

# Reflections: The Generosity of Fredric Jameson

Saturday 19 October 2024, by [TALLY Robert T. Jr.](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2024).

Fredric Jameson, arguably the leading cultural critic in the world and certainly the most influential Marxist critic of our time, died at the age of ninety on September 22, 2024. The news came as a shock to many of us, for Jameson was as active as ever in his final years. In 2024 alone, he published two books: *Inventions of a Present: The Novel in its Crisis of Globalization* (Verso) and *The Years of Theory: Postwar French Thought to the Present* (Verso). And Jameson has more work—alas, now to be labeled *posthumous*—to come. Jameson’s legacy is undoubtedly tremendous, but it will also be most visible in the continuing and as yet unforeseen work of those who have been inspired by the critical theorist’s life and work.

I was honored to both participate in and help organize two events in celebration of Jameson’s ninetieth birthday this past April. First, a series of brief essays published on Verso Books’ blog site under the title “Jameson at 90,” featured twenty-six distinguished authors, each writing on a different book by Jameson. [1] The series covered Jameson’s entire career from *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (1961) through *The Benjamin Files* (2020). Sebastian Budgen (who spearheaded this project) and I were able to gather an impressive array of scholars and critics to discuss the significance of each book in question, its influence on their own work, and its lasting value for contemporary and future readers. Assembling the roster was quite easy, and everyone’s eagerness to join in the celebration of Jameson’s life and work testify to its continuing importance for cultural criticism today.

Second, my coorganizers Nicholas Brown, Maria Elisa Cevalco, Fabio Durão, and I set up a four-day online symposium titled *Jameson at 90: A Celebration of Theory*, with papers that extrapolated from Jameson’s work by taking it in new directions and extending it into different domains—which is a rather Jamesonian thing to do, of course. [2] Again, we had an amazing group of speakers. Fred himself was there for all the sessions—sometimes serving as an impromptu respondent, sometimes just taking it all in as a fellow member of the audience. On the last day, he remarked on how enjoyable and generative the discussions had been and suggested we should do something like this every week, adding, with a self-deprecating laugh, “it wouldn’t have to be about *me* all the time.”

This enthusiasm for such events, for scholarly criticism and theory, for engaging with students, colleagues, and friends, typifies Jameson’s life and work completely. There was always something fundamentally *joyous* about him and the projects he engaged in, a joyousness that casual critics—particularly those who wished to label his approach as “paranoid,” “suspicious,” or “negative”—seemed to miss. As Jameson himself put it in his introduction to the expanded edition of *The Ideologies of Theory*, “inasmuch as ideological analysis is so frequently associated with querulous and irritable negativism, it may be appropriate to stress the interest and delight all these topics, dilemmas, and contradictions as well as jests and positions—still have for me.” [3] It is clear that, whatever else was also happening in Jameson’s work, he was having a good deal of fun. This is as it should be, of course.

Jameson’s laugh, almost a giggle really, will be missed by all who knew him. The shock and sadness of his relatively sudden death has, for me, been somewhat alleviated—or I might say, it has been

dialectically transformed in a manner that cancels, preserves, and sublimates my grief—by the outpouring of memorials, tributes, and remembrances, from those who knew him personally, those who only knew his writings, and from everyone else in between. Those I have read there are far too many to list—and I have seen only a fraction of the total. Jameson’s work had an enormous international impact. Friends in China, for example, tell me that memorials have been pouring in across media, and I have little doubt that this is the case elsewhere as well.

One word that appears over and over in these testimonials is *generous*, and it is true; Jameson’s generosity is legendary. This attribute characterizes all aspects of his approach to criticism, his teaching and mentoring, and his personal life. His many students, colleagues, friends, and even his mere acquaintances, frequently cite examples of Jameson’s generosity toward them—moments when he took the time or effort to help or offer his support. By the 1970s, with the publication of *Marxism and Form* (1971) and *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), Jameson was already a “star” (at least by academic standards), but he never acted the part beyond doing his job as a teacher, mentor, and scholar. He may have had his elite tastes—in wine or music, for example—but he was never an elitist. Whether he was in the presence of another leading scholar, a new student, or even a stranger, Jameson was always interested in what that person had to say, often asking questions if only to satisfy his own curiosity, and offering surprising insights based on his own vast and wide-ranging reservoirs of knowledge. In this way, perhaps, his generosity was also part of his genuine desire to know the world and its people. As Colin MacCabe famously quipped, borrowing the line from Terence, “nothing cultural is alien to him.” [4]

And Jameson’s body of work is an elaborate monument to his critical and intellectual generosity, with its stunningly inclusive embrace of all manner of theories, methodologies, texts, authors, approaches, and forms. Jameson was a Marxist first and last. But, unlike more sectarian partisans within Marxist theory and practice, Jameson affirmed that Marxism does not so much stand athwart other ideologies or philosophies as it includes them, incorporating their insights while encompassing a vaster purview, that of totality itself. As he put it in *The Political Unconscious*, “Marxism is here conceived as the ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic and incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them.” [5] Of course, some non- or anti-Marxists would balk at Jameson’s sense of Marxism as simultaneously transcending, subordinating, and absorbing their own theories, but it is another sign of Jameson’s commitment to a vision of totality, not to mention his always generous reading of others, that he insisted that no text or idea is completely without value. Even the most ideologically suspect texts may be revealed to hold within them, like the “seeds of time” or the “stirring within the chrysalis,” some ultimately utopian prospect to which we, as Marxists, must be attuned at all times.

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Among the more striking versions of this extraordinarily inclusive Marxist criticism can be found in *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979), where Jameson’s artful interpretation of Lewis’s novels would uncover the revolutionary potential to be found in even the work of a viciously anticommunist writer. Or more recently when he identified the corporate

behemoth Walmart—with its global supply chains, diverse workforce, and mass-cultural hegemony—as a model for a properly socialist organization for the future. Not long ago, Jameson astonished and discomfited many Marxists when, in *An American Utopia*, he laid out a practical plan that would involve widespread conscription in a “universal army,” thus establishing the “form” of the US Army as a congenial means to figure forth a practical yet utopian social order. Earlier Jameson had already written on the ways that gangster films, detective fiction, or conspiracy theories, among other genres and texts, might offer prospects for a Marxist utopian theory and practice. Some of this may have been a bit tongue-in-cheek, arguably, but this also speaks to Jameson’s generosity with respect to reading across genres and ideologies, as well as his commitment to a dialectical criticism that would necessarily take the good with the bad in a sort of unity of opposites, which in turn would advance the problem to new levels of analytical consideration.

As I have discussed in my *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism* (2014), I first met Jameson as a teacher when I was a callow undergraduate. This was long before I knew of his writings or reputation. To me, he has always been that genial professor, excited to introduce others to stimulating, insightful, challenging, and beautiful works of art, philosophical ideas, critical essays, and so forth. I recall a film class I took with him: while the class was nominally an introduction to film studies (for example, we read David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s monumental *Film Art*), it also focused on what Jameson called “the Historical Film” and used Georg Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* as a touchstone for the semester’s discussion. In that class we watched classics alongside lesser-known films—from D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* and Luis Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* to Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather, Part II* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon*—in connection with a variety of disparate texts, including history, theory, and novels. For example, we watched Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Burn!* after reading C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* and later did a viewing of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend* in the context of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. Some years afterwards, I realized that the students in those lectures and discussion were made privy to some of the insights that would appear in Jameson’s *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (1992). I mention all this merely to offer another example of Jameson’s eclectic yet comprehensive approach to culture, politics, and society, which was as thrilling for a student in his classroom as it is for readers of his scintillating writings.

Jameson was first and last a Marxist critic, something readily discernible in all of his endeavors. He was deeply committed to Marxist theory and practice, which for years he championed in a time and place most inhospitable to that discourse and its politics. Many in the United States skeptical of, if not openly hostile toward Marxism—Jameson was formed in the era of McCarthyism, after all. After 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall taken as a sign for an “end of history,” Jameson’s perseverance and commitments to Marxism could seem quixotic or worse. Even many on the putative left abandoned their faith in Marx in those days, and undoubtedly Jameson must have appeared unfashionable at the least. However, Jameson has shown that Marxism is not merely relevant—it is absolutely crucial to our postmodern epoch and has become all the more indispensable for making sense of “late capitalism” in an era of globalization. If anything, thanks in part to Jameson and in part to the lamentable state of the world, Marxism and Marxist critique are more meaningful than ever, and Jameson’s work remains vital to the cultural cartography of our world today.

Although he has been criticized—unfairly, in my view—for being too academic, too theoretical, and sometimes too difficult, Jameson’s contributions to Marxism are considerable. Jameson was an academic, to be sure, and he spent his entire career—from his undergraduate days at Haverford College, through his time at Yale, Harvard, UC-San Diego, UC-Santa Cruz, Duke, and his many guest and visiting stints elsewhere—in the academe. Indeed, Jameson was at the start of another semester when he died, having recently given a first lecture on Kant for a course on aesthetic theory. Jameson has conceded in interviews that there may be something of a division of labor between theory and

practice within Marxism, but even amid its apparent Ivory Tower trappings, Jameson's work has for so many years been of great and lasting value to activists, artists, militants, and oppositional critics. And, needless to say, Jameson himself was always wholeheartedly committed to the struggles for liberation throughout the world.

This is ultimately the greatest gift we might associate with Jameson's inveterate generosity. In addition to his direct or indirect support for such movements, Jameson's example, teaching, and writings have made new ways of seeing the world possible. These new ways of seeing the world we live in are prerequisites, not only to interpret our conditions, but to change them. The world system that Jameson so assiduously and elegantly attempted to map and to remap over a more than sixty-five year career is ever more dynamic, complex, and interconnected. Jameson's work offers sturdy infrastructure for current and future projects, and the many who have benefited from his teaching, speaking, and writing will undoubtedly extend his dialectical criticism in productive ways. Anna Kornbluh, who exemplifies this legacy as well as anyone today, has rightly observed in her *Immediacy, or, the Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024) that Jameson's theory and practice provide us with "building materials" for the critical endeavors to come.

**Robert T. Tally Jr.**

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• Spectre. October 8, 2024:

<https://spectrejournal.com/the-generosity-of-fredric-jameson/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Verso, "Jameson at 90: A Verso Blog Series," Verso (blog), September 23, 2024, <https://www.versobooks.com/en-ca/blogs/news/jameson-at-90-a-verso-blog-series>.

[2] "Jameson at 90 Day 1: April 5, 2024," Vimeo video, 1:41:36, posted by "Nicholas Brown," June 28, 2024, <https://vimeo.com/971012700>; "Jameson at 90 Day 2: April 12, 2024," Vimeo video, 1:45:32, posted by "Nicholas Brown," June 28, 2024, <https://vimeo.com/971101234>; "Jameson at 90 Day 3: April 19, 2024," Vimeo video, 1:57:19, posted by "Nicholas Brown," June 28, 2024, <https://vimeo.com/971155208>; "Jameson at 90 Day 4: April, 26, 2024," Vimeo video, 1:37:38, posted by "Nicholas Brown," July 14, 2024, <https://vimeo.com/984057888>.

[3] Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), xi.

[4] Colin MacCabe, "Preface," in Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), ix.

[5] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 10.