

Louis Armand, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:

re "Authority & Authorship: James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*
as a Work of Fictocriticism."

by Morgan Childs
(MA dissertation, 2014)

As Alfred Jarry was to Surrealism, so James Agee is to Fictocriticism. Such may be characterised as the thrust of Ms Childs's argument in this thesis, in which Agee is situated as a kind of ficto-critic *avant la lettre*. Ms Childs, by examining the implications of the portmanteau construction "fictocriticism" – a term whose very attribution, historically, textually, remains in the realm of the semi-factual – attempts to delineate a critique of the *unclassifiable* as it pertains to the artefactual and evidential at the intersection(s) of cultural and scientific discourse. The strategy of "anachronism" in employing the (field)work of Agee as exemplary of a late twentieth-century development in sociology and literary studies is entirely pertinent to such a critique: among other things it provides a demystifying service to the usual genealogy, since Agee here is the "real" inventor of Fictocriticism. This is the palpable realisation we arrive at after reading Ms Childs's thesis: inevitably it is not so much about classifying what cannot be classified – Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a work of Fictocriticism – but rather about declassifying, so to speak, a certain set of assumption concealed within this discourse of marginal and hybrid classifications that ultimately must account not only for its supposed objects but also for itself, the fictocritical status of Fictocriticism; and this is where we see the latter emerging as a "work" of Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Ms Childs's thesis, which draws upon theories of "genre" (Derrida), "fictionality" (Vaihinger), "authority" (Barthes, Foucault), and by implication the subversive status of the "formless" (Bataille), also examines the unacknowledged recuperative task such approaches as Fictocriticism pursue while purporting to erode institutional "critical" norms from within: a self-conscious and ironic normativity here presides. Fictocriticism's contest with authority ultimately assumes the form of a hankering after authorisation – that is to say, by and within the institutional bounds of an academic discourse from which it presents itself as standing apart. Its stance is one of demanded permission, and in this sense it is in every respect *secondary* to the work of Agee, which though it failed as journalism did not compromise with the prevailing dictates of the genre, nor did it negotiate with them. The relative obscurity of the publication of Agee's text thus stands in contrast to the self-

promoted “ism” of Fictocriticism within the larger post-poststructuralist context of university humanities departments.

In this regard, Ms Childs’s thesis is quite timely and addresses a problem that has elsewhere focused upon the phenomenon of the institutional avant-garde and the subsumption of modes of “subversion” (e.g. Agee’s “individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness”) within the status quo. At a time when this subsumption has achieved unprecedented levels, there is perhaps no more pertinent area of critique. The question that Ms Childs’s herself raises is: to what extent can such a critique in fact be possible, given that the very basis of Fictocriticism as such is the general relativisation of all critical values – with the possible exception of those attached e.g. to “the immutability of an author... within a text,” even allowing for the contested character of terms like “author.” All of this might be better encapsulated in a question about the operations of *power* behind the term Fictocriticism and its avowed practices: what, e.g., are its *political* dimensions. (Ms Childs at times uses terms like “anthropology” and “ethnography” interchangeably – perhaps this could be an area of consideration: what political dynamics are involved in the implied synonymy of the *anthro* and the *ethno*?)

In a different light, many of the neo-avant-garde strategies of Fictocriticism are reminiscent of 1970s Conceptual art. The documented origin of the term harks back to this period (an interview with Frederic Jameson, which Ms Childs quotes). In this sense, does fictocriticism display a comparable ambivalence towards its own institutional status as we see in Conceptual art and (Jamesonian) “postmodernism” in general?

One final question – and again this is in part provided by Ms Childs herself – has to do with the attribution of *Famous Men’s* authorship. In the context of a discussion of Fictocriticism and genres of “unclassifiability,” of hybrid and miscegenated forms, how is it that Walker Evans (whose photographs are said to be an inextricable part of the book) is given only an ancillary, subordinate role in the discussion?

My recommendation for this thesis, dependent upon the candidate’s performance in the defence, is a grade of excellent. I also nominate this thesis for the annual Mathesius Prize.

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