

**“As we babble about the sky and
the weather and the forests of change”:
Nostalgia in John Ashbery’s Early Poetry**

Ronald S. Judy

Intergrams 6.2 (2005):

<http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/062/062-judy.pdf>

Abstract

This essay argues that John Ashbery’s early poetry is deeply invested in what Fredric Jameson has termed the “art language” of nostalgia. That is, his early work is bent on colonizing the *avant garde* styles of yore and re-appropriating them for contemporary audiences. Whether nostalgia is an intense “attack” on the senses as Ashbery’s narrator recounts in the opening lines of “Mixed Feelings,” or appears as a deeply threatening sense of space in his film noir poem “Forties Flick,” we are presented with a “lyric consciousness” that is baffled by the richness and depth of the *avant garde*. By reproducing the shock in the experience of rediscovering confinement as something like an ur-history of our present unfreedom, or condition of confinement, I argue that poems like “Mixed Feelings” and “Forties Flick ” re-write the past in terms of style alone—i.e., as a reification of the already fetishized image of the past.

Keywords: John Ashbery, poetry, nostalgia, pastiche, avant-garde, Marxism, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, paranoia, film noir, popular culture.

So it is that some chance contact with an external object may “remind” us of ourselves more profoundly than anything that takes place in the impoverished life of our conscious will. For unbeknownst to us, the objects around us lead lives of their own in our unconscious fantasies, where, vibrant with mana or taboo, with symbolic fascination or repulsion, they stand as the words or hieroglyphs of the immense rebus of desire.

—Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*

I. Memory and Desire in “Mixed Feelings.”

In recent years, critics of John Ashbery’s poetry have become interested in the ways nostalgia functions as an ironic or parodic device in his work. For example, in tracing the influence of the Romantic ideology of the fragment in the work of Ashbery, Benjamin Colbert questions how “[a]n ironic nostalgia for a time of lost unities seems to underscore many of Ashbery’s poems,” especially those which are “concerned with the problem of influence, priority, and originality” (48).¹ This ironic nostalgia, omnipresent in the way a poem like “Mixed Feelings” approaches a “found” image of the past (a WWII era photographic relic in this case)—by trying to invoke its speech—functions to highlight the impossibility of all attempts to recover a lost or “originary” historical moment or “meaning.” Similarly, Krystyna Mazur has called attention to how Ashbery relies on episodes of “forgetting or loss, moments of inattention, or the inability to hold a meaning intact, englobed” (109). For Mazur, Ashbery is trying to show readers how a strategy of repetition can “allow objects or words to become meaningful again” (ibid). In her view this indicates that Ashbery works toward a condition of “aporetic duplication,” a recycling of strangely familiar images and diction in “other” terms that allows the poem to open out onto indeterminate discursive-aesthetic grounds (e.g., in “Self-Portrait’s” mirroring of mirrored subjects). Marjorie Perloff has also argued that Ashbery’s obliquely familiar allusions, even in the prose and free verse poems, are both “recalled with great fondness” and simultaneously “gently mocked” as “send-ups of various sorts” (Perloff 138).² Thus, for example, the title of “Mixed Feelings” appears to conflate Eliot’s “mixing memory with desire” in “The Wasteland” with feelings of lust and nostalgia for girls seen in a faded photograph.

In contrast to the above critics though, in David Herd’s formulation a poem like “Mixed Feelings” is neither a *mere* work of ironic nostalgia nor an attempt to recover “lost” origins, but a poem about the artist’s openly hostile relationship to his middle-class readership and their feeble attempts to understand his work.³ According to Herd, written at a time when Ashbery felt the need to “take refuge in [the] anti-bourgeois shock tactics of the historic avant-garde,” “Mixed Feelings” can be seen

as an attack on bourgeois “readerly” assumptions (Herd 160). That is, Herd wants to claim that, like the Dada or Surrealist writers who would incorporate bits and pieces of objects “found” in daily life into their work to exploit their shock value as “non-artistic” elements, Ashbery tries to upset his readers’ expectations about “good poetry” by writing a poem that obsesses on a “found” photographic object. Thus, in Herd’s view, the Paris expatriate writer’s vilification of the “American types” found in a chance encounter with a WWII era photo, “these Ruths, Lindas, Pats and Sheilas,” and the puerile sado-masochistic fantasy that he concocts about their image, is indicative of a more ambitious (if wrongheaded) attempt to “shock” the reader out of an artificially comforting sense of nostalgia for 1940’s “innocence.” Herd’s formulation of Ashbery’s flirtation with avant-gardist “shock-technique” thus helps us contextualize the aforementioned critics’ work on Ashbery’s use of an ambiguously “aporetic” or merely pastiche-like nostalgic irony. This linking of the poem to the “shock-tactics” of the historical *avant-garde* also helps us situate the poet’s work within a larger continuum of modernist art values that are openly hostile to the very nostalgia-prone audience it seeks to solicit sympathy from. This chapter further extrapolates from Herd’s reading of “Mixed Feelings” as a belated *avant-gardist* poem, taking into account how, from a Marxist critical perspective, Ashbery’s “ironic nostalgia” can be understood as an attempt to narcissistically compensate for a denuded, if not altogether elided, sense of historical “depth” of feeling. Then, in the second section of the essay, I propose an elaboration on this compensatory logic by closely examining one of Ashbery’s most affected nostalgia pieces, the poem “Forties Flick,” in light of Fredric Jameson’s theory of the subject of postmodern nostalgia.

From the outset what is most disturbing about John Ashbery’s “Mixed Feelings” is not so much the complex flirtation routine that takes place between the ironic protagonist and a group of girls fixated on in an old, “circa 1942” photo, but rather the way in which the whole WWII era is re-structured as an elaborate nostalgic fantasy about the loss of that era as an “original” meaning or point of departure to begin with. The fantasy is sparked, however, by an intense sensation:

A pleasant smell of frying sausages
Attacks the sense, along with the old, mostly invisible
Photograph of what seems to be girls lounging around
An old fighter bomber, circa 1942 vintage.
How to explain to these girls, if indeed that’s what they are,
These Ruths, Lindas, Pats, and Sheilas,
About the vast change that’s taken place
In the fabric of our society, altering the texture

Of all things in it? (Ashbery 182)

Immediately the problem is one of historical distance—would the previous generation be able to understand what has taken place since World War Two? Indeed, the girls and the bomber they lounge on are so long gone in the past that they appear absolutely “faded,” and nearly insignificant for the present. It is important to note how this gesture toward an apparent loss or withdrawal of “serious” historical meaning is immediately rendered as *affect*, or as a requirement of the speaking subject’s attempt to make sense of what Jameson refers to as a “chance encounter with an external object” that wants to speak to us in the quote cited above. This persona, initially caught in a moment of synaesthesis reverie, or an instant when he is suddenly “attacked” by “A pleasant smell of frying sausages” and a faded “old, mostly invisible / Photograph of what seems to be girls lounging,” is compelled to talk his way into the sensations of this almost “invisible” photo. It is important to note that the rhetorical strategy Ashbery uses to write his way into this scene derives from a posture of defensive compulsion, the need to fend off this sensual “attack” and somehow allay or channel its power into more fruitful discourse. Thus he begins pondering the stereotypical, “forties” innocence of “These Ruths, Lindas, Pats and Sheilas” and how best to explain to them “the vast change that has taken place / In the very fabric of our society, altering the texture / Of all things in it;” unfortunately, he can only conjure the clichéd pick-up line—“What are your hobbies girls?”—with which to begin. Sudden insertion of this cagey erotic trope, and the negative reaction it elicits from the girls (they “joke and go on and out”), leads the speaker to lightly remark his non-chagrin, commenting that even his rejection is “part of a complicated / Flirtation routine” that will presumably end in some satisfactory manner. And it is at this point that the fantasy takes on a surreal, “cartoonized” image that shifts our focus to the “California sunlight” which is

Belaboring them and the old crate on which they
Have draped themselves, fading its Donald Duck insignia
To the extreme point of legibility.
Maybe they were lying, but its likely their
Tiny intelligences cannot retain much information.
Not even one fact, perhaps. That’s why
They think they are in New York. (Ashbery 182)

Concern with the transformative effect of this egregious “California” light, its “belaboring” the girls and with the extremity of its “fading” capacity, draws us out of the “object gaze” of the speaker and attunes us to the irony of his “monologic” position.

For here, as with any loss of focus, optical or linguistic, we are prone to seek causes for the breakdown elsewhere, by turning our attention to the material apparatus or medium itself. And yet, because the medium, the photographic print, is so lacking in clarity, the speaker cannot but stand in for the object--make himself "present" as it were--in the "language" of the photo. Substituting himself in this highly "unpoetic" and somewhat baffling manner, Ashbery simultaneously highlights (and even lampoons) his position as fantasist—or, that is, as self-conscious artificer—by mocking the image he is trying to create.

To confound matters further, the intrusion of a crate marked with a "Donald Duck insignia" triggers bizarre associations with the bomber the girls are posing before: is our narrator being coy with this "photograph" from a cartoon war era that never took place?! The "content" of the narrative is quite literally thrown into a different light altogether here, for now a seemingly mock gesture of suspicion—"maybe they were lying?"—enters into the picture along with the Disney character so that the speaker seems suddenly to want to re-fashion his little historical drama into a cloak & dagger espionage tale. In performing this shift in narrative modes (from nostalgic reverie to something like a paranoid rhapsody), the speaker assumes a suspicious persona that now seems primarily bent on denigrating the girls' "innocent" capacity for agency in his little drama. Indeed, even at the level of the "background" we are invited to make associations with a kind of mock-fascist tableaux that implicates even childish cartoon characters in the business of war (both Nazi and Allied warplanes and armaments were often marked with Disney logos). Indeed, this teasing hostility toward his by now purely formal "creations" has our speaker morbidly playing with the idea that the "girls" are not only idiots, but idiots incapable with "their tiny intelligences" even of duplicity. But duplicity about or in what? The girls are even mistaken about their whereabouts--they "think they are in New York," presumably the location of the photograph--so the speaker hints paranoiacally at a plot totally alien and threatening to him. So much for the effort to explain post-WWII history to these "creatures."

Instead, in lieu of his original impulse to engage with his sense of felt distance in time from the aesthetic object, the speaker figures himself precisely as an artificial "complement" (or supplement) to the photo, poised always in some self-defensive stance of hostile mockery. Although this is not precisely a form of narcissism, a self-involved position of vacillation between imaginary pleasure and real disgust is maintained even as the speaker plays the role of the concerned aesthete. Interested now in the quality of the light that "belabors" the image, apparently exhausting its representational power, now with "the way / They [the girls] act and feel," the speaker can only understand his relation to the "object" as part of that "immense rebus of desire" that Jameson likens to "hieroglyphs." That is, along with this turn of emphasis

toward the shock of synaesthesis “taste”—already hinted at in the opening attack of “a pleasant smell of frying sausages”—we notice the narcissist’s “preoccupation with fantasies of power,” his desire to “master” threatening images by filling in its “almost invisible” and “faded” gaps according to an explicit logic of “desire.” By now having emerged as a dominant structural motif, this compulsion to correct or compensate for some originary loss—i.e., the historical consciousness of women during the second world war, the photographic clarity of desire, or in other words, the signified itself—we realize this input or investment of “idealization” is almost exactly parallel in ratio to the speaker’s net sense of historical loss. Which is merely another formulation for the claim that memory and desire, nostalgia and narcissism, are proportionally (or “rationally”) conflated via “sensed” feelings of deprivation.

Finally then, my claim that this debased sense of history as loss or absence is somehow connected to a belated pathology of the surrealist image requires further clarification. My understanding of the “image” in surrealist avant-garde art is predicated on what Hal Foster considers its “compulsive” aspect, i.e., the internal compulsion to “blindly” repeat in images and language the psychological experience of trauma or deeply conflicting impulses.⁴ Automatic writing, though meant to enact the unconscious and ultimately offer a degree of release from the less wholesome forces of the libido, is also a form of fantasy-projection in surrealist practice. It seems plausible in this regard to think of Ashbery’s “mixed feelings” toward the photograph as a “working over of seduction, the paranoid projection of persecution, the melancholic repetition of [a] loss” that tries to deny the vast changes which have disabled recollection in our time (Foster 73). And yet, even as the poem constructs itself as a surreal “projection” of paranoid fantasy, we see it simultaneously deconstructing the verbal contents of its own seduction. Denial of the “signified,” then, is part and parcel of a simultaneous longing for a pleasurable release from “presence” within “real” history:

I have already forgotten about them
Until one day in the not too distant future
When we meet possibly in the lounge of a modern airport,
They look astonishingly young and fresh as when this picture was
 made
But full of contradictory ideas, stupid ones as well as
Worthwhile ones, but all flooding the surface of their minds
As we babble about the sky and the weather and the forests of change.
(Ashbery 183)

This final “scene” is very much in keeping with what one critic has called Ashbery’s habit of structuring stanzas that “operate as vitrines, or viewing chambers, of elements the poet has rearranged allowing narratives to emerge and recede through the rhythms of juxtaposition” (McCorkle 104).⁵ Unlike the Imagist avant-garde’s poetry, which worked by inter-cutting images and narratively disjointed scenes, Ashbery’s poems work by constructing narrative “viewing chambers” from the museum of modernist art. These allow him to string together disjointed genre scenes or stories like the one above which seem to go nowhere and yet everywhere at the same time.

And yet this particular “vitrine”—of girls babbling about contradictory ideas, the weather, and “forests of change”—appears as just another form of artifice insofar as it too magically originates outside the meaning-making subject. A speaker who cannot conceive of his subject-matter or image (the photograph dialogue) outside of the framework of such self-consciously projected chamber-displays sees history as a radically reified, or thing-like substance. Indeed, even the attempt to render the primitive, convoluted consciousness of the girls as a “surface” flooded by “ideas, stupid ones” and “Worthwhile ones,” appears as yet another failure: the ironic, masculine ploy that will downplay feminine agency and reinstate the desiring subject as master is undermined by the framing device. What passes for pre-Cold War feminine agency is inevitably, then, reinscribed as the “surface” effects of a mind seen through the voyeur’s peep show—a depthless system of narrative projections and rejections that cannot cohere apart from the pleasure they can generate or undermine.

Thus precisely because Ashbery is so deft at implicating the site of poetic desire as an act of narrative juxtaposing and ordering, we are made aware of a condition in which, as Slavoj Žižek has explained, “the symbolic order itself [...] is identified with the pleasure principle: the unconscious ‘structured like language’” (Žižek 132).⁶ With Ashbery’s “vitrine”-stanzas even the will-to-self-subterfuge appears obedient to a libido-serving conscious memory. In this regard it turns out that the poem is actually *about* the seduction inherent in attempts to (re)construct representation outside itself—as attempts to talk ourselves into delusions of “infidelity” or, in other terms, the loss of a sense of (historical or conscious) “objective” wholeness. Seemingly ungoverned, the reflective ego is here subsumed in a compulsion to view both past and future as utterly fictional “projections,” an imbedded libidinal urge governed no less by the “pleasure principle” than a weary nostalgia for lost origins. “Thematized” in this manner, via the final vitrine of the “lounge of a modern airport” (a place of “departures” as well as meetings that recalls the menacing aviation image of the fighter-bomber), nostalgia becomes a brilliant performative tool that allows Ashbery to both depict the process of unconscious “sublimation” and, at the same time, render the nostalgia fetish transparent to a level of critical subversion hitherto unimaginable. In many respects

fascination with the nostalgic aura of “things” is pervasive in other poems of this period too, from the way “Forties Flick” sublimates “film noir” aesthetics--in the figure of a “melancholy of the bright stare” brought into sharp contrast with the metonymic “panties and bra” that “Zips” the blinds up--to the more narcissistic, yet equally nostalgic reminiscence on seeing a Parmigianino painting of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” Foreboding at some ominous historical distance, rendered in the last line of “Mixed Feelings” as an attempt to “babble about the sky and the weather and the forests of change,” is itself a reminder that we fetishize in speech what we can grasp only indirectly, as an unconscious apprehension of temporal distance. For aesthetic purposes this means that, despite the speaker’s attempts to subsume his sense of time’s corrosive passage within an ironic “rebus” of nostalgic, “mixed feelings,” or conversely, to encapsulate memory within a desire for the fetish-object, a deep sense of historical impotence pervades the speaker’s pensive longings in the face of these “vast forests change.”

II. “Forties Flick” and Noir Nostalgia

Fredric Jameson has often characterized postmodern art, and especially film, in terms of its nostalgic relation to the past or, in other words, as an attempt to appropriate history for art according to the “iron dictates” of changes in fashion (Jameson 1990 19). This presents serious problems for Jameson, because “faced with [...] ultimate objects--our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as ‘referent’--the incompatibility of a postmodernist ‘nostalgia’ art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent” (ibid). This “artificial” response to the need to recover lost pasts disables genuine attempts at engaging with history, projecting in their stead “appropriation” as so many “artistic” bricolage or *pastiche* attempts to render entire epochs--“the forties” or “the sixties”--as pleasantly diversionary fetishes which allow us to eschew recognition of present-day suffering. A Marxist, Jameson explains the commodification of the past in postmodernist “art language” by resorting to a historicization of the technique itself. He writes that

this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way. It cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather demonstrate, through these contradictions, the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience. (21)

Nostalgia is, remarkably, somehow the outcome of a modern existence which exhausts the potency of historical time to affect us or demand our action in the present. In this regard it is also “symptomatic” of what Jameson’s predecessor, critical theorist Walter Benjamin, once called “traumatophilia” in conjunction with his study of Charles Baudelaire (Benjamin 161). For Benjamin, Baudelaire is a modernist because he attempts to absorb the “shock” of modern life into his poetry, making the experience of change and social upheaval something of an internalized, lived experience. That is, Benjamin sees modernist poetry--especially its Symbolist and Surrealist variants--as basically preservative in its attempt to “absorb” it into the very core of its form the upsetting historicity of the present. And yet, relying on Freudian notions of memory and trauma recovery, Benjamin also poses the frequent opposite, neurotic reaction to “shock” as an experience “incorporated directly into conscious memory” (*Erinnerung*) in a way that “sterilize[s] the incident for poetic experience” (162). This pathologically enforced repetition of the incident in voluntary memory kills its alienating “affect,” both by reifying the experience as melancholic affect and by re-telling it in terms that repeat only banal and unreflective “truths” (E.g., the sixties as an “age of liberation” doomed to failure). Aesthetic nostalgia as Jameson subsequently formulates it follows the logic of this latter reaction to historical life: as a “sterilized” encapsulation of the past its voluntary memorizings attempt to master, or “fetishize,” the experience of artistic “shock” by erasing all possible traces of an authentic/unique historical reality (which it must itself present or put forward to work as nostalgia) as so many parodic “send-ups” of history.⁷

For this reason Jameson elsewhere defines “historicity” as “neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future” but a “perception of the present as [a] history” that “defamiliarizes” us from the confining immediacy of present experience (284). By contrast, nostalgia, far from being an outright negation of “historicity,” is a condition in which “realism” only “derive[s] from the shock of grasping [...] confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (25). Lacking this historicity and lacking its own formal styles or organizational principles, postmodern nostalgia emerges as so many ironic appropriations or “pastiche” of dead forms, languages, images, and all manner of popular cultural detritus while still functioning according to the logic of avant-gardist “shock tactics.”

Like “Mixed Feelings,” Ashbery’s “Forties Flick” re-enacts the logic of this new nostalgic “shock” in interesting ways. The poem organizes itself around an ambiguous opening scene that is at once both an engagement with and a nostalgic “tribute” to film noir’s darkly imaginative power:

The shadow of the venetian blind on the painted wall,
Shadows of the snake-plant and cacti, the plaster animals,
Focus the tragic melancholy of the bright stare
Into nowhere, a hole like the black holes in space. (Ashbery 166)

Internalizing as they do the “expressionistic” mood of the early film noir experience, these opening lines can be understood at one level as a form of trans-coding of the lost black & white film aesthetics of the forties. Unless we are acquainted with film noir technique this passage is likely to have a quite alien effect on us, influenced as it is by a shadow-based lighting techniques of the noir generation of directors. For example, it is quite easy to visualize the interior of one of Orson Welles’ offices or houses from *A Touch of Evil* (1945) when reading this poem. This is because Ashbery pays especial attention to the fairly stereotypical ways in which “shots” are constructed from a series of empty spaces or shadows filled in by ominous “kitsch” objects—the cheap, plaster trinkets, a pair of plants, and, of course the all-important striped shadows of the venetian blinds. This object-obsession is very much in keeping with the style of film noir, invariably shot in worlds where objects take on a hallucinatory, all-powerful dimension. Indeed, the “tragic melancholy” gaze which exists off screen and apprehends (and ends) in a near cosmic blankness everything within its field of vision, is paradoxically “focused” by these lifeless objects. As if to confirm this impression of vacant existence we are presented with a subdued element of mechanical action:

In bra and panties she sidles up to the window:
Zip! up goes the blind. A fragile street scene offers itself,
With wafer-thin pedestrians who know where they are going.
The blind comes down slowly, the slats are slowly tilted up. (ibid)

All that is missing here is a “hard-boiled” detective to explain, in voice-over of course, what he thought the dame was looking out for. But verbal explication would be superfluous at this point, for what Ashbery is trying to depict is the law of visual mystery that “forties” films seem so religiously obedient to. In part this “occultation” is carried out by the poem’s curiously “cinematic” focus on how the scene is constructed by the objects which, in it, take on a disproportionate meaning. Thus, the “bra and panties” woman that operates the blinds here cannot be said to have been “portrayed” exactly, rather she “sidles up to the window” to initiate the elaboration of the image: “forties” America, “fragile” in its innocence and yet full of self-assured people who

“know where they are going.” But this quaint, wholesome impression is immediately supplanted in the next paragraph’s disjunctive take of the woman:

Why must it always end this way?
A dais with woman reading, with the ruckus of her hair
And all that is unsaid about her pulling us to her, with her
In the silence that night alone can’t explain. (ibid)

Here the woman is re-figured as something of a queenly *femme fatale*, a “black hole” that draws us *to her*, *with* her into an oblivion of silence that cannot be explained by “night alone” but which has more to do with the “pull” of her mysteriously “unsaid” character. What troubles our narrator here and prompts his interruption, “Why must it always end this way?,” is the necessity of the scene, its inevitable melancholy logic and the realization that it is morbidly repetitive in the first place: the image of the anonymous female in a vacant, darkly lit scene rich in lurid, overloaded objects is at the heart of the “expressionist” aesthetic he seeks to invoke and understand.

The “silence” of this intensely visual but “muted,” or “unsaid” milieu thus constructs its meaning out of a negation in fashion paralleled by the use of darkness as an organizing principle in black and white films of the period:

Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad,
But we didn’t have to reinvent these either:
They had gone away into the plot of a story,
The “art” part--knowing what important details to leave out
And the way character is developed. Things too real
To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page (ibid)

The definition of the “art” used here, in the formulaic “knowing what important details to leave out / And the way character is developed,” is an intriguing comment on how cinema figures art as a process of reduction, an editing down of extraneous images and character takes. But for our purposes what is striking in this “scene” is the way in which it self-consciously returns to the issue of “forties” representation itself: the image of the dual “silences” of the library and the telephone incite the remark that these image-devices—bare visual episodes which stand forth without need of commentary and yet wind their way into the filmic “plot”—need not be “re-invented” by the speaker in order to be understood. The curious “sublimation” of these gazes into empty time, i.e., narrative silence and arbitrary details into a linear “plot” prompts the speaker to define them, ironically, as being “to real / To be of much concern, hence artificial.” But,

in the shadow-play of the film noir experience, these absences remain inscribed in the “language” of the work, scrawled “all over the page” of each scene as an affect-governed stylistic motif.

Although it is arguably the central concern of the poem to account for the “Forties” genius for affect-as-absence, the final lines of the poem attempt to address the meaning of this artifice directly:

Things too real

To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page,
The indoors with the outside becoming part of you
As you find you had never left off laughing at death,
The background, dark vine at the edge of the porch. (ibid)

Apprehending the laws of film noir style seems, even in this closing passage, to hinge on understanding its form in terms of a “colonizing” spatial dynamic. That is, Ashbery’s conceives of “style,” and specifically 1940s *noir* style, in terms of a subject’s fixation on, or implantation with, a melancholic “gaze” that occupies the viewer’s space of observation. Hence we get a cinema of inversion whose subtle mutation of “things too real” to focus on transforms part of the “artifice” of reality itself and, more tellingly, an “indoor” space defined as consuming its opposite, “the outside,” “becoming part of you.” But Ashbery’s perhaps overly facetious characterization of this experience of *noir* form as a “laughing at death” sets up a playful inversion of its own, a mockery of the death-in-life “expressionism” of film noir that cannot be overlooked as mere vine entangled “background” gesture. For Ashbery’s attitude toward this filmic style seems most evident precisely in the realization of his interlocutor’s enjoyment, *jouissance*, in the inversionary cheating of “death.”

As other critics have pointed out, there are certainly traces of nostalgia in this and other poems for a lost formal rigor or “unity” of speaker and form. In the works Shoptaw labels Ashbery’s “all purpose fairy tales” of wonder and linguistic play (Shoptaw 168), for instance “*Marchenbilder*” (or “Fairy Tale Scene”) where we are reminded of the old “bad stories” that are both “empty as cupboards” and “beautiful as we people them / With ourselves” (Ashbery 184-85).⁸ A certain “nostalgia for nostalgia” is present too in “*Scheherezade’s*” “textual landscape of groundless fertility,” particularly in the heroine’s fertile “bank / Of colored verbs and adjectives” that cannot “connect” to the larger narrative except as intertextual echoes, or lost memories of the stories’ verbal trace. “*Oleum Misericordiae*” too is, as Shoptaw points out, a “marvelously misrepresentative flow chart” based on the Brothers Grimm’s “The Water of Life” and featuring an extended reverie on lost memory (Shoptaw 168).

But for a better understanding of how filling older textual forms with ourselves serves to complete their pleasure we need first to make a final detour through Jameson's notion of postmodern nostalgia.

For Jameson, because present experience can no longer adequately apprehend its "historicity," nostalgia must be characterized as a "spatial" mode of aesthetic awareness, one that attempts to recollect for itself an historical "present" which can nonetheless appropriate history without its problematic (action demanding) elements remaining intact. For Jameson this turn of events is explainable as an effect of late capitalism's imaginative colonization, or "division of labor of the mind" whereby particular pasts become fetishizable (e.g., "1940sness"), thrown into the universal tool box of stylistic values, and later deployed as so many pastiche "art languages" (Jameson 368). That is, because the postmodern artistic "mind" has become so conceptually compartmentalized and reduced to formal categories of analysis, it can only comprehend the past in terms of separate "sectors" of time which appear equidistant from Benjamin's "lived experience" of history. Flattened in this way, the past is emptied of its defamiliarizing power and remains open to the self-consciously libidinal search for aesthetic pleasure. Thus, as the product of a culture that demands radical memory be both heterogeneous and discardable, the poet apprehends a past where "the tone and style of a whole epoch becomes, in effect, the central character, the actant, and the 'world historical individual'" (ibid). According to Jameson the nostalgia film plays a crucial role in the articulation of this new sense of time, for film operates according to the principle of time's spatialization and offers the impression of a sensory "immediacy" not available in other mediums. This construction of a filmic remembrance of our dead collective sense of the past allows us to make the deadly realization, as Ashbery's interlocutor does, that we never did leave off "laughing at death."

It would perhaps be too extreme to argue that Ashbery's writing re-enacts the enfeeblement of sense of history. But his nostalgic engagement with the "forties" demonstrates meticulously the cultural logic of time's spatialization—which renders poetic the sense in which time has begun to order itself around interminably artificial silences, shadow absences, and even banal moments of anomie. Unlike the eroticized "vitrines" of lost innocence in "Mixed Feelings," however, the "Forties Flick" retreat into nostalgia is staged as a partial recovery of our postmodern "origins" in the emergence of popular film culture. Although both poems are presented as attempts at engagement with the pre-Cold War past, the moment when "everything changed," neither directly confronts the Jamesonian "historicity" of their content. Rather, told in a highly subdued fashion, and in tones so neutral as to appear almost inseparable from the forms they are symbiotic on, Ashbery's poems nostalgically reinvent the

“contradictions” inherent in these “lost origins.” Understanding how this is pulled off in particular poems is always a matter of understanding how Ashbery reformulates the affective syntax of an epoch, reproducing its manner of speaking of itself, either as word-image or cinematic signifiers-as-word images. That is, whereas in “Mixed Feelings” we were presented with a static, representation of “forties” innocence as so many enticing young “air heads,” in “Forties Flick” we are too closely bound to the representational “logic” of affect to notice that it is the classic *femme fatale* in all her dark glory and mystique who is being described as a “black hole.” In this sense the two poems share a common nostalgic interest in confronting, from opposing poles, the same forties feminine idol that holds an ominous fascination for the present. Whether as the faded celluloid space on which erotic fantasies can be over-written or as a dynamic force of negative attraction, it is apparent that for Ashbery “the forties” exist primarily as a space of representational desire—as the feminine “other” who can be “addressed” only as she is undressed *as memory*. The seductions of memory in both poems can be said to re-enact the arrival of postmodernism as an obsession with self-referential forms: just as “Mixed Feelings” reduplicates the stereotypical “forties” pin-up girl fantasy, “Forties Flick” reinscribes the cult of the *femme fatale* as the vacant center of a film noir aesthetics of absence-as-presence (though film noir already achieved this, reliant as it was on pastiches of German “expressionist” painting styles). Thus, it would appear that, as the primary “actant” of “forties” aesthetic life, the melancholy drama-queen film noir wins the title of “world historical individual” in Ashbery’s nostalgic universe.

III. Conclusion: Ashbery’s Avant-garde Vitruvines as Resistance?

Finally, if it no longer bothers us to find Ashbery’s early poetic forebears in popular culture if we understand his work nostalgically. For indeed the poet seems bent on invoking a plethora of strange and troubling precursors, many of whom, like the speaker of “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” are used to demonstrate that art must somehow account for the culture industry’s increasing commodification of desire if it hopes to invoke Calinescu’s Surrealists/Dadaist tradition of crisis in our time consciousness. In fact, this “cartoon poem” could be said to be about how older poetic forms—e.g., Daffy’s Miltonic rhetoric or his pastiche of Dryden—get recast directly amid the “popular” as so many “bits and pieces, spangles, patches, really; nothing / Stands alone” (Ashbery 221). This unsentimental method of appropriating the language of the 17th century and miming it in consciously neutral tones gives us the impression that, as Keith Cohen suggests, Ashbery is assuming a “non-negative valuation of the spectacle” (Cohen 132). But if this is true, if Ashbery speaks with a sense of blank neutrality and even tries to take on the “attitude of the spectacle” in hopes of

overturning our incorrect prejudices toward the past, how do we account for Daffy's sense that, amid a rain of consumer images and a nightmare Hollywood, he has wound up in a dire existential dilemma where "suddenly, all is loathing"? Cohen's answer to this question appears to be that Ashbery's speakers, in their seemingly unreflective interiorization and reproduction of all the signs, quirks, lingo, and styles of an absurdist cultural realm, have somehow begun to read this language back at us in a provocative and critical manner.⁹ But if this is true it is not always immediately apparent where the "non-negative valuation" ends and an openly libidinal "spectacle-mongering" begins.

Ashbery's nostalgia, if it really is to be read as critical resistance, should be considered a discursive rediscovery of those "conditions of confinement" (patriarchal fantasies of power) that Jameson sees imbedded in the "simulacra" of popularly imagined history. By reproducing the shock in the experience of rediscovering confinement as something like an ur-history of our present unfreedom or condition of confinement, poems like "Mixed Feelings" and "Forties Flick" re-write the past in terms of style alone—i.e., as a reification of the already fetishized image of the past. Thus, in terms of the examples given here, to deconstruct the libidinal process whereby "the forties" can appear a time of innocent or seductive female protagonists at once invites questions about what kernels of truth our popularly held stereotypes of "the forties" stand in for today and what, if anything, they continue to signify for present consciousness. It seems in this light that the issue of resistance hinges on how acutely we are able to experience the juxtapositional "shock" of nostalgia in works of "high art." Were nostalgia as intense as the "attack" on the senses that Ashbery's recounts at the opening of "Mixed Feelings" or as deeply threatening as film noir seems to be in "Forties Flick," we would have little difficulty ascribing to its poetry a "dismantling" function. Unfortunately it also encodes a longing for the past that is conservatively utopian, concerned as it is with recovering or reclaiming the past, as the cinema often does, for a repressive and paranoid era that continues to feed on the self-contained, dead images of the past. As "Forties Flick" seems to hint, with its "fragile street scene" and "wafer thin" citizens who appear to "know where they are going," we can only understand these "vitrine" pasts in terms of the way they stage themselves for our pleasure as literary "artifacts."

Notes

1. Colbert situates Ashbery's work within the framework of Romantic aesthetics' attempt to invoke the unity of a lost "origin" beyond the pale of the "enlightened," alienated consciousness of the Romantic

- subject. Ashbery still plays with such gestures, according to Colbert, in an ironic attempt to show how open-ended both the “origin” and the subject really are for postmodernists like Ashbery.
2. In her book Perloff reads Ashbery against the grain of consumer culture, attempting as she does so to relate Ashbery’s project to the historic avant-garde’s aim of subverting poetic artifice by undermining the very expectations and traditions of reading which motivate poetry in the first place.
 3. Herd’s is the most up-to-date and comprehensive studies of Ashbery’s work. In his book Herd tries to make the case for a Pasternak-influenced “melancholy lyricism” on Ashbery. Herd’s reference to Ashbery’s avant-garde “shock” tactics is intriguing and can best be understood, I think, against the backdrop of an essay like Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” (254-69). Benjamin, using John Heartfield’s photo-montage parody-attacks on Nazi power as an example, argues that avant-garde art (especially in its Dada manifestations) also functioned to “test art for its authenticity” by saying “look your picture frame ruptures the age; the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than paintings,” p. 262.
 4. The claim that interests us in Foster’s work is that surrealism and psychoanalysis, while long thought of merely as uneasy bed-partners, were actually working towards their own distinct theories of the object fetish. According to Foster the surrealist image takes the fetish and makes it a “compulsive,” irresistible object of aesthetic fascination that genuinely promises utopian satisfaction.
 5. McCorkle’s thesis is that Ashbery’s work often carries out a “libidinal decentering” that overloads itself on excessive representational strategies and thereby constructs social critique as “excess” rather than symptom; his discussion of “vitrines” or “viewing chambers” that disrupt narrative normativity are but one example of “critique” can how the poet undermines these structures.
 6. While part of Zizek’s aim in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is to lead us off the garden path of “postmodernist traps” via an elaboration of the Lacanian theory of the object-fetish as an untotalizable form of ideology critique, his theoretical claim would seem to work well with the kind of understanding of “aesthetic object” like Ashbery’s intensely felt “viewing poems” insofar as they are constructed on some dialectical notion of the visual signifier—i.e., a faded photograph, a Parmagianino painting, or *film noir* aesthetics—that is taken over by the negativity of the unconscious “gaze.”
 7. Although much has been said about Jameson’s notion of postmodern nostalgia as it relates to film, it is not often remarked how this cinematic, basically spatial mode of artistic awareness functions (or gets transcoded) in terms of literary or poetic production.
 8. Shoptaw offers an intriguing queer theory reading of Ashbery’s repressed “homotextual echoes.” It is not, however, terribly apparent to me that Ashbery’s poetry operates according to the logic of an un-reflective homoerotic mechanism of repression as Shoptaw seems to suggest. Rather, he seems more interested in camp representations of masculinity of the kind discussed by Sweet in connection with Frank O’Hara’s work.
 9. See for example, Jody Norton’s “Whispers Out of Time: the Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall 1995, vol. 41, #3, p. 281. Norton’s claim is that Ashbery’s work often follows a formalist existential “syntax” reminiscent in many ways to the film insofar as it organizes meaning around “reflective glimpses” ungoverned by authorial direction.

Works Cited:

- Ashbery, John. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Cohen, Keith. “Ashbery’s Dismantling of Bourgeois Discourse.” *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, Lehman ed. Ithaca : Cornell UP, 1980.
- Colbert, Benjamin. “Romantic Entanglements: Ashbery and the Fragment.” *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, Lehman ed. Ithaca : Cornell UP, 1980.
- Cooper, Travis. “Ashbery’s Self-Portrait.” *Papers on Language and Literature*, Fall 1992, vol. 28, # 4, p. 451.
- Herd, David. *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.

- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1990.
- . *Marxism and Form*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971.
- McCorkle, James. "Eros and Reverie in the Poetry of John Ashbery," reproduced in *The Tribe of John*, Shultz ed. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995. p. 101-125.
- Mazur, Krystyna. "The 'Unfamiliar Stereotype': Repitition in the Poetry of John Ashbery" in Kelly-Lionel, ed. *Poetry and the Sense of Panic: Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*. Amsterdam, Netherlands : Rodopi, 2000. 105-117.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Radical Artifice*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991.
- Norton, Jody. "Whispers Out of Time: the Syntax of Being in the Poetry of John Ashbery," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall 1995, vol. 41, #3, p. 281.
- Shoptaw, John. *On the Outside Looking Out*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

Ronald S. Judy is Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages at Ching Yun University, Taiwan