

FUTUROS DA ÁGUA
RESILIÊNCIA,
GOVERNAÇÃO
E ADAPTAÇÃO 

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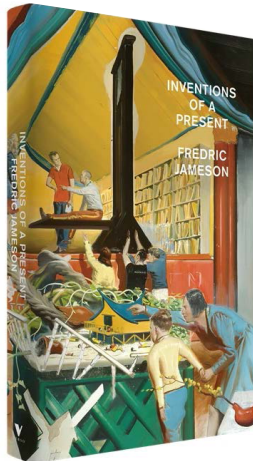
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Inventions of a Present: The Novel in its Crisis of Globalization, by Fredric Jameson
 Jeffrey Childs

Of all of the literary genres (with the exception of the perhaps now extinct literary essay), the novel is the most open to historical circumstance. This is no doubt structural: borrowing narrative from the epic, dialogue from drama, philosophical reflection from the essay, and the observation of daily life from journal writing, it has, since its modern invention in the seventeenth



century, combined these in loose and highly varied constellations, sometimes challenging our ability to recognize the genre as such, with Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego* (1982) representing perhaps the best challenge to date. It should thus come as no surprise that this genre would offer a privileged space of reflection for such an historically-minded critic as Fredric Jameson, as evidenced by one of the last collection of essays published in his lifetime: *Inventions of a Present: The Novel in its Crisis of Globalization* (2024).

Jeffrey Childs
 Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal
 Centro de Estudos Globais da Universidade Aberta, Lisboa, Portugal

[0000-0001-7105-2260](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7105-2260)

Published in the year of his death, *Inventions of a Present* gathers together Jameson's scattered reflections on the novel ranging from his 1972 essay on the novel *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, to his 2022 essay on Ben Pastor's Martin Bora novels.

Fifty years of reflection on a literary form is significant span of time, and the diversity of Jameson's topics attests to the range of his interests and breadth of his imagination — a scope we (like Jameson himself) can now identify with “the global,” beyond the more narrowly identified “globalization” in his title. Jameson's fluency with the heterogeneous vernaculars of the contemporary novel is impressive if not surprising, as he moves adroitly through such diverse phenomena as American regionalism, the Latin American “gringo novel” and magic realism, cyberpunk, the fallout of German reunification, the fragmentation of the former Soviet Union, late Japanese modernism, and the breakdown (and reconstitution) of the novel form in the recent television serial (namely, *The Wire*), among others.

In many authors, such a diversity of topics would suggest a work of circumstance, indicative of the historical contingency of an author's work without a compelling organizing form or intention. Two overarching engagements save Jameson's work from this fate. The first of these is his extended meditation on the novel form, a form which develops in the nineteenth century to mediate the experience of lived reality and the typologies of the nation-state, yet which proceeds, in the twentieth century, to document the dislocation of the such centers of meaning through the expansion of the form throughout non-Western countries and the disruption of the individual as his/her own event horizon (a shift that can be charted within Jameson's work from the “form-problem” in Henry James to the conspiratorial novels of DeLillo and Yurick). The second of these engagements is with globalization itself, the intensification and advancement of capitalism throughout the world. The central ambiguity of globalization — how does a process identified with the global as such advance per se? what

is the invisible center of its centrifugal operations? — lies at the heart of the contemporary novel, as Jameson notes:

The dilemma can be schematically described as the increasing incompatibility — or incommensurability — between individual experience, existential experience, as we go on looking for it in our individual biological bodies, and structural meaning, which we can now ultimately derive only from the world system of multinational capitalism (2024, p. 65).

Of course, as with all things Jameson touches, the trick lies in the methodical patience with which he approaches this ultimate derivation. What makes his analyses so robust and compelling is that he is less interested in the absent cause of the historical circumstances he charts than in the dazzling prismatic effects it engenders as it is refracted through the lenses of particular aesthetic, sociological, and cultural formations.

At times it may seem as though Jameson is too beholden to the phenomena he analyzes, suffering (as it were) from a kind of cultural Stockholm syndrome (his remarkable work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [1984] is a case in point). Yet I think the larger message to be gleaned from his work is his genuine commitment to the cultural forms he analyzes, in this case the contemporary novel, not as finished cultural entities to be placed on the mantle of a global civilization, but rather as provisional mediations of objective material circumstances by human consciousness (whose own material form is, of course, language). For Jameson, cultural forms are never mere symptoms of the historical forces that shape them and make of them meaningful utterances. They are also the privileged locus in which such forces and meanings are refracted through human will, desire, and intelligibility, and returned to the world as something changed, perhaps even refreshed, accompanied by that thin sliver of human freedom we call hope.

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