

1982

## **Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Book Review)**

Gary Shapiro

*University of richmond*, [gshapiro@richmond.edu](mailto:gshapiro@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/philosophy-faculty-publications>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Shapiro, Gary. Review of *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, by Fredric Jameson. *Philosophy and Literature* 6, no. 1 (1982): 206-207.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

**Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act**, by Fredric Jameson; 305 pp. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, \$19.50.

Fredric Jameson believes that narrative is not just one literary genre among others but that it is our chief means of access to reality. This is because Jameson, as a Marxist, sees reality as essentially historical, social, and political. In recent years narrative has come to be seen as a way of understanding texts so apparently diverse as popular novels, television sitcoms, serious novels (like those by Balzac, Gissing, and Conrad which Jameson analyzes here), and historical writings and philosophical histories, such as those by Hegel and Marx. The primary narrative text of our culture is probably still the Bible, and Jameson's Marxist readers (and others) must be prepared for him to draw tools from those hermeneutic pioneers of the early church who distinguished four levels of meaning in biblical texts. They must also be prepared for a dense discussion of Freud, structuralism, Northrop Frye, and Nietzsche in a style which illuminates these and other thinkers by assessing their contributions to the understanding of narrative.

Jameson may be truer to the spirit of Marxism by pursuing the category of narrative than he would be if he were to write a treatise on the principles of social and economic development. As he suggested in his earlier book, *Marxism and Form*, Marxism entails an essentially narrative view of the world; it sees the world as the locus of a simple great collective story in which freedom is continually wrested from necessity. Jameson's attraction for religiously inclined thinkers like Northrop Frye and Paul Ricoeur and for religious patterns of interpretation (the discrimination of literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical readings of a text) comes from a healthy ecumenicism which recognizes that many schools of thought have had significant insights into the discourse of story-telling. In his concluding chapter Jameson cites Ricoeur in order to suggest that a Marxist approach to narrative must be simultaneously a hermeneutics of suspicion and one which projects a Utopian vision. It will be such because all class consciousness is both suspect and Utopian and because every narrative is oriented in terms of the consciousness of a class. Every actual class is parochial, intolerant and often savagely cruel to its class-enemies; at the same time every class has a vision of human solidarity which is an idealized ideological form of its own actual social relations. This double-edged hermeneutics distinguishes Jameson both from vulgar Marxists and from deconstructionists. The former practice only suspicion, reducing the text to nothing but an expression of limited class interests. The deconstructors, on the other hand, would avoid hermeneutics and its "labor of the concept" altogether by insisting on an ultimate playful plurality of meanings in every text. While Jameson is glad to recognize the deconstructors' radical critique of a certain bourgeois "tyranny of meaning" (Derrida's phrase in describing Hegel), he also observes, acutely, that the celebration of an endless plenitude of meanings may be a way of deferring the great clash which must come if and when we admit (along with Augustine or Frye) that only a finite number of interpretations can be seriously considered for a given narrative.

As one might suspect from his critique of deconstruction, Jameson's Marxism is structuralist. He follows Lévi-Strauss's analysis of art and myth in suggesting that a narrative is to be read as an imaginative resolution of a real and determinate contradiction. In this spirit he gives readings of three major novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which exhibit both the class limitations of their visions and their aims at Utopian integration. In these writings, as in a number of articles, Jameson produces Marxist readings which are in the tradition set by Marx and Engels (as in their analyses of Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* or their hints about Balzac), but he clearly benefits from the development of both Marxist theory and theories of

narrative since their day. For any reader with a serious interest in the contemporary discussion of narrative and hermeneutics this book will be necessary reading. For philosophical thought it raises this question (which may also be found in Hegel, in Heidegger, and in the biblical traditions): if narrative is indeed the most fundamental way of understanding reality, because that reality is historical, must philosophy itself become what it was in ages of faith, that is, either a form of story-telling or a commentary on stories?

University of Kansas, Gary Shapiro