

*Foreign Office*

[Symposium 3... take 2...]

I tried to speak from the Havana of the mind and found myself an impossible refugee in the anachronistic wastelands of Passaic New Jersey, a place in a book where I have not been physically either. But that is precisely the matter because despite all of one's efforts it seems that one always writes this from where one is not, a place in the almost more than maybe, at a distance a glass thick from the here and definitely one duration in anticipation of the now. For convenience, let's pretend this is proper English. And yet, later on I might need to say what time it is in our program. By the way, did I forget to say good evening, dear listeners?

Tonight's epigraph is an anonymous poem sung by Eugenio Arango, the unforgettable Totico\*, drumming from one of the Havanas of the mind—in this case, The Bronx—a Havana no less real or unreal than the one depicted by Kalatozov in his *I Am Cuba* (you are right now hearing its background noise thanks to our kind friends at Milestone Films). But let's get back to Totico's recording with Patato Valdés in 1968. The song, *En el Callejón*, recounts an allegorical dialog between the singer and a famous film character. "Where were you going about, Gilda?"—he starts. And Gilda replies: "Hey Glenn Ford, I was roaming with Flash Gordon / In the dead-end street / Pablo and Rebeca, Samson and Delilah / the Three Mousquetaires / Catherine the Great, Richard the Lionheart / They all set up a meeting at the border / To conquer the universe / The general died at sunrise / History is written at night." A love stanza follows, and then the mysterious refrain: "Superman just arrived, dancing rock and roll / Oh yes Superman arrived, dancing Guagancó / dancing Cha Cha Cha..." A list of other Afro-Cuban dances follows the rhythm.

This song is arguably a crystal of cultural and political references and experiences, an inescapable example of playful critique pursued through danceable music, made by Cuban migrants in the Bronx. It accounts for the presence of extremely synthetic, germinal elements of a comparative thinking at work in popular cultures—and I am not emphasizing enough the -s—especially those diasporic. Note that the poem contains only two markers of location: the dead-end street or blind alley, and the border.

## L O C O A M O R

I will now introduce tonight's lecture, delivered by none other than Fredric Jameson, one of our living master thinkers, as an opening address to the symposium held in Bergen, Norway, to celebrate no other work than his own on the occasion of the 2008 Holberg International Memorial Prize celebrations. I want to thank the Secretariat of the Holberg Prize for allowing us to share this valuable recording tonight. It is a brief, irregular, I would even say rocky, sometimes even erratic presentation remarkably titled "Does World Literature Have a Foreign Office?" I am truly moved by the presence of professor Jameson here tonight, in radio-illusionistic proximity—he is even closer than the music: a hologram in a recording room. Even if his books are of that kind that one reads and

rereads with the growing suspicion that only a sordid misunderstanding could have gotten us so interested in conceptual problems such as the nature of modernism at its twilight, the necessity for us to periodize or not, and as you will hear, the internal quarrels of some university departments, in the dead-end street and across the border. But however crooked our path was to this critical wasteland, we don't know the way back.

[Fredric Jameson, "Does World Literature Have a Foreign Office?"]

After this twenty-odd minutes, we are reminded of the lecture's title with estrangement: "Does World Literature Have a Foreign Office?" And, well, it has taken us some time to realize that this captivating title is actually a bear-trap. So in the following minutes I will try to get my foot out of it without—how to say it—without having to cut it off.

It is, first of all, striking to hear professor Jameson speaking in such figurative terms as foreign offices and united nations of literature. Nations—what nations? A global government for literature? What? Professor Jameson enters the sour discussion on nationalism jokingly, something one can understand and since it's essentially a foul one. And what he says about nations seems, at least from my denationalized end, or dead-end, essentially right. It is no twilight of the nation-state nor nationalism we are living in, quite on the contrary, nation-states will continue to be used, as Fredric Jameson points out himself, as alibis for a better and smoother corporate control. Think of all those aspiring nations, populations with a historical singularity that keep dreaming and dreaming of acquiring a state with a beautiful flag and lots of offices and institutions that will be essentially the same as anywhere else. Obviously, the difference between nationalistic and anti-nationalistic dreams is that the latter take some prior conceptual work, and no one wants to dream difficult. From this side of things, once again, it seems that identity is one of those problems that could not be satisfied by a simple political solution, such as the creation of a new state. Rather, the only satisfaction for the nationalist craving or lust seems to be perpetual war, at least on the symbolic plane. If, as Jameson explains, nationalism is in the global-Imperial framework an obscene lie, in the postcolonial framework it should be considered (Jameson continues) a disposable rhetorical tool for regional emancipation, quickly to be disposed of once its goal has been attained. *Deleuze dixit*. Jameson's characterization of the "national situation" carries echoes of the expression "national reality," commonly used at least in Romance languages for contexts of nationalistic struggle. Jameson adds a passive, or patient, twist to it, implying that literature has to coexist with, rather than emerge from, a certain set of collective stage rules and narratives that are marked by the ideology of national identity. Now, how does this word "national" stay afloat in a world of mobility, migration, de- and re-territorialization, global branding and culture industries, data exchange et-cetera—that question can solely be given the same reply all the questions about the ever-growing popularity of false consciousness are given.

However, it seems difficult to believe Jameson's thesis about a relation of inverse proportionality between the size of the country and the intensity of the miserable nationalistic feelings. It looks like a hasty analogy, even a crude extrapolation... Should this mean that the most nationalistic countries, in Europe for instance, are Monaco, Luxembourg and Switzerland? Let alone Andorra... Is Belize more nationalistic than, say, Argentina or Brazil? In sum, Jameson's idea about the inferiority complex as the central nationalistic feeling should apply, instead, to all nations or none, and I suggest, let's start with the big ones to promote the example.

But enough with nations. If we accept the "superstate," or a transition stage between nation-states and superstates with global post-nations, as the only valid framework for world literature in the present, then we are somewhat forgetting that the influence of those structures, however transitional they may be, does not apply homogeneously to all singularities, and that the relations of citizens with the trans-national superstate are certainly not isometric or equidistant. To that extent, again, it seems highly artificial to speak about world literature in the present time as an interplay of national identities and realities, as if we could quantify memory, influence and degrees of displacement. Unless, of course, we want to wipe out some singularities and tuck them into the container of what Margaret Cohen called the "great unread." Especially, if we consider that those singularities will be more crucial than ever in revealing the nature of so called "world literature," a literature of disparate worlds. Just think about Pound, to use an example professor Jameson invokes—can you think of Pound as an addition of national situation percentages? We seem to shift from one false problem to another, so let's skip the question of universal value.

As for this part so far, and the remainder of the lecture, professor Jameson has only moved away from the opening question, as a hunter walks away from the bear-trap once it's set, or perhaps he has drawn a dense scrubland around it, only to reach an oblique vantage point on the question. We have to assume that such an oblique vantage point is provided by his definition of Modernism as a "uniquely dialectical phenomenon" allowing us to transcend the "national" particularities of a literary work and bring it to a field of readership that is itself defined by "universal foreignness"—the foreign office of Modernism being, you guessed right, Post-modernism. But what foreign office is this, that has franchise stores everywhere the ideology of modernism is represented—which is, pretty much, everywhere? Isn't this another false clue that inevitably brings us back to the previous set of dodgy problems, exemplified now by the hardly compelling "disfunction between the individual and collective dimensions" that "miss each other like different planes in infinite space"? And I wonder, weren't we rather talking about the surface where the plane itself is drawn or imagined?

But if there was an interesting question at the very beginning, that was not the simultaneous operation of literary works on a domestic and an international level, thanks of course to the miracle of the dialectic; the interesting question was not either the significance of literary prizes. The interesting question concerned the possibility of a foreign office for foreignness itself—a meta-level for metaliterature, whose mysterious location and dissemination may constitute an aesthetic locus itself; a mesosphere of critique the idea of foreign office made us dream of. One could devise another lecture, this time by the famous ex-senator and ufo-conspirator Paul Hellyer, in which the truth about extraterrestrial literature is finally revealed: prose exists in other planets, aliens have their own science fiction in the form of pastoral human novels, and they are all fans of the works of Dan Brown.

Yet, if we acknowledge the current dissolution of national identities—and regardless of nationalistic agendas being implemented in postnational cultural contexts—and if we accept the simultaneous dissolution of major cultural genres—again, regardless of the implementation of literary genre agendas in post-genre contexts—such as the novel, the feature film, the music record, etcetera—then the question of the foreign office takes almost redemptive undertones. The transformation of genres into liquid categories, into openness, of literary or artistic works in an infinitely variable blend of forms, aesthetic idioms, media, and layers of referentiality beyond the mere local—this hyperdissolution and multiplication of works as digital files (and not their reproduction as analog documents) can only transform, dissolve and multiply both the conceptual nature and bureaucratic infrastructure of such disciplines as comparative studies, art critical or historical studies, and philosophical aesthetics to name only the closest ones. Soon, the words book, album, film will melt, turning books albums and films into "documents,"


historicising media. Exactly as we are tending toward a world population, we are tending toward a single medium or web full of disparate hypertextuality, and this is not a strictly coincidental analogy but it is not an accident either. Of course, in both planes singularities will be constantly pushed toward the beneath, in other words the dissolution of media will just reproduce a *great unread* based on its new forms—although there will still be a great deal of unread people and unread desire; we will live under the hegemony of mirroring and bifurcation and everything will be readable, not read. The great unread actually moves toward the center. Maybe Moretti's trees and formalist waves will work in real time soon, only to make Borges's vision of a world-size map of the world seem diminutive. There will be so much to read that, as Moretti the prophet has anticipated, no one will read, it's ironic to think about books growing back into trees, by the way. There will be lots of pills for headache, that's for sure; there will be glare. Far from simplification, the Humanities will be divided in two branches, "Studies of Studies of Studies," or Studies Cubed; and "Studies without Subjects," emphasis on the -s.

Did I forget to say good night?

M. C.  
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A few appendical thoughts came to mind once the program was written and recorded. The question could have been raised regarding Jameson's well-known interest in science fiction in the past, which could have counterbalanced my jokes about extraterrestrial literary concerns and the imaginary connections between ufology and comparative literature. It was not done, mainly because of my lack of references at hand (or lack of time, simply) but the bridge is there for those who may want to cross it. More seriously, the point concerning the critical meaning of such an expression as "foreign office for world literature" as a "meta- level for metaliterature" is, I believe, more related to media than it is to actual literary genres or national/global frameworks. My hypothesis would be, although not



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exclusively, that the foreign office of (world) literature is naturally located in *other media* than written/ printed text—radio being, no less naturally and for obvious reasons, the most immediate example, not only because of the literary texture of certain events happening regularly on radio (Symposium included) but also insofar as things like *En el Callejón*, whose cultural-literary values I tried to emphasize, happen there all the time in a more or less noticeable way. But let's not forget that when we say radio, we are also and more and more saying "podcast" and implying an environment of pages, texts, and images. First, the reference to "other media" is here to open the question of marginal literatures—again, marginal in terms of medium or locus, not in terms of acceptance (it may be of use to remind that many conceptual artists have set camp on such margins, especially those of photography and film, but also music, television, etc., since decades). To speak properly, this is in fact an extra- (external, foreign) level to literature and metaliterature, a matter of delocalization or practice *hors-les-murs*, whereas the notion of a meta- office points at something ultimately different. In other words, the question of marginal media for literature is above all a historical question, especially in consideration of the perspective of current dissolution and interpenetration of media that was proposed. It takes much more than the best comparative literature to analyze an e-book, for instance; and we don't know what e-books will become in twenty years. I am surprised, in sum, that professor Jameson did not address a more abstract, pervasive conception of the literary Text, in relation to which the very apparatus of world literature remains, after all, provincial.