

Difference Relates: Allegory, Ideology, and the Anthropocene

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Abstract

Fredric Jameson's recent book, *Allegory and Ideology*, argues that allegory has become a 'social symptom', an attempt during moments of historical crisis to represent reality even as that reality, rife with contradictory levels, eludes representation. Mobilising the fourfold medieval system of allegory he first introduced in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson traces a formal history of attempts to come to terms with the 'multiplicities' and incommensurable levels that emerge within modernity and postmodernity. This article identifies the complexities of Jameson's understanding of allegory and draws on the brief moments when Jameson references the Anthropocene to argue for an allegorical reading of our contemporary environmental crisis that would allow us to see the problem the Anthropocene names as truly contradictory: at one and the same time, the world we inhabit appears to us as a world of our own making and as a world that has become truly alien to us.

Keywords

allegory – ideology – historical crisis – Anthropocene – postmodernity

The topic of Fredric Jameson's recent book should come as no surprise. After all, he has been working on the dual concepts of allegory and ideology his entire career. The timing of *Allegory and Ideology*, however, is particularly serendipitous insofar as both concepts have been simultaneously the object of sustained critique by contemporary theorists and increasingly resurrected in the debate around climate change. In short, there is a new urgency to bringing these intertwined terms and their interconnected practices to the fore at this particular moment.

Jameson loses no time addressing the main argument against ideology-critique and the attendant work of allegory, stating upfront that *Ideologikritik* is not only negative, as it has come to be branded, but also positive, as 'restorative and ontological as the practice of suspicion and deconstruction',¹ associated with Ricœur's account of it. Crucially, and characteristically Jamesonian, it is Utopian, and 'draws into the light not only all those features of class consciousness we wish to avoid thinking about, but also the thoughts and visions (wish fulfillments) that are designed to replace or displace them; it is a practice of allegorical enlargement rather than one of reduction, as its less consequential critics have always liked to maintain'.²

As a sign of the times, allegory for Jameson has 'become a social symptom', a 'solution' to an impasse or lack: the demand or need for a representation (or at the very least, an acknowledgment) of the contradictory levels of the Real that are belied or go unrepresented or missing at the surface level of 'existential or social life'.³ In an echo of Althusser's description, in May 1968, of the 'objective grating and grinding between ideological apparatuses'⁴ that has the

¹ Jameson 2019, p. xvi.

² Ibid.

³ Jameson 2019, p. 34.

⁴ Jameson 2019, p. 200.

capacity to disrupt the smooth functioning of ideology, Jameson likens these contradictory levels to ‘tectonic plates’ that ‘shift and grate ominously against one another’. The creation of allegory as explanation in no way (re)unifies these forces; rather, it ‘sets them in relationship with one another’ with no predetermined or necessary outcome. The result may just as easily ‘lead to ideological comfort’ as to ‘the restless anxieties of a more expansive knowledge’.⁵ Indeed, the geological metaphor of shifting and grating tectonic plates takes on resonant meaning in our present context as we can readily imagine alternative allegories of the Anthropocene that allow us some degree of ‘ideological comfort’ (‘technology will save us’, ‘there is nothing to be done’, for example) or leave us anxious and facing head-on the enormity of the planetary crisis, best captured perhaps by Lenin’s at once explicitly political and all-encompassing question, ‘What is to be done?’ At its broadest, then, allegory arises from and in response to ‘the dilemmas of representation itself’.⁶ Given the twin crises today of global capitalism and environmental catastrophe, the purchase of allegory lies in its capacity to register the inability of the empirical to represent the Real and to respond to that inability in ways that illuminate rather than obfuscate the multiple and contradictory levels that enlarge the social field beyond its illusory surface – and not by offering simple solutions but rather by posing representational and, by extension, political problems anew.

Importantly, Jameson’s aim here is not to argue for a programme of allegoresis or its revival.⁷ Rather, as he asserts, his claim about allegory is ‘a historical claim, one that suggests that meaningful narratives today, in late capitalist globalization, tend to find their fulfilment in

⁵ Jameson 2019, p. 34.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ In contrast to Franco Moretti’s playful intimation in the title to his review of *Allegory and Ideology* that Jameson’s injunction here is to ‘Always Allegorize?’, the point is not to replace ‘always historicize’ with this directive, but rather to recognise the historical work that allegory does, and the ways in which it is a symptom of the moment or age.

structures that call for allegorical interpretation'.⁸ In keeping with the shape of *Allegory and Ideology*, this claim highlights not only how Jameson's book as a whole provides a *formal* history of a series of 'surviving works of art the past has left behind it',⁹ but that it does so precisely because it is only through such works that we can gain access to that past. Over the course of the book, Jameson analyses *Hamlet*, a Mahler symphony, Spenser, Dante and *Faust*, and two contemporary novels, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, in order to unearth the *succession* of forms and 'their slow mutation, emergence, or decay, a process in which their approach to the Real or retreat from it requires us to come to terms with the representation of reality'.¹⁰ These attempts inevitably fail, but it is not failure as such that interests Jameson so much as the fact that these failures are historical: 'Historical failure is valuable because it is historical, not because it is a failure'.¹¹

On the one hand, these claims reprise Jameson's previous work and its emphasis on the always-mediated nature of History, and hence the primacy of narrative as the means through which to apprehend History. (It is in this regard as well that Jameson ties allegory to theology rather than philosophy, given philosophy's treatment of narrative as secondary.) On the other hand, the affective tone of this acknowledgment resonates somewhat differently here than in Jameson's earlier writings. In a rare moment of personal reflection, Jameson refers to his own long life and what it does not ultimately bring to this dilemma of representation. He comments that 'a longevity (owed as much to late capitalist pharmacology as to Shavian will power and the life force?), which ought to have made me a more receptive registering apparatus for the historical than those with less exposure, has on the contrary begun increasingly to convince me of the phenomenological,

⁸ Jameson 2019, p. 309.

⁹ Jameson 2019, p. 335.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jameson 2019, p. 15.

the experiential relevance of Althusser's famous sentence, "The lonely moment of the last instance never comes"¹². He goes on to relate two personal experiences that highlight for him that the 'moments in which [an immediate experience of History] seems nearest or most dramatic ... reduce themselves to empirical detail, their objectivity quickly swallowed up in the subjective and assimilated to autobiographical anecdote.' In the first, a child seeing him in Vienna in 1956, queried of him, 'Magyar?'; in the second, he is in Havana in June 1959, and 'unable to find the Revolution' in the men and crowds on the street. To both of these experiences, he concludes: 'Memory doesn't exist'.¹³ It is 'confiscated' by the media, becoming, as postmodern theory will articulate, simulacra, images of the past rather than a memory of the past.

This same situation equally limits attempts to locate traces of a past, whether in material potsherds and artefacts or the building of monuments to commemorate the past. These too ultimately miss their mark, for these searches are incapable of 'detecting the carbon dating or the faint atomic signature of historical radiation anywhere'.¹⁴ Not only, then, is it impossible to elude the clichéd images that supplant memory, but the very objects that are meant to mark and define the past are not those that in fact contain it. In total, Jameson describes this situation as a 'crisis of symptomatology',¹⁵ a dearth of symptoms with which to apprehend postmodernity and History itself. Perhaps mirroring the changes in subjectivity that parallel Jameson's analysis of the succession of forms from *Hamlet* to the novels of postmodernity – namely, the evolution from named emotions to affect – Jameson's own affect is less easily identifiable than it has been in earlier works, whether in the exclamatory 'always historicize!'¹⁶ that opens *The Political*

¹² Jameson 2019, p. 334.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jameson 2019, p. 335.

¹⁶ Jameson 1981, p. 9.

Unconscious or the sci-fi invocation of Utopia figured in the last sentence of *Valences of the Dialectic*, wherein ‘from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible’.¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest, by any means, that the Utopian impulse has waned so much as to signal an affective or tonal shift consonant with the particularly daunting challenges of our crisis-ridden contemporary moment.

If the turn to allegory comes in response to historical crisis or calamity, Jameson’s reference to ‘the faint atomic signature of historical radiation’ harkens to a postmodernity commonly defined these days in terms of the Anthropocene and the numerous and contentious potential moments of rupture that the epoch of the Anthropocene marks.¹⁸ The very dating of the Anthropocene, itself a political concern, ranges from reinforcing an Enlightenment narrative (with an origin-date of 1784, to coincide with the invention of the steam engine) to challenging that narrative (with an origin-date of 1610, to highlight the global, imperial processes that undergirded

¹⁷ Jameson 2009, p. 612.

¹⁸ There has been much debate about the term ‘Anthropocene’ and the ways in which it does not differentiate unequal power relations with its seemingly universal or ‘blanket’ reference to the ‘human’. As a result, a number of critics have proposed alternative notions better able to identify and analyse these differences and the root causes and conditions of this new epoch: Andreas Malm has introduced the term ‘Capitalocene’ to emphasise the determinant role of capitalism in the climate crisis; and Jason W. Moore identifies the dialectical relations between capitalism, the environment and geopolitics, a set of relations that he refers to as a ‘world-ecology’ (Moore 2015, *passim*), a ‘multispecies assemblage, a world-ecology of capital, power, and nature’ (Moore (ed.) 2016, p. xi) that cannot be understood outside the context of sixteenth-century slavery and colonialism. Likewise, Françoise Vergès stresses the racial nature of the Capitalocene and argues for a ‘history of racial Capitalocene, with an analysis of capital, imperialism, gender, class, and race and a conception of nature and of being human that opposes the Western approach’ (Vergès 2017, p. 77). Although Jameson does not enter into these debates in *Allegory and Ideology*, his idea that ‘difference relates’ aims to maintain rather than erase the constitutive differences that compose the totality. And, obviously, his focus throughout the body of his work is on the role of capitalism rather than any kind of broad appeal to humanity.

the invention of the steam engine), to locating the rupture in later moments such as nuclear testing during the Cold War (echoing Jameson's citation of the elusive radioactive isotopes it leaves in its wake), and the post-WWII 'Great Acceleration' that fuelled globalisation.¹⁹ As Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey argues in *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, these moments represent 'perceived turning points in the human relationship to the planet', which, drawing on Benjamin, constitute 'the "flash" of understanding in which "thought comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions"'.²⁰ Although Benjamin has only a small part to play in *Allegory and Ideology* (Jameson has just published a new book on Benjamin),²¹ his notion of the constellation and the vantage point it affords is central to Jameson's theory of what allegoresis allows us to see about the world or to socially map that is otherwise obfuscated or impossible to grasp conceptually. As he notes in the final pages, we 'need the legible points of a constellation, a new kind of reification' in order to 'replace the sense of drift and tendency with the identifiable space of a cast of characters, a personification of friend and foe, a movement of social classes in conflict and in alliance: classes in formation, perhaps, where everything static about traditional personification is replaced with the process of personifying and of identifying agencies to come'.²²

These legible points of a constellation come from the fourfold schema of allegory and its ability to chart the multiple associations that allegoresis makes visible in its account or rendering of textual signification as a multi-layered series of levels.²³ This system of levels, initially

¹⁹ See, for example: DeLoughrey 2019; Davis and Todd 2017; Malm and Hornborg 2014.

²⁰ DeLoughrey 2019, p. 8.

²¹ Jameson 2020.

²² Jameson 2019, p. 347.

²³ This fourfold system is akin to the Greimas square in its shared dependence on the principle of 'undisambiguated synonymity' (Jameson 2019, p. 332), or what Jameson characterises as a continuous movement 'within the multiple personalities of the signifier itself' (Jameson 2019, p. 332). They both speak to two specific features of postmodernity, 'difference and spatiality' (Jameson 2019, p. 330), and offer modes of visualising or naming overdetermined historical conjunctures such as our own that otherwise seem unthinkable and unrepresentable.

introduced in *The Political Unconscious*, follows the hermeneutic of the medieval system, rewritten in secular terminology as the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical levels of interpretation or meaning. In *The Political Unconscious*, the value of this interpretive model is explained in terms of its ability to bring back into relation that which modern life has sundered: ‘namely that incommensurability ... between the private and the public, the psychological and the social, the poetic and the political’.²⁴ In its fuller elaboration in *Allegory and Ideology*, this schema is characterised as a ‘vessel of excess’ rather than reductive simplification or similarity, which affords a view of reality with the capacity to ‘[sort] through the multiplicities’ unleashed by modernity and its differentiations – ‘new specializations, new mental faculties ... new zones of reality ... new productive activities, subjectivities, and varieties of human flora and fauna’ – and to ‘find identities among the differences’.²⁵ Tracing a trajectory from the personifications of traditional allegory (with their one-to-one correspondences and fixed identities) to modern allegory, Jameson argues that modern allegory ‘involves a kinship of processes’, and consists of ‘the interechoing of narratives with one another, in their differentiation and reidentification’.²⁶ Turning as it does on incommensurability and difference, allegory becomes the vehicle or vessel for making sense of modernity and postmodernity, for creating ‘a new kind of coherence’ that, as Jameson notes, he has ‘tried to express with the slogan, Difference relates!’²⁷

How, then, might this slogan and its potential for producing a new kind of coherence enable us to think through the particular challenges of climate change with its at once slow and imperceptible, monumental, and catastrophic transformations? Although it is mentioned only three times in passing, the Anthropocene constitutes the conditions of possibility for both the present

²⁴ Jameson 1981, p. 31.

²⁵ Jameson 2019, p. 347.

²⁶ Jameson 2019, p. 48.

²⁷ Jameson 2019, p. 332.

and the future; it is the ground on which we must necessarily re-envision the world and our place and activity within it. Moreover, the references to it are posed in terms of what it affords us in a well-nigh celebratory vein, rather than the usual, predictable doom and gloom scenarios in which we are damned no matter what we do. When it is first mentioned, Jameson speculates, ‘if the human age is to be celebrated, and the Anthropocene given its due, it is in terms of its production of reality and not in its transformation into an aesthetic image’.²⁸ In a reading that harks back to Jameson’s analysis in *Brecht and Method*, this Brechtian conception of activity is ‘now urgent and topical precisely because activity and praxis’, unlike in Brecht’s day, are no longer ‘on the agenda, and because so many people seem immobilized in the institutions and the professionalization which seem to admit of no revolutionary change, not even of the evolutionary or reform-oriented kind’.²⁹ For Brecht as well, science itself is more akin to the pleasure of tinkering associated with *Popular Mechanics* than with reified views of science, a form of activity that is entertaining and energising. As Jameson writes in *Allegory and Ideology*, ‘It is the perspective of human activity (*Tätigkeit*), of Marxist productivism, of the construction of nature as well as of human reality, that is the truly exhilarating vision: Fichte rather than the Third Critique! Sartre rather than Whitehead! Not for nothing did Mallarmé insist that aesthetics and political economy were two sides of the same coin, the coin of the realm, the ultimate prize’.³⁰

In an insightful reading of Jameson’s style, Steven Helmling ruminates on how Jameson’s own writing takes on the ‘distinctive *gestus*’ of the particular figure about whom he is writing, and proposes that the apt characterisation for his analysis of Brecht might be ‘Marxist “comedy”’³¹ –

²⁸ Jameson 2019, p. 36.

²⁹ Jameson 1998, p. 4.

³⁰ Jameson 2019, p. 36.

³¹ Helmling 2001, p. 158.

not of the laughs variety but the kind of comedy Marx elucidates in ‘A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’, where he writes:

History is thorough and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient form to its grave. The last stage of a world-historical form is its comedy. The Greek gods, who already died once of their wounds in Aeschylus’s tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, were forced to die a second death – this time a comic one – in Lucian’s dialogues. Why does history take this course? So that mankind may part happily from its past.³²

Ending with a joke himself, Helmling likens this late ‘comedy’ of Jameson’s to a comment Jameson made about ‘late Marxism’, as the USSR was collapsing: “‘better late than never!’”³³ There is something, then, of this *gestus* in Jameson’s response to the Anthropocene. Again referring to Brecht, Jameson flips or reverses the affective register of the Anthropocene from a dire dystopian end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it to an exhilarating moment rife with productive possibility, a time that could be celebrated if only we were able to see it for those productive possibilities, if only we were able to ‘part happily’ from our past.

Specifically, Jameson invokes Brecht’s notion of *Umfunktionierung*, his ‘word for the transformation of all the unlovely advances of capitalism’s universal accelerationisms into humanizing achievements’, to imagine a future beyond our catastrophic present: ‘the transmutation of ecological disaster into the terra-forming of earth, and of the population explosion into a genuine

³² Marx quoted in Helmling 2001, pp. 158–9.

³³ Helmling 2001, p. 159.

human age, an Anthropocene to be celebrated rather than caricatured in second-rate dystopias'.³⁴ Reiterating the Brechtian relationship between aesthetics and productivity – figured so powerfully in the jeepnies of the Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik's *The Perfumed Nightmare* ('vehicles of war' transformed into 'vehicles of life') – Jameson reminds us that 'aestheticization can be energizing only if it becomes the allegory of productivity and radical constructivism; the social construction of late capitalism needs to be converted and refunctioned into a new and as yet undreamed of global communism'.³⁵

In a final reference to the Anthropocene, Jameson cautions that we need not rest our hopes for such a transformation in heroes or heroic acts beyond our ken, again a very Brechtian lesson. The final lines of *Allegory and Ideology* leave us with the reminder that

the human animal is an essentially incompetent species, finding its heroes in specimens who, like Napoléon, exceed the norm only by a degree or two. The glory of the Anthropocene, however, has been to show us that we can really change the world. Now it would be intelligent to terraform it. But symptoms of the future are far less reliable than symptoms of the present.³⁶

³⁴ Jameson 2019, p. 37. There is a literary precedent for such a utopian view of earthly terraforming in Alexander Kluge's *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*. Following the destruction of the globe, the Chinese go about reconstructing the earth to correspond to representations in Chinese landscape paintings (Kluge 1996, pp. 32–4).

³⁵ Jameson 2019, p. 37. As Jameson says concerning the production process for these vehicles, 'it consists in the building, the unbuilding, the rebuilding, of the jeepnies – bricolage if there ever was, a scavenging for spare parts and home-made ad hoc solutions – the constant re-functioning (Brecht's *Umfunktionierung*) of the new into the old, and the old into the new, the reconstruction of military machinery into painted traditional artifacts, and the dismemberment of those artifacts for the handicraft assemblage of the jeepnies' (Jameson 1992, p. 209). Significantly, in the production of these jeepnies, 'aesthetics and production are again at one, and painting the product is an integral part of its manufacture' (Jameson 1992, p. 210).

³⁶ Jameson 2019, p. 348.

The provocation here to terraform the earth, like Jameson's account of terraforming in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy, is yet another allegorical figure for collective agency in the face of 'what Althusser calls "complex overdetermined concrete situations," which he also very specifically associates with history and above all with politics'.³⁷ In the *Mars* trilogy, and in our present circumstances, by extension, 'all of the scientific problems described in the novel, without exception, offer an allegory, by way of the form of overdetermination, of social, political and historical problems also faced by the inhabitants of Mars'.³⁸ To grapple with these problems on earth, as on Mars, is to resist all forms of Romantic anti-capitalism, with their problematic reliance on individual rather than collective action or agency as well as their political goal of restoring some lost subjective or collective unity and harmony with the natural world.³⁹ And, most provocatively, it is to commit to the Hegelian notion of a collective human transformation of nature, a notion that finds expression most powerfully for Jameson in science fiction – but not so much in the 'hard SF content' of this or that vision of a futuristic world, but rather in an allegorical reading in which that content 'stands revealed as socio-political – that is to say, as utopian'.⁴⁰

Perhaps, then, an allegorical reading of the Anthropocene in the distinctive *gestus* of Jameson would allow us to see the problem the Anthropocene names as truly contradictory: at one and the same time, the world we inhabit appears to us as a world of our own making and as a world

³⁷ Jameson 2005, p. 395.

³⁸ Jameson 2005, pp. 395–6.

³⁹ In his analysis of Lukács's development from an idealist to a materialist thinker, Jameson notes the shift in *Theory of the Novel* from a metaphysical construction of the environment in terms of 'the relationship of man to some absolute outside himself' (with the world conceived as the 'Not-I, the being of nature') to a historical one, in which 'external reality is not alien to him, but of the same substance as himself, for it is history, and the result of the activities of men' (Jameson 1971, p. 181). This, as Jameson underscores, is 'Vico's great insight ... that we understand what we have made, so that it is history rather than nature that constitutes the privileged object of human knowledge' (Jameson 1971, p. 181).

⁴⁰ Jameson 2005, p. 396.

that has become truly alien to us. So much so that our present task is to terraform it, to recreate it in the image of an earth that no longer exists. In this sense, we could do worse than see in the engraving of Hutton's 'Unconformity at Jedburgh, Borders' that graces the cover of *Allegory and Ideology* an injunction to imagine the incommensurability of the different levels of our social-ecological life as the foundation on which we will need to read not only the symptoms of our present, but also those of our future, despite, or rather because of, the unreliability, the shifting ground and the multiple scales, visible and invisible, gradual and catastrophic, on which all politics today rests.

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