological analysis is anymore. But it still may be the attempt to locate the way in which a certain kind of work is characteristic of a present situation.

I guess the big Hegelian question would be what about the next step, which is locating the contradictions. The problem is that older works of art or literature had a certain self-sufficiency to them, and one could locate a contradiction in an individual work. I think the newer artistic production is more of a field as opposed to an isolatable individual work in the same way. The example I always use is installation art. As T. J. Clark has said, painting is, well, dead. Now we have bunches of objects that are put together or assembled, to use a popular word. Well, it's not going to be in any one of those objects that one locates fundamental contradictions anymore, but I wouldn't for that give up the kind of criticism that's looking for contradictions. I've written an essay on *Neuromancer*, for example, which really does locate a contradiction in the two kinds of operations that are going on in the mechanics of that book. What are our contemporary contradictions? Local and global is a good one. There are all kinds of formal dilemmas and antinomies that one can find embedded in works and that can be studied. But that is not the same process as finding the contradictions in a modernist writer like Flaubert, let's say, or in an older kind of genre like Greek tragedy. It's a different kind of operation. One hesitates to use the word *hermeneutics*, but I still think that's a good word despite its overtones of digging under and finding hidden treasure.

*What are your thoughts about reading practices as taught in universities today and practiced in academic journals, and the extent to which there is a resistance to, or at least a turn away from, close reading and deconstruction, but also ideological analysis and symptomatic reading? One finds new terms proposed; for example, a journal issue a few years ago was devoted to "surface reading," or another example might be Franco Moretti's idea of "distant reading." Close read-*

*ing gets replaced by data mining. So we're interested in hearing you say a little more about this trend away from the text-based approach. You say that there are reasons that the individual text can no longer be necessarily taken as the primary object of analysis, and yet as you're suggesting, in some cases it is still useful to draw out contradictions in a single primary text.*

Yeah, it does seem to me difficult to do any kind of real criticism unless one begins with a text or maybe several texts. Comparison and comparative work are always safer and more revealing than being locked in one particular text. Yet, criticism today is a very free form. And I think that's as it should be; we have everything to gain from people doing all kinds of different things. I wouldn't want to impose any particular approaches or "methods." But, on the other hand, it is the institution that imposes that: it still wants articles, it still wants books, some of which the publishers won't print anymore, like single-author studies. There's obviously a reason for that. I have the feeling—and I don't think I'm the only one—that what's succeeded literary studies, namely, cultural studies, is itself greatly weakened today. It's a convenient way of lumping a lot of different things together, but I'm not sure there really is such a thing as "cultural studies" anymore; it's no longer a movement or a vanguard.

Criticism should minimally involve some sense of history, even if it is only a heightened sense of the present. On the other hand, we have global history now, and it's very hard for anybody to have a really enlarged sense of all that history. And then there's also English as a global language and what remains of an older kind of English. Think of those long sentences of George Eliot. I would be interested to know whether students would be more receptive to Proust's long sentences than Eliot's and, if so, why. It has been claimed, for example, that reading electronic texts like on a Kindle makes it more and more difficult to follow plots, to remember what happened, but above all, more and more difficult to read long sentences. I suppose that this is one of things that history is: a history of our retention of sentences and their structure, which is actually the very topic of Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Still I do think that something is lost when people are not trained to sustain that kind of temporal attention. The same goes for music and really for all of the art of the past.

I tend to still have some sympathy for the old humanities courses and so-called great books courses. But people have to be attracted to them in some way. I know that when my daughters were growing up a whole run of Jane Austen movies came out, and they all sat down and read Jane Austen's novels. So that seems to me fine, but if people want, after seeing them, to read five-volume fantasy novels, I think that's fine too. It's a question of reading itself. On the other hand, I wouldn't stridently defend "reading" or the classics in the familiar reactionary way (what Brecht called the good



old things, as opposed to the bad new things). Pedagogy is not inflicting discipline but awakening interest.

*Is this sympathy for these arts of the past why in your recent work you returned to questions of modernism and realism?*

The series you are alluding to [*The Poetics of Social Forms*] was always planned that way. I mean, I started with utopias, that is, science fiction and the future; then I went to postmodernism, which is the present, and so I'm making my way back into a certain past—to realism and then on to allegory and to epic and finally to narrative itself, which has always been my primary interest. Maybe indeed I have less to say about contemporary works than about even the recent past; or let's say I have built up a certain capital of reading but am not making any new and exciting investments any longer. It's a problem: you can either read or write, but time intervenes, and you have to choose between them. Still, I feel that I always discover new things about the present when working on these moments of the past. Allegory, for example, is both antiquated and surprisingly actual, and the work on museum pieces suddenly proves to make you aware of present-day processes that you weren't aware of.

*Has that tracing backward from *The Modernist Papers* to *The Antinomies of Realism* in any way make you rethink questions of postmodernism?*

No, not in the sense of revising my description, but perhaps in enlarging it: thus, all the new work on affect and emotion has allowed me to see certain things in a different way. I suppose it would be inevitable that this process would allow you to be able to articulate some new problems that you hadn't really thought of in those terms before. And certainly the affect material was one of those.

*Following from that, we would like to ask you explicitly about your use of the word affect today compared to thirty years ago. Of the various tendencies associated with postmodernism that you highlighted in 1984, it is "the waning of affect" that has often been taken to be the most at odds with the current cultural climate, or at least current theoretical assumptions. Do you see "the waning of affect" as still a constitutive feature of contemporary culture? How so? How do you understand the current theoretical emphasis on affect (which, of course, has a number of variations, from Eve Sedgwick's influence on the use of the term in queer theory, to the more Deleuzian and/or Spinozist forms, to phenomenological or cognitivist uses of the term)?*

I used the wrong word in that passage. It was written in the early 1980s, before the term *affect* had the voluminous theoretical attention it has since; I did not then have a binary opposition to guide me, and I simply

took the word *affect* as a synonym for emotion. Today, however, I see the situation as involving an opposition between *affect* and *emotion* or, better still, *named emotion*, as I prefer to call it: where affect as an emergent and bodily sliding scale of feelings and *Stimmungen* (Heidegger's word for it) is radically opposed to a system of named emotions which in one form or another has been in place since ancient times (in the West). This system is at one with a whole aesthetic, a rhetoric, and a psychology of expression and expressiveness, whereas affect has not been visible aesthetically until recently and is resistant to the operation of naming—I'm not sure we yet have the right terminology to describe its manifestations. So to sum up, what I really meant at the time was the waning of emotions, but I didn't yet have that opposition between affect and emotion available, which I've deployed in more recent work. I develop it really only in a one-sided way in *The Antinomies of Realism* because my allegory book will deal more with named emotions. I see affect and emotion almost as opposites, and that opposition suddenly allows one to see the historical position of affect as, if you like, a kind of reduction to the body, which I mentioned earlier. I'm not sure that I'm using *affect* the way other people are nowadays. But certainly the whole emergence of "affect theory" has forced me to rethink that word and to recognize how useful it is in the context that I was trying to develop.

*We were asking you this because we feel like what you called "the waning of affect" does still correspond to something even if, as you say, you may have chosen the wrong word for it. The term you posed at the time in opposition to affect was "intensity" . . .*

Yes, and now I identify those two things. It seems to me intensity is another word for affect in the Deleuzian or Lyotardian sense. But on the other hand, I think the point about waning in connection with affect—you could talk about it in terms of intensities too, of waxing—is that it's something that is temporal, is ephemeral, chromatic, if you like, and one has to think of it that way.

Whereas emotions of the older variety nowadays play a lesser part in narrative and in what narrative tries to do and therefore in the way people think about their lives. If you're isolated in the present, then it's affects and intensities that you're aware of, more than the dominance of some fundamental emotion. What would be the dominant emotion today? Ressentiment, perhaps, or something like that? Well that's not exactly an emotion either. But things like resentment, hatred, maybe even some of the positive emotions . . . Proust already showed that grief was—how did he put it?—an intermittency. Maybe emotions are now only used to organize characters around a certain kind of emotion, which would make for a kind of static character of some sort, or secondary character.

On the other hand, affect is very difficult to organize into a narrative. And, whatever the status of our temporality today, we still have to think of things somehow in terms of narratives. That's maybe really the most interesting problem of postmodernism. Whereas the representational problem in the modern was very present—the impossibility of representation and so on and so forth—modernist artists and authors thought it could be overcome. They thought that something could be constructed that could even stand as the impossibility of representation—even Lukács says that, oddly enough, in *The Theory of the Novel*—whereas I think that in postmodernism everybody knows that it's impossible and nobody cares. So the problem of representation is there, but maybe it's no longer a crisis the way it was in the modern period, and you can connect that to the social too. If capitalism is everywhere, there's no great urgency about describing it, whereas if it's still isolated and comes into being alongside other modes of production, or older forms of life, then it suddenly is seen as this strange new, frightening, even monstrous thing that you need to describe.

*We'd like to return to the question of the global. If, as you just said, capitalism is everywhere, is it accented differently in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the Global South more generally?*

Yes, of course, and those are also incompletely capitalized, financialized, colonized areas. There are still lots of very poor peasants in China. What we think of as China, especially the “new China,” is right on the coast in the old concession areas. So there is bound to be a much more uneven kind of temporality in some parts of the world. On the other hand, people have said the same thing about the United States, which is supposed to be the most advanced country, and yet we also have immense pockets of poverty which have become areas that are perhaps no longer completely subsumed by capital.

I do think the national framework is still very important. First of all, it's what organizes globalization. I always use the example of New Zealand; it was Chomsky who brought it to our attention. If you want to lower salaries and create worker givebacks and so on and so forth, you do that by saying, “Look, we can't compete in the world.” The national framework is indispensable for that kind of propaganda operation, because the “we” who have to make sacrifices, take pay cuts and payoffs, and so forth, are of course the national workforce. We're still in that situation. Meanwhile, there is a representational problem of globalization: what are the fantasy characters that all these countries are playing in our unconscious? I mean it's obvious from a much cruder standpoint that Russia's a villain, China's some kind of ally but let's not trust it too much, et cetera. And each country or culture has its version of this, which is Carl Schmitt's “friend or foe,”

of course, but which is not fixed but shifts and changes according to the national and international context.

And then there is tourism. Tourism was always a matter of going back to the past. When it began in the nineteenth century, you wanted to see older modes of production. You went to North Africa or even to Italy. For a while, it was also seeing the future; that was the role of Japan in the '90s in *Neuromancer*, for example. Japan was this future, though it seems not to be anymore. That kind of tourism, which was a kind of time travel, has gone away. Meanwhile everything looks alike, all airports look alike, all hotels look alike, like motels; I mean these non-places, to use Marc Augé's term. Well, I think that's quite a useful way of describing something that is neither global nor local but that is certainly allegorical.

*Since we're talking about terminology, what about the terms we use to describe contemporary capitalism? Is the phrase late capitalism still the key term for you? Earlier you mentioned "finance capitalism," and there is also "flexible capitalism" . . .*

I don't like "flexible" because that sounds too positive somehow, but you could also say post-Fordism, disorganized capitalism, the knowledge economy, cognitive capitalism, and so forth (I get these terms from Mezzadra and Neilson's useful *Border as Method*), but I still like "postmodernity" best.

*And neoliberalism?*

Neoliberalism is for me a strategy and an ideology. I wouldn't call the system itself neoliberalism, because that hasn't been doing so well either lately. Late capitalism is the term I got from Ernest Mandel, and I think it's a good term for it. It has some suggestive overtones. Certainly finance capital is a much more precise way of underlining what's unique about this combination of communications and finance and abstraction that's taken over the system of postindustrial production. And then I think one can still say *globalization* except it doesn't seem to sound like a word for a social system exactly. But all of those things express an aspect of this new system. Whatever people want to call it, by now almost everybody recognizes that from the '80s on a fundamental change took place.

A friend of mine who has looked into this said that the last moment in which government was still planning utopian projects was the Carter administration. So that's one interesting temporal index, but there are many other ways of dating the shift. It has to do with the peculiar kind of abstraction that finance involves: autonomy of finance as opposed to that of production. People have analyzed the way in which money is different in these two systems: value of production is very different from the value

or nonvalue of all these crazy figures. So abstraction becomes itself a very interesting philosophical question. And I think that has something to do with this newer art that you ask about.

I suppose the equivalent of abstraction in art or literature would be the *simulacrum*, which everybody is probably tired of, but which was really the definitional moment for this art, because it both looks like reality and somehow is also abstract at the same time. If there is another fundamental characteristic of this art, it would be its relationship to that and how it invents some new mode of dealing with that impossible representation. Because representation of the simulacrum means you have a complete realism, none of which is real. That's rather different from what the modernists did. I also have the feeling that much of contemporary literature is a kind of first-person literature which approaches these changes through a different kind of subjectivity. That is, you don't have somebody telling about their feelings or affects or whatever in a stream of consciousness. You have somebody testifying to their flow of experience. It isn't really subjective anymore in the same way.

*Postmodernism, as a term, emerged from architecture, but visual media seemed to provide the paradigmatic examples; for example, Debord's idea of spectacle and Baudrillard on the simulacrum became some of the most used and abused concepts to mark the shift to the postmodern. You, of course, highlighted the notion of a shift from time to space or, indeed, a spatialization of time as a primary feature of this new cultural logic. Do you think this diagnosis holds for contemporary culture? It seems as if the sense of a perpetual present, the loss of an ability to think historically, et cetera, is as true as ever if not more so, but what do you say to the idea that, increasingly, cultural forms seem to be moving away from the visual and that the word that seems to have replaced spectacle is information? Do you think there has been a shift away from visual culture in recent years toward something else? And how do you understand the trend toward information becoming the primary category through which to read everything—not just the images and texts that make up cultural forms but also everything that makes up the human as such?*

So you're seeing the image itself as a form of information?

*Yeah, or at least that might be one way in which digital culture can be seen to have changed the way we think about the image.*

I'm not sure I understand enough about digital culture to answer that properly. I do think that this is where film comes in because in some sense, photography and film are neither subjective nor objective, which might become the answer. As Cavell said, it's the world without people. So from

a Kantian standpoint, what would film be? I mean, you're not getting the thing in itself, but you're not getting a point of view on the thing, and you're not there either. And so I think that film becomes a very different kind of nonsubjective, but also really nonobjective, medium in which that strange no-man's land can be conveyed. Now how does that change when you pass from film stock to digital media? I'm not clear. It seems as if literature becomes a sort of voice-over of that contemporary experience.

But meanwhile I think that art exhibitions as such are no longer visual in that sense. Painting—the great age of painting—all the way up through abstract expressionism was an autonomization of the visual, a way in which everything was translated into the visual. And that's clearly not the case anymore. But is spatial the right word for this? I guess space in this context presupposes the temporality of the present, so it's not exactly geographical. But it's also not exactly visual. I'm not sure quite how to characterize that. And probably the relationship of music and space and music and time has something to do with that too. But we have different—you can use Rancière's slogan if you like—we have different ratios of the senses to each other in this case.

*Can you elaborate on this idea that art today is less visual? It seems today that moving image art is everywhere, as if cinema has bled out into the spaces of the gallery and the museum. Does this say something about the state of contemporary cinema?*

Well, this first raises the issue of photography. There were a lot of combinations of painting and photography, and photography itself became a very fundamental kind of art for a while. But I wouldn't say it's film; I would rather say it's video that has effected this change, or that is present in all these ways. But I'm not sure about the dominance of video either, since it too is reduced to an aspect. So it isn't visuality of that older, autonomous kind; it is the integration of a different kind of sensation into the mix, so to speak. I looked at video art a long time ago, and I thought it was very interesting in itself, but now it's really everywhere. In the beginning it was also autonomous. It used to be a separate medium and a separate branch of art. I don't think that's true anymore. It seems to me that a lot of gallery installations include video, in the form of loops and so on, something which reduces the autonomy of all of the components, including the visual.

*In The Antinomies of Realism, you write, "The weakening of the fictional undermines its opposite number, the category of the factual; and . . . this is the point where we find ourselves on the threshold of a new world." You are writing about Alexander Kluge but suggest that this has much larger implications. Can you say a bit more about what you think might be happening with the*

*breakdown of the fact/fiction distinction and how it might relate to the kinds of shifts you see taking place in the function or understanding of the aesthetic more generally? Thirty years ago, you hinted at the sense of an emergent shift in our understanding of aesthetics and culture more generally that perhaps could not yet be clearly articulated.*

I think that's right. I mean we still use this word *art*, and we have museums and what we call works of art, but the whole function of the thing has changed. That is why the revival of aesthetics is not a good idea, because it isn't dealing with works anymore—it isn't dealing with the same kinds of objects, and these are not really objects anymore anyway. I don't know whether people use the word *fiction* very much anymore, either. Let's just stick to a Freudian approach here: if fantasy is so important and omnipresent, then it becomes a fact, too. I mean, if people keep talking about the *narrative* of things—all the news commentaries use this word now, which is a relatively new word in that context—then everything's a narrative and everything goes.

But I wouldn't want to be thought to be promoting the primacy of the "fact" either, as in documentary. If now we know that the fact is constructed, as so many people have taught us, then the very power of the fact has lost out. Is this simulacrum? You see it; it's there. Is it a fact? Well, but it isn't really a fiction either. . . . So the whole opposition has faded in some sense. Has it been replaced by something else? I do think that art and art's autonomy have also disappeared in everyday life. If everything in everyday life is becoming images, and simulacrum, then art ceased to occupy a separate sphere.

*Art still occupies a separate sphere in that it can be sold for a lot of money . . .*

Well, but you can sell everything else for a lot of money, too. So in a sense, it's drawn into the world, the commodity world, by the way of its price. In another sense by way of its number if you're talking about these astronomical figures. I don't think that should necessarily lead us to the triumphant conclusion that all we're interested in now is reality, as is suggested by a book like *Reality Hunger* [by David Shields], because reality itself gets lost in all that. So people's memoirs and their accounts of things are just as fictional as anything else. But that does devalue the act of writing novels: the crisis of the novel! In film you get the same thing with the documentary. Film follows the same evolution. I always think of *Eclipse*. You're seeing something real in that fictional film. Film is still photography. Well, okay, special effects throws a monkey wrench into this question. Maybe that's why I don't care much for special effects. I think everybody's a little annoyed because they would like their simulacrum to have a little reality, and the

more they know that somebody's got a machine that just produces this, the less they can have their sense of the disappearance of the real. I mean that's certainly fictive, but it's not the fiction of the storyteller, it's some damn engineer who has produced it and so it loses its *jouissance*. The news also becomes this fictional thing. It doesn't mean that those things are not real, but maybe there are more things that are real now than before. Or maybe we need a more capitalized word like Lacan's *Real* to distinguish some other relationship to it. But the Real of Lacan didn't refer to facts either. That was an existential distinction between truth and science, lived experience and fact. But it does mean that experience itself has become transformed, modified in its structure.

*Regarding the issue of distinguishing lived experience from fact, how do you take the concept of "cognitive mapping" today? Is it different from when you first used it?*

There too, the map has to be understood as a representational problem, and a representational impossibility. Everybody is writing about maps today, for and against. Really the concept has to do with the representation of globalization. It also relates to how we situate our own individual consciousness in a larger situation. It might be better to just consider it a form problem, and when it makes for new representations, it's interesting. When people manage to think of something new, whether it's film or the novel or something else, then I think we know that something interesting, something relevant is going on. But, on the other hand, I don't think I imagine the artist can do that just by thinking about it. Something in their own psyche, in their own experience or situation has to make those kinds of discoveries possible and unexpected.

Faulkner once said that the best novels had to draw on three things: imagination, observation, and experience (any two of which would do in a pinch). Maybe that's the starting point for us both in terms of literature and theory, these three questions: what can we experience in the US? What can we observe from the US? How far can an American imagination take us?

*You were speaking earlier about the possibility of the political in the artwork being different now than it was in the past. Are there any cultural forms—movies, works of literature, art—being made right now that are exciting to you?*

We always have to reckon our class position into these forms of personal taste; the kind of revelations that we got from naturalism on don't have the same kind of impact now. Or maybe we don't know them in the right way. I think it's harder to shock people, it's harder to stun people, with new kinds of realities that they didn't know. But maybe we're not doing it right. Or maybe the documentaries or newsreels and so on are not doing it right.



One is always looking for newer kinds of texts and films, and newer kinds of art as well.

I think the most interesting painter around right now is Neo Rauch. I hope to write something about him someday, and that's certainly a case where narratives are fundamental, maybe reinvented, combined in weird assemblages. It's not surrealism anymore, not exactly fantasy or magical realism; it's more like pieces of the past are being superimposed in some new sense.

In terms of film, I think that the most interesting examples come from outside the West. I hesitate to mention specific examples off the top of my head, but there is [Nuri Bilge] Ceylan, for example, and in other ways, Béla Tarr or Aleksei German. There used to be good Chinese films before Tiananmen, though perhaps less now. People like Tsai Ming-liang were doing weird and interesting things, but I haven't seen his latest films. Jia Zhangke has been interesting to me. I'm somewhat more interested in fiction films, despite there being no such thing as fiction, and then subgenres like detective stories and science fiction sometimes. I wrote about *Cloud Atlas*, the novel, which I think was a real breakthrough. The funny thing is detective stories are coming out everywhere. They're a new form of tourism—there isn't a major city in the world that doesn't have somebody writing a detective story. And then it often ceases to be so productive.

*What about TV? Around the time you were working on Postmodernism (the book), you also seemed to focus a great deal on cinema. Today certain kinds of TV shows (no longer necessarily watched on a TV) seem to be displacing films as the dominant narrative cultural form at least within a certain elite culture. Meanwhile, new kinds of viewing and reading practices are getting shaped by the centrality of the computer in so many current forms of cultural consumption. Is there anything that seems new here that might inform how we think about the "cultural logic" of capitalism today? You've written, for example, about The Wire, but do you see other significant features in some of these new TV series?*

I am sure people will produce that kind of analysis. I wasn't so crazy about *Treme*, and I didn't like the war thing, but if he [David Simon] only did *The Wire*, that's still something (and I don't underrate *Homicide*). The problem is that there aren't any plots anymore. So you have to work very hard to put a lot of different strands together in a way that operates like a plot. But otherwise all you get in popular culture is serial killers and terrorists. That's about it. Pedophiles, but we don't really show them much. Well, I guess maybe those fit under serial killers. It is to *that* that plot has been reduced.

I read something recently about the disappearance of the family novel. I think that's an interesting thought. That some of it still exists in other countries where you still have families. I don't know whether we're

interested in families anymore here; Franzen's families, for example, are fairly restrictive, besides being dysfunctional. But these other things were dynastic novels really . . . in China, in India I think too, to a certain degree. I think that for me generally the good things—whether films or novels—are coming from the non-Western world right now. But one doesn't want to rule anything out. One has to keep looking for it. That I'm willing to do.