

Book Notes

JAMESON, FREDRIC. *Signatures of the Visible*

JAMESON, FREDRIC. *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge. 1990, 254 pp. \$25.00 cloth.

"The visual is *essentially* pornographic." So begins Fredric Jameson's introduction to this collection of eight of his previously published essays on film and film theory. The book is divided into two parts: part one opens with his well known "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," and contains six other essays published between 1977 and 1986. And though the eighty-page essay constituting part two is entitled "The Existence of Italy," neither "existence" nor "Italy" appears in the text. The essay is instead titled in response to a sentiment from Adorno and Horkheimer, which serves as an epigraph to the essay: "Not Italy is offered, but proof that it exists." Clearly, Jameson's language is not on holiday but working overtime (the day for night-shift of cinema?).

Consider the language of the title of the collection: *Signatures of the Visible*, Film is to be construed as a signature, indeed a signature of that which is "essentially pornographic," which is to say a signature related to desire. Film theory (and by extension, aesthetic theory) would then consist of "readings" of (and instructions and methods as to how to "read") these visible signatures, these signatures of the visual. The problem however is that, properly speaking, signatures are not legible—we may *recognize* them via their visibility but certainly we cannot "read" them. The central task for Jameson throughout this disparate collection of essays is how to make sense of that which cannot be read but nonetheless appears ubiquitously as a kind of writing. (We might recall that pornography itself is literally a writing.)

Jameson's task is not to read but instead to theorize how one might decipher, recognize and register these signatures (at once both autographic and allographic) which resist reading. It is to his immense credit that his theorizing comes out of his reluctance to embrace and be satisfied with his own quite convincing readings of films ranging from *Jaws*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and *The Shining* to those of Hitchcock and Syberberg.

Two allusions intrude here (and perhaps allusion itself might well serve as a model of an alternative to reading): Adorno's remark to the effect that the artwork is a kind of writing but not one which we can make any sense of. The second allusion is to the nearly invisible signatures—one might say to a kind of "writing" somewhere between a scrawl and a scratch—that indelibly mark the stones in Kafka's fable of the temple builders. These markings on Kafka's stones have no meaning and yet they are not empty, they are instead simultaneously display and memento.

And this is precisely how Jameson would have us construe the filmic signatures of the visual. Such signatures mark both the history of the visual and display (illegibly but not invisibly) the visual itself. When we successfully recognize signatures we in a sense no longer see the signature but instead recognize the person it identifies, the person to whom it belongs. A successful signature (one which is recognized) collapses the distinction between itself and what (whom?) it identifies. Jameson's thinking takes place in the ground between the signature and that which it identifies, at times focusing on the nature of the signature, at times on that which it is a signature of. Jameson is perhaps at his best when he explains and details how these signatures signify both more and less than that which they ostensibly merely signify.

If the visual *tout court* is a (pornographic) artifact, to detail its history via its own signatures would serve to display a history which as yet remains invisible to us. (Certainly the visual looks like anything but an artifact.) Jameson seeks to display the *form* of the visual as a way of displaying the history which informs the visual. Central to this display is the recognition of the role desire (and for Jameson desire is authentic only when it is the expression of a collective) has played in attempting to control history. Films are the signatures of a collective desire to overcome an oppressive history.

This collection should be of interest to most aestheticians, but especially to those aware of their interest in the pornographic nature of cultural artifacts. (TH)