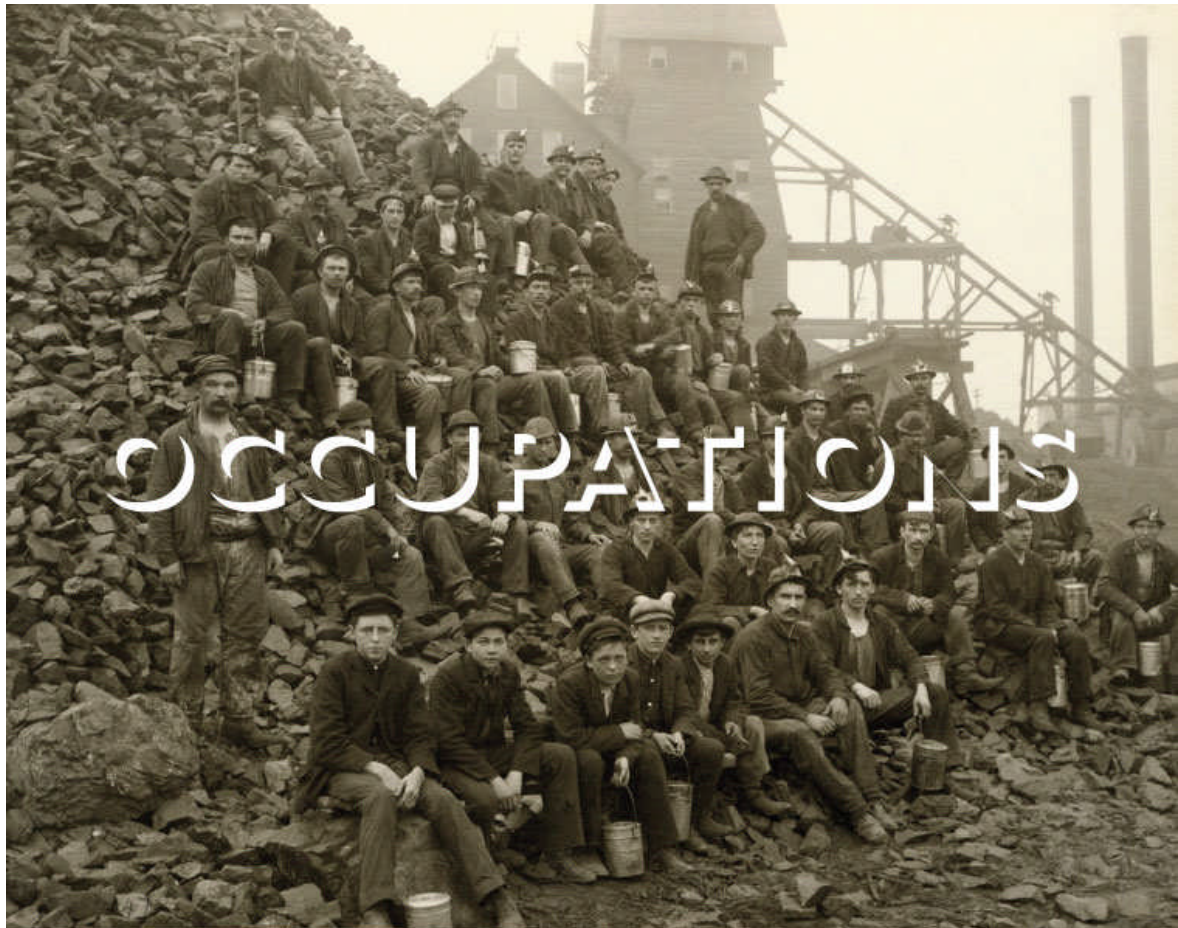


# Excursions

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Rebecca Harding, 'Review of *The Antinomies of Realism* by  
Fredric Jameson'

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## Reviews

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*The Antinomies of Realism* by Fredric Jameson  
London: Verso, 2013.

*The Antinomies of Realism* is the third in a series of texts under the title *The Poetics of Social Forms*, in which Jameson seeks to interrogate the concurrent passages of cultural, social, and historical elements in tandem with developments in aesthetic form. In this work, which successfully stands alone, he investigates this central thesis with a focus on the development of realism, tracing and interrogating its various permutations through the fiction of Émile Zola, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Mark Twain, William Faulkner and Leo Tolstoy, among many others. He probes the various ways in which each of these literary examples can be seen to occupy the space of the

realist novel, as well as how they interact with the trajectory of other genres such as the naturalist and historical novel.

Jameson's canonical status and prodigious writerly output has been marked by accusations of difficulty that might lead us to approach his most recent work with certain expectations of a highly impenetrable or difficult text. David Foster Wallace, in his 1996 essay 'Authority and American Usage' singles Jameson out as the archetypal theorist, embodying the traits of obliqueness and unreadability that mark the discipline (Wallace, 1996, p.115). In response to Wallace, Alex Carp has noted that the two writers in fact have much in common, and that their general projects are much the same: for Carp they are both

making sense of the ways in which the world was being remade around them toward the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first, and trying to make peace with how the language they inherited failed to communicate an experience of those changes (Carp, 2014).

Jameson's broad array of subject matter begins with the eighteenth century and the origins of the novel form itself, and progresses forward to the present day and onward to a speculative future. However, apart from the fact that the book's subject matter is located in the historical past, Carp's evocations, in particular of a 'world being remade' and of the failure of inherited language, ring true throughout *The Antinomies of Realism*. As might be expected of such a prolific writer and established thinker, the book does not act as survey or overview; rather it is a dense and idiosyncratic work, and Jameson's characteristic style makes for what seems a highly personal account of his subject, due in particular to the works of fiction and theory he invokes. These are thoroughly diverse—while Zola and Auerbach figure centrally, Jameson's is a frame of reference that ranges broadly through European philosophy and the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel.

Perhaps surprisingly given the text's central thesis, Jameson turns frequently to the medium of film. In his earlier work *Signatures of the Visible* (2011), the author employed filmic examples as a fitting means to illustrate the dominance of the visual within contemporary culture. Again in this later work, in his discussion of the turn to visuality in realism, he sees no inconsistency in an argument that refers at times to film as much as it does to text. A treatment of *Pulp Fiction* (p.230) and a pleasing diversion to Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception* (p.299) which features in the book's

conclusion make for a unique account and provide some light relief from the more opaque engagements with philosophical thought. A thorough intermixing of different media sees repeated invocations of Erich Auerbach interspersed with examples from contemporary film, and Hegel, Sartre, and Freud sit alongside an oblique reference to *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (p.289) and an anecdotal mention of Larry King (p.305). Jameson also playfully borrows terminology from one medium to describe another; for example, in his discussion of the historical novel he even refers to the Second World War as the ‘sequel’ to the first (p.235). These details contribute to a sense that Jameson’s approach to his subject is playful and creative, and is more concerned with drawing out these same elements from the works under discussion, rather than serious engagement with the ethical problems and challenges that accompany the portrayal of history in literature and film.

In approaching realism in terms of its antinomies, Jameson focuses on the paradoxical and contradictory elements of the genre, which he acknowledges must be unresolvable by their very nature. His project is to show how various elements of realism work against one another, and it is not his intention to resolve these conflicts. He states that he can only achieve what he sets out to do ‘by grasping realism as a historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined’, thereby setting up the unresolvable nature of his subject matter (p.6). If the text seems at times to evade satisfactory or conclusive meaning, this is something that Jameson takes pains to clearly establish, not as a failing but as an essential and undeniable part of his project. He opens by asserting the evasiveness, the difficulty in the ‘attempt to hold the phenomenon of realism firmly in our mind’s eye’, and does not attempt to resolve or provide a solution to this slipperiness (p.1). Rather he acknowledges it, and posits that the only way to approach the works under discussion is relatively; that is, as much in terms of the historical, contextual, or theoretical space that they occupy as their content. He does not shy away from referring to or stating the ‘impossibility’ of the answers and definitions he seeks (p.260). In particular, in his appropriation of affect theory for his own specific context he is keen to emphasise its status as essentially impossible to capture in language (p.55). Likewise, the horror of war is ‘nameless’ and ‘ultimately unrepresentable’ (p.233). By invoking these difficulties that are integral to his subject matter, and the fundamental problems inherent to defining literary form, Jameson allows us to proceed more comfortably with the text, and avoids a tone of overly prescriptive assertion.

In a particularly engaging element that runs throughout the text, Jameson identifies a central tension from which the realist narrative arises: a tension between what he describes as the ‘tripartite past-present-future’ (p.25) which is linked to notions of a manifest and predetermined destiny, and can be found in genres such as the epic and *récit* (a tale in the French tradition), and the subsequent giving way of this notion to be replaced by an open or ‘eternal present’. For Jameson, realism resides in the contradiction between these two approaches to temporality (p.26). I found assertions of the work such as this one to be most engaging and rewarding when they were anchored in one of the many extended and thorough close readings. Specifically, there is a particularly evocative treatment of the sensory sublime in a passage of *The Belly of Paris* (p.60), which is pleasingly classified in the index as ‘smelly cheese as sensory autonomization in Émile Zola’ (p.326). Jameson characterises the progression of the realist genre as an open and ongoing process. In his treatment of the author Stephen Crane he describes him as using the setting of war as a ‘laboratory’ (p.235), and elsewhere he refers to one of his literary examples as ‘rehearsing the modes of allegory and symbol’ (p.247). He defines his own project as unresolved and continuous, characterising the book as an experiment, and what remains consistent throughout is the sense of the author’s immersion in and enthusiasm for his subject. The text features a number of extensive quotations from French and German works along with their English translations that are often Jameson’s own. He arrests the progression of his own arguments with a number of “but I don’t have time for that here” caveats, and repeatedly cuts himself off from extended diversions, directing us instead to further reading outside the text. As Jameson directs us in footnotes to find a particular idea explored more fully in other texts, we find that these are often his own, a detail which confirms the benefit that a broader knowledge of his other writings would bring to this one.

The book provides a useful and unique account of the ties that bind history to literature, and there is much rich material to be found in what is not a holistic overview, or even necessarily a cohesive picture of the history of the realist novel, but rather an engaging and idiosyncratic take on the subject. Jameson concludes with a convincing argument that if it is possible for a work to occupy the space of the realist novel today, it must also necessarily be speculative and engage with questions of our future (p.313). The author works to untangle the complex network of the history of the realist novel through a truly diverse set of close readings. While his priority is clearly not a

commitment to plain English such as the one championed by Wallace, Jameson writes with an energy and enthusiasm that brings together a mixed bag of references, successfully sweeping the eighteenth century novel and science fiction into the same discourse. The text is populated with Jameson's characteristically unique points of reference, and the overall sense is of a wealth of ideas densely packed into a text in which there is still not enough room. There is certainly work to be done by the reader: quotes from French and German texts are not always presented with an accompanying English translation, and the more extensive forays into close analytical reading might seem oblique to a reader not grounded in the texts to which he refers. It is a book that is worth the perseverance it requires of the reader, and would no doubt benefit from re-reading.

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