

Jameson, Fredric. *Valences of the Dialectic*. London and New York: Verso, 2009 (pp 625). ISBN 978-1-85984-877-7.

In an observation on the greatness of Deleuze Jameson remarks it “was to have confronted omnivorously the immense field of everything that was thought and published” (182). No one, he continues, can read Deleuze without being stunned by the ceaseless flood of references that tirelessly nourish his texts and it is in this sense that we can speak of Deleuze “as a thinker of synthesis, one who masters the immense proliferation of thoughts and concepts by way of assimilation and appropriation” (182). It has always seemed to me that as much can be said for Jameson himself and such a view is fully confirmed by this monumental study of the dialectic. *Valences of the Dialectic* brings together Jameson’s writings on the dialectic over the past 20 years¹ and presents detailed readings of Hegel, Derrida, Deleuze, Lukács, Sartre, Heidegger, Althusser and Ricoeur, as well as more specific engagements with Lenin, Rousseau, and expositions of commodification, cultural revolution, reification and totality. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise to see a certain degree of repetition and re-statement of key Jamesonian positions that go back as far as *Marxism and Form* (1971) and its concluding chapter on dialectical criticism. This being said, certain things are worth repeating, and Jameson’s defence of dialectical thought as an “unfinished project, which anticipates modes of thought and reality that have yet to come into existence” (372) is just such a thing.

Traditionally the dialectic has been staged as either a system (Hegel) or a method (Marx) and both views, so the current doxa has it, have been thoroughly discredited by contemporary philosophy and theory. The whole idea of a closed metaphysical system with its spurious teleology is today deemed unsustainable after the Nietzschean critique of systematic philosophizing. Similarly the Marxian notion of dialectical method has to contend with the charge of instrumentalization and the radical split between means and ends. If the dialectic is simply a method (means) then what are its ends? Jameson’s approach is to confront these dilemmas head-on and to claim the truth of both positions—the dialectic is both system and method—but also as a form of “praxis,” the unity of theory and practice, it is also that which transcends system and method. For Jameson, dialectical thought is fundamentally scandalous; it is provocative and perversely challenges all notions of common sense. Contrary to the poststructuralist caricature of dialectical thought as

1. The earliest piece in the collection, “Ideological Analysis: A Handbook,” dates back to 1981 but has undergone a number of revisions since.

closure and the imposition of identity over difference, Jameson stresses the fundamentally paradoxical and contradictory nature of the dialectic. The dialectic emerges when thought approaches incommensurability, but rather than approaching such a moment as an aporia or unsurpassable blockage of thought, the dialectic turns the problem back upon itself, revealing the truth within the falsehood. The two great exponents of this kind of dialectical thought in the twentieth century, notes Jameson, are Adorno and Žižek. Adorno's insistence on the labour of the negative and Žižek's conceptualization of the "objectivity of appearance" serve to remind us that we cannot resolve a contradiction as such but must attempt to hold the two poles of the opposition together and "to abolish the autonomy of both terms in favour of a pure tension" (65). The dialectical term for this pure tension is "mediation."

This properly dialectical refusal to abandon the supposedly discredited categories of dialectical thought by the post-Foucauldian and post-Marxist theories of discourse shares certain similarities to Žižek's recent attempt to recuperate the truth of totalitarian politics and his reconceptualization of Marxism. Marxism, argues Jameson, is not a doctrine or a world view but a problematic, the validity of which rests on its capacity to generate problems rather than solutions, and to say that one is a Marxist is to align oneself with this problematic. Notions such as "base and superstructure" or social class are not answers but articulations of the problems themselves. The truth of such notions lies not in our ability to identify specific forms of mediation between the economy and say culture—although this is clearly a very useful thing to do—or in our ability to objectively identify specific social classes but in the operations and analysis to which the concept of class gives rise. In this sense, "class analysis, like materialist demystification, remains valid and indispensable even in the absence of the possibility of a coherent 'philosophy' or ontology of class itself" (394).

Another story the dialectic has to tell is that of the subject itself and one of the recurring themes of this volume is the tendency of the subject to dissolve back into object. The starting point for this, of course, is Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness. Consciousness, observes Jameson, is always self-consciousness and when Hegel attempts to describe the moment of self-consciousness, it is famously evoked by the clash of two consciousnesses (the Master and the Slave). The problem of self-consciousness then becomes a problem of representation and of the impossibility of representing the self. In short, the problem of the self is one of self-representation and one can only represent the self by *a priori* positing a non-reflexive self. Jameson's "spatial" solution to the problem of representing self-consciousness is to see the "non-reflexive self as itself an object within a larger field" (69). This enlargement

of the field of consciousness then “produces what we call the self or the sense of identity” in an analogous way to that in which “two distinct spatial objects are set in relationship to each other by perception as such” (69-70). Jameson returns time and again to this dialectical tendency of the self to fold back into the object: Žižek’s “objectivity of appearance”; Deleuze’s elimination of the Self/ Other distinction through the concept of nomadism (198); Lukács’ dissolution of the centred subject (216) and Sartre’s critique of the distinction between self and things (223). The relevance of *Valences* to this volume of *Gramma* lies in its presentation of numerous variations on the dialectic that seek to dissolve the individual or autonomous subject and re-inscribe that subject as a collective entity in History. Jameson’s own version of this is developed in his extended engagement with Paul Ricoeur’s “magnum opus” *Time and Narrative* and the formulation of a “spatial dialectic.”

For Jameson, the decline of narrative along with a schizophrenic sense of time and the waning of history have been some of his major preoccupations in the era of postmodernity and the engagement with Ricoeur here points to some of the underlying assumptions of the book. If you do not buy into Jameson’s analysis of postmodernity, then the necessity of a spatial dialectic to revitalize dialectical thinking for the twenty-first century becomes something of a moot point. Ricoeur’s work turns on the distinction between Aristotelian time, the time of before and after or chronology, and Augustinian time, the time of the world where past and future are held together in the now. Another way of conceptualizing this is between objective cosmological time and subjective phenomenological-existential time. What is missing from this binary opposition though is Historical time as such, or, to put it another way the totalization of individual subjective times. Ricoeur prioritizes the subjective time but fails to register, according to Jameson, the radical changes in time and space under the conditions of postmodernity. The weakness of Ricoeur’s position, in short, is his humanism and his adherence to subjective phenomenological time. For Ricoeur, the gap between existential time and cosmological time can never be bridged and therefore Historical time as such can never properly emerge.

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Works Cited

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellaver. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.