

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Ambiguous Lever

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In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács describes mediation as “a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the empirical world,” stressing that “as such it is not something (subjective) foisted on to . . . objects from outside” but “rather the manifestation of their authentic objective structure” (162).<sup>1</sup> As Fredric Jameson notes, Lukács is thinking of reification—the central concept of *History and Class Consciousness*—and also of Max Weber’s closely related concept of rationalization; both are processes that apply equally to “social relations in late capitalism” and to “formal relations and verbal structures within the latter’s cultural and literary products” (*Political Unconscious* 27 [42]).<sup>2</sup> Lukács makes a tacit distinction between good or useful mediations and bad or obscuring ones, the latter being “confusing categories of reflection,” the “mediations of metaphysics and myth” (*History* 166, 190).

Jameson follows Lukács in *The Political Unconscious*, while making what is implicit in the latter’s argument more explicit. Similarly describing mediation as “a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation . . . of social life . . . is at least locally overcome,” Jameson dedicates the bulk of his introduction to singling out a list of interpretative wrong turns or dubious analytic moves (including many favored by Marxist critics) that are essentially bad mediations, while offering the more detailed account Lukács does not himself offer (focused as the latter is on defining reification) of why they are dissatisfying (*Political Unconscious* 25 [40]). At the same time, Jameson clarifies that all mediations, bad or good, involve “transcoding,” or “mak[ing] connections among the seemingly disparate phenomena of social life”—which boils down to identifying a likeness or pattern of recursion across social levels (25 [40]). Reification in modernist artworks, for example, particularly in their fragmentation and autonomization of the senses, replicates, while remaining ultimately distinct

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from, the reification of commodities and rationalization of labor in capitalist production.

So let's recap: (1) mediations are analytic devices for counteracting false immediacies (such as how the capitalist world necessarily appears to us, through the senses, as fragmented and subdivided); (2) not all these devices are equally effective; (3) a theory of literary interpretation should offer insight on how to distinguish effective mediations from ineffective ones; and especially since (4) both strategies for combatting the given involve pointing out some sort of resemblance, likeness, repetition, or familiarity. If the distinction between good and bad mediations makes a difference, what we are facing is the challenge of distinguishing between modes of sameness that are alike but, ultimately, not the same.

Does the distinction between good and bad mediations make a difference? Certainly the introduction to *The Political Unconscious* makes it clear that it should? Jameson's list of the problematic moves made by left-liberal critics—economisms that reduce everything about capitalist life to "the market" (and all of capitalist ideology to "liberalism"); "contemplative" attitudes that in presuming the gulf between object and subject, end up widening it; the historicist errors Louis Althusser castigates as "mechanical causality" and "expressive causality"; and merely formalist homologies—demonstrates how difficult it is for "reified minds" to grasp the unity of unity and difference in capitalist social life. That is, to see two things as part of the same process, different branchings of the same unity, without conflating them or assuming that one must be the "cause" or "result" of the other.

These ways of thinking are so automatic, so entrenched in everyday activity, are so much a part of what counts as common sense, that even for local and transient traction on a total social process rendered empirically inaccessible by capitalism's abstractions (including labor's abstraction in the valorization of commodities), the analyst will need an "invention": a "lever" or "device." And given the criticisms of bad mediations with which *The Political Unconscious* begins, it seems like only the right one will do.

Now of all the unsatisfactory "interpretative mechanism[s]" discussed at the beginning of *The*

*Political Unconscious*, the one singled out most is homology. (It is also singled out, it should be noted, in the concluding chapter on dialectical thinking in *Marxism and Form* [1971]). Interestingly, this spotlighting of homology—its coming to the fore as the poorest of mediations—is occasioned almost accidentally: at the end, and as a by-product, of Jameson's much lengthier discussion of another dubious mediation—"expressive causality"—in which the discussion of homology is embedded but that homology ultimately displaces.

Expressive causality is Althusser's main antagonist in *Reading Capital*, his overarching example of his problem with "mediation" (and Hegel) in general. But Jameson suggests that expressive causality (i.e., Hegelian mediation) isn't ultimately as dangerous as Althusser makes it out to be: "The true target of the Althusserian critique would seem to me not the practice of mediation, but something else, which presents superficial similarities to it but is in reality a very different kind of concept, namely the structural notion of *homology* (or isomorphism, or structural parallelism)—a term currently in wide use in a variety of literary and cultural analyses" (*Political Unconscious* 28 [43]).

In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson's example is the historicism of Hippolyte Taine and Oswald Spengler, who, in their efforts "at giving an account of the total *style* of a culture," try to illustrate "the unity of [that] cultural style as it envelops everything from engineering techniques and mathematical thinking to religious dogma and literary convention" (324, 325). (In this manner, as René Wellek notes about Taine, "classicism" is regarded as a "style or mode which mediates 'between a hedge at Versailles, a philosophical and theological argument of Malebranche, a prosodic rule prescribed by Boileau, a law of Colbert on mortgages, a compliment in the waiting room of the king at Marly, a statement of Bossuet about the kingship of God'" (qtd. in Jameson, *Marxism* 324–25). In *The Political Unconscious*, the example is Lucien Goldmann's study of Jansenism, *The Hidden God*, which constructs parallels between class situations, worldviews, and artistic forms, in order to argue, unconvincingly, that "at some level of abstraction the 'structure' of the

three quite different realities . . . [is] ‘the same’” (28 [43–44]).

Coming to the fore as the poster child of bad mediation at the end of a discussion of expressive causality, in which it effectively displaces it from this undesirable role, homologies are unambiguously problematic in *The Political Unconscious*. They are “static,” “misguided,” “comfortable,” and above all “abstract” (29, 30, 30, 51).

But when we turn, almost thirty years later, to *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), we encounter something more neutrally presented as “the ideological replication of . . . form—what leaves its imprint on the organization of the various superstructures, whether theoretical, political or artistic” (360). Now this “replication” by which we track the same pattern across different social “levels” may not be *the same* as homology. But it certainly looks a lot *like* homology—at the very least, it seems isomorphic or analogous to it. In his chapter “Ideological Analysis,” Jameson’s main example is what Marx calls “cooperation”: that politically ambiguous organization of labor power (at once intensifying exploitation, yet essential for any future “association of free men”) that “can be observed in the structure of the nineteenth-century novel, with its immense increase in personnel and their reorganization around protagonists and levels of secondary or minor characters, organized into a kind of proletariat, anonymous background” (*Valences* 360). If the mode of similarity being discussed here—the recurrence of a form or pattern across social realities as different as the novel, the industrial workplace, and an analytic text by Marx—is essentially the same as the mode of similarity highlighted in *The Political Unconscious*, it is interestingly no longer repudiated.

Similarly, in *Representing Capital* (2011) we encounter “dialectical synonymy,” “the process whereby a critique is waged on several levels of implication at once” (17). The example offered is taken again from Marx in *Capital*, volume 1: Marx’s singling out of the principle of equivalence, which we see primarily played out in economic exchange, but also in the realms of mathematics, political theory (legal rights), contract law, and psychology

(“reflexionist” theories of self-consciousness). Like the cultural replication of the social form of cooperation discussed in *Valences*, this mode of similarity is also presented neutrally, perhaps even admiringly, qua Marxian mediation, a lever used to disclose “the patterns and the functions or operations of the system as it is replicated in all the multitudinous subsystems that make up [capitalist] life today everywhere” (*Valences* 359).

What is the relation, then, between “replication,” “synonymy,” and what was called homology in *The Political Unconscious*? Are these three modes of similarity, all enlisted as devices or mediations for ideological analysis, the same mode of similarity? Or are they (meaningfully) different ones?

In a sense this is the overarching question asked across all of Jameson’s work from *Marxism and Form* onward, insofar as all of it is an exploration of the future of dialectical thinking. Consider this moment from *Representing Capital* (2011), in which Jameson offers

a hypothesis about the very origins of the dialectic itself. For I believe that the dialectic came into being to *handle a strange and unparalleled historical situation, namely one in which everything is different and yet remains the same*: in which the discovery (or invention) of history reveals the enormous structural disparities, not only between *anciens* and *modernes*, but between all the different historical modes of production! *And yet in another sense, they are all the same thing, namely modes of production*. By the same token, history reveals the immense variety of groups which exercise dominion over other groups—castes, feudal orders, clans, families, hordes and, finally, unique to our mode of production, social classes; and *yet in another sense they are all social classes, all somehow the same*, a ruling class extracting its surplus value from a laboring class.

(133–34; emphases added; see also *Valences* 17–19)

Dialectic, Jameson concludes, is “a mode of thinking able to combine the singular and the general in a unique way, or better still, to shift gears from the one to the other and back again, to *identify* them in such a way that they remain different” (134). Dialectic and its “lever,” mediation, are thus isomorphic things.

Both enable us to “shift gears” between the singular and the general, the individual and the collective.<sup>3</sup> Both, in a way that is maybe insufficiently acknowledged, rely on similarity, which, as Jonathan Flatley suggests with startling lucidity, is itself dialectical: the unity-in-difference of sameness and difference:

[B]eing *alike* . . . is both experientially and conceptually distinct from being equal or identical. As Jean-Luc Nancy concisely observes, “The like is not the same [le semblable n’est pas le pareil].” Indeed, *when something is like something else, it means precisely that it is not the same as it*. Things that are alike or similar are neither incommensurate nor identical; they are related and resembling, yet distinct. Similarity is thus a discrete concept aside from the same-different opposition.

(5; emphases added)

*Valences of the Dialectic*’s “replication of form[s],” *Representing Capital*’s “dialectical synonymity,” *The Political Unconscious*’s “homology”: if similarity lies at the core of these analytic mechanisms—concepts of similarity that are in themselves similar (that is, “neither incommensurate nor identical”)—it is a concept that cannot be purged from the theory of mediation. For, in the end, mediations are similarities. And we have nothing else to rely on for tracking the relation between (static) antinomies and (moving) contradictions, or expressive and structural causalities, or homologies and dialectical synonymities. If, more dynamically, we want to see the first terms in these series as “proto-narratives,” as naive or “pre-philosophical” versions of the more developed or properly philosophical terms, we will need to rely on similarity as well.

But if homology, as similarity, is in this manner retroactively “forgiven” by Jameson’s work as a whole (by way of the eventual accrual of multiple similar mediations—i.e., modes of similarity, in his analytic tool chest), it is not because it is immune to error. Similarity—or mediation—remains susceptible to error. But it is so, in Jameson, in the context of his significant reevaluation of error’s role in interpretation overall. This shift is already visible or “proto-narrativized” in *The Political Unconscious*, where, as we move through the three readings of

Honoré de Balzac, George Gissing, and Joseph Conrad, we notice the book’s opening tone of warning or caution (Don’t make homologies! Avoid expressive causality!) modulate into something gentler, culminating in the conclusion’s argument for the inextricable coupling of ideology and utopia. But it is also possible to see this change played out across Jameson’s books over the decades. And here it also becomes possible to argue, I think, that the shift in Jameson’s attitude toward error is specifically facilitated by Hegel.

In *Valences of the Dialectic*, for example, the static binaries, contemplative abstractions, and one-sided reflections of *Verstand* (understanding) in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* are read as necessary crutches—contrivances that can’t be abandoned even if we try, because they are part of everyday thinking. “[E]rror is always a stage in truth and remains part of the latter” (*Valences* 98).<sup>4</sup> As Jameson suggests, reading *Verstand* as the *Science of Logic*’s “villain”—a term with a curiously comic undertone—involves tracking how this incarnation of reification moves and develops, as it creatively adjusts and adapts itself first to the realm of Being, then Essence, and Notion (while always remaining the same *Verstand* across these changing levels).<sup>5</sup> The idea that even error is capable of dialectical movement recalls a thesis, already laid out for us in *The Political Unconscious* (and in a way that directly anticipates the culminating chapter on the unity of ideology and utopia, or the unity of replication [sameness] and The New [difference]), that reifying thought is not itself reified but astonishingly productive. For what are our culture’s most symbolically powerful artifacts if not products of (as well as enactments of, or meditations on) rationalization and fragmentation (of the senses, in the case of modernism)? How do the very concepts we use to interpret culture emerge, if not through abstraction and autonomization? Jameson’s examples are, significantly, “desire” and “value.” Desire can only become a semi-autonomous object of study, or “independent sign system,” when sexuality is set apart from embodied existence and social life—isolated, compartmentalized, specialized (*Political Unconscious* 49 [64]). But this separation enables

the abstraction to take on a special charge that it would not have otherwise. Similarly, “value” only acquires its vast symbolic extension when it disappears from the social field—that is, “at the moment of . . . the virtual obliteration of all value by a universal process of instrumentalization” (240 [251]).<sup>6</sup>

This brings me to an argument in *The Political Unconscious* that I have always found strangely hard to absorb, even though it is one of the book’s central and most plainly stated claims: ideology is less “false consciousness,” or even an “imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (245n42 [256n42]; see also 65 [79]), than a containment strategy—a shutting down of possibilities generated by, if never fully realized in, the text itself. But it is now easy to see why this explicit definition of ideology is hard to remember. Like *Verstand* in *The Science of Logic*, or Lukácsian reification, a text’s ideological strategy of containment can be so creative and energetic that what comes across to the reader will seem like the opposite of “containment”—rather much more like an opening or multiplication of possibilities than their narrowing down. This very contradiction—brought to the fore in the remarkable chapter on *Lord Jim*, and in more recent reinterpretations of Jameson’s semiotic squares by Phillip Wegner—helps us grasp how these two actions might be one.

Horror tropes abound across Jameson’s writings. Connoisseurs of the genre may especially delight in these moments in the characterization of dialectic in *Marxism and Form*, which seem to deliberately activate our squeamishness so it can in turn be enjoyed: “dialectical thought comes as a brutal rupture, as a cutting of the knots that restores us suddenly to the grossest truths, to facts as unpleasantly common as common sense itself” (309); “[t]here is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness—something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator’s fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner. That recalls us to our bodies much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers” (308). And my favorite:

The peculiar difficulty of dialectical writing lies indeed in its holistic, “totalizing” character: as though

you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything; as though with each new idea you were bound to recapitulate the entire system. So it is that the attempt to do justice to the most random observation of Hegel ends up drawing the whole tangled, dripping mass of the Hegelian sequence of forms out into the light with it. (306)

But what we might call *The Political Unconscious*’s affective arc from gothic to comedy—how it opens by inculcating our anxious vigilance against X, but then, in homeopathically absorbing X, turns that anxiety into an object of play—ultimately shows us how to become less fearful in our interpretative practices.

## NOTES

I am grateful to Andrew Cole for his comments on this essay.

1. *Lever* itself is an ambiguous word. As a tool for maneuvering a stolid or resisting object by applying force in a clever way, it is a device that can easily veer in the equivocal directions of stratagem or ruse. As Andrew Cole has pointed out to me, it doesn’t seem like an especially intuitive metaphor for dialectical thinking—and certainly not a metaphor one would think its own practitioners would choose, given its dubious invocation of a flippable switch. Yet Lukács does in fact choose *lever* (*methodischer Hebel*) as his image for “mediation” (*Vermittlung*) and moreover in the same text in which he cites Marx on how the working class, instead of becoming absorbed by “economic ‘trade-union’ struggles, might use “their organised forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wages system” (qtd. in *History* 73). This said, in a way underscoring the term’s political ambiguity, the “levers” in *Capital*, volume 1, are nearly all stratagems for capital. A few examples: the piece-wage “served as a lever for the lengthening of the working day and the lowering of wages” (698); at a certain point in the development of capitalism, the “productivity of social labour” becomes the “most powerful lever of accumulation” (772); “[t]he masses of capital welded together overnight by centralization . . . become new and powerful levers of social accumulation” (780); “[c]ommensurately . . . there also takes place a development of the two most powerful levers of centralization—competition and credit” (778–79); “[b]ut if a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population also becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation” (784).

2. Numbers in square brackets refer to pages in the first edition of *The Political Unconscious*, published by Cornell University Press in 1981.

3. If this is the case, there is an utterly everyday event that offers a crude model of what happens in, and maybe even assists us to

practice, dialectical thought or mediation: aesthetic judgment, as theorized by Kant. Strange as it sounds—for isn't the aesthetic, in its affective immediacy, the very cauldron of ideology?—aesthetic judgment *in general* might be thought of as a prototype or rough draft or primitive mimesis of mediation's way of coordinating the singular with the general. For it involves an irreducibly individual experience of pleasure or displeasure—an experience no one else can have for me—that, as revealed in the strange verbal compulsion to share it, nonetheless cannot be private. Here spontaneous feeling signals the inextricable coupling of discursive judgment to the perception of form—the seam that joins a way of speaking, a way of facing or addressing others, to a way of seeing.

How we talk to each other—how we verbally share or make our feelings of pleasure and displeasure public—is immanent to aesthetic experience. It is not an auxiliary matter. As such, it reveals the content of any aesthetic experience to be less about a subject's relation to an object—flower, poem, pop song, vacuum cleaner—than about a relation of subjects to subjects. A relation among subjects that deceptively looks, on the surface, like a relation to a thing: doesn't this sound like a Marxist account of the commodity's logic, or how its form ends up reverberating throughout society once that logic becomes universalized (with the commodification of labor-power)? So here it is a case, not of applying the same terms across different levels of social reality, but of a recursive pattern or structure. "Looks like a thing—is really a relation" coordinates two levels of social reality that are in truth part of a single process but that for "objective" reasons appear not to be.

4. Jameson writes, "Hegel's analysis of *Verstand*—so subtle and wide-ranging—thereby proves to be his most fundamental contribution to some more properly Marxian theory of reification. We have indeed had many studies—negative and positive alike—of Marx's Hegelianism; but this particular transmission does not seem to me to bring more grist to a mill still very much in business, however antiquated its technology. I would rather propose for current purposes a more unusual version, namely Hegel's Marxism. This virtually unexplored continent would certainly include the dialectic itself" (*Valences* 100).

5. "*Verstand*, although omnipresent, and the very thinking of daily life itself, is the villain of the piece," Jameson writes in *Valences*. "We cannot say that throughout the *Logic*, Hegel tracks down the truth like a detective, but we can certainly say that he tracks error, and that error always and everywhere takes the form of *Verstand*. The *Logic* is therefore not a Bildungsroman, where the little Notion grows up and learns about the world, and eventually reaches maturity and autonomy: that could be, perhaps, the narrative schema of the *Philosophy of History*, and can still be detected in its alleged teleology. Rather, *Verstand* is the great magician, the Archimago, of the work, the primal source of error itself, and of all the temptations—to persist in one moment, for example, and to make one's home there. Unlike the *Faerie Queene*, however, if there is a villain, there are no heroes: none of the knights, not the Dialectic, not Reason (*Vernunft*), not Truth, nor Speculative Thinking, nor even the Notion itself, goes forth to do battle with this baleful force (although it might perhaps be argued that Philosophy is itself such a heroic

contender, a word which, besides meaning Hegel, also means all those other positive things just mentioned). And this may have something to do with the fact that *Verstand* also has its place, as we have suggested, and cannot only not be done away with for good: it would be undesirable to do so, it is the taming and proper use of this mode rather than its eradication, which is wanted" (82). As we see here, Jameson does not explicitly describe *Verstand's* villainy as comic. The phrase "comic villain" does appear later in *Valences*, however, in a gloss on comedy, as genre (*Valences* 586). The indestructibility of *Verstand* in the *Logic* moreover recalls the indestructibility of *Geist* in the *Phenomenology*, as famously described by Judith Butler in slapstick terms: "[For] Hegel, tragic events are never decisive. . . . What seems like tragic blindness turns out to be more like the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo whose automobile careening through the neighbor's chicken coop always seems to land on all four wheels. Like such miraculously resilient characters of the Saturday morning cartoon, Hegel's protagonists always reassemble themselves, prepare a new scene, enter the stage armed with a new set of ontological insights—and fail again" (21).

6. This passage is worth quoting at length: "What we are here concerned to stress is the paradox of the very notion of value itself, which becomes visible as abstraction and as a strange afterimage on the retina, only at the moment in which it has ceased to exist as such. The characteristic form of rationalization is indeed the reorganization of operations in terms of the binary system of means and ends; indeed, the means/ends opposition, although it seems to retain the term and to make a specific place for value, has the objective result of abolishing value as such, bracketing the 'end' or drawing it back into the system of pure means in such a way that the end is merely the empty aim of realizing these particular means. . . . [Because] rationalization involves the transformation of everything into sheer means (hence the traditional formula of a Marxist humanism, that capitalism is a wholly rationalized and indeed rational system of means in the service of irrational ends).

"Thus, the study of value, the very idea of value, comes into being at the moment of its own disappearance and of the virtual obliteration of all value by a universal process of instrumentalization: which is to say that—as again in the emblematic case of Nietzsche—the study of value is at one with nihilism, or the experience of its absence. What is paradoxical about such an experience is obviously that it is contemporaneous with one of the most active periods in human history. . . . We must ponder the anomaly that it is only in the most completely humanized environment, the one most fully and obviously the end product of human labor, production, and transformation, that life becomes meaningless" (*Political Unconscious* 239–40 [250–51]).

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