Imperial Jive (A One-Act Theoretical Essay)

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Dramatis Personae:

A Theorist (played by Jonathan Beller)
A Reader (played by you)
White Cultural Hegemony Thugs (played by anti-PC stooge-caricatures)

Scene 1: Everyday, Jargon

Critics of PC to one side (preferably lined up against the wall), nearly everyone else involved in cultural analysis in the tattered West is becoming aware that jargon is not only unavoidable but absolutely essential – the lingua-franca. The colonized, the queer, the officially colored, the emerging subaltern, the self-consciously subcultural, others of our youth and even some of our scientists, know that the language of power is everywhere and specialized languages are required to achieve some perspective on the invasive consciousness of officially sanctioned reality. Even subaltern dialects and spoken word smelted in the heart takes on an air of jargon in the marketplace of ideas.

Nearly a century ago, Mikhail Bahktin, the great theorist of heteroglossia, remarked on the clash of various classes and class fractions in the novel, noting at once that the novel was the perfect medium for the double voicing of language, that is, the allowing of a contending discourse to speak through another discourse that dominated it, and also that everyday had its slogan. The understanding he articulated was that material situations and conflicts were generative of particular forms of utterance, that language at once bears the signature of its particular conditions of production and furthermore is a condition of production and reproduction. Since the conditions are contested, class and other forms of social struggle take place in discourse itself. How much more so with the intensified commodification and the widespread, techno-mediatic implementation of the control of daily life! The novel has exploded and its fragments are everywhere taken up by new media.

Whether it is the oenophile’s invocation of “leather” and “tannin,” the security state’s insistence that “if you see something say something,” the media firms injunction to sell “eyeballs to advertisers,” the corporate anxiety over “treasuries,” “the fed” and “subprime,” the scientists’ “west nile vectors,” hip-hop’s specific inflections and terminology, or the cultural critics’ “queering” and “interpellation,” everyone, it would seem, realizes that they have at their disposal a specific, indeed specialized code advantageous to their intellectual and cultural investments and social position suited for particular forms of knowledge production. The cultural critic, just like the astrophysicist has their jargon—specific semiotic tools that allow for the articulation of particular kinds of knowing and revelation, as well as (and this is perhaps the same thing) the exercise of agency in the world. These particular modes of speech with their
specialized vocabularies or jargons are used to reposition other modes of knowing alien to the social network being constructed through the speech acts of these groups.

**Scene 2: Where Have All The Poets Gone?**

While it might seem to some of us English teachers that only dumbfucks (to use the technical term) would insist that English teachers always write an English that anyone can understand (even as these selfsame dumbfucks have no problem with a computer scientist or astrophysicists writing code that for the non-specialist is nearly impenetrable) the fault lies less with our poor but exemplary anti-PCers and more with the obfuscation of the political by commodification and its attendant naturalization of certain forms of separation. We should pity the fools (even as we hold in reserve our deepest feelings of communion for the many victims of their conservative, racist, imperialistic, white-supremacist, capitalist regimes). Realizing that science and/or mathematics and/or political economy is naturally beyond the purview of their generic selves they are content to allow specialists to handle it. However, like Marx’s petty bourgeois shop keepers who feel the erosion of their social position and thus cling to the remnants of their privilege in the most reactionary of ways as an effort to forestall full proletarianization and hence dehumanization, these pathetic souls cling to their rapidly disappearing humanity in an equally reactionary way—they hold onto a belief in natural language, as if its proper function were located beyond the petty material transformations of society and existed in some pure, universal space to function only as an incorruptible vehicle of self-expression—their self-expression. Transparent language, unproblematically expressing their truth … —we don’t need Althusser to remind us that ideology is most powerfully at work where it is least visible.

Here perhaps I am veering close to Adorno’s fundamental point in *The Jargon of Authenticity* — the language that purports to get at the true, the good the beautiful (Imelda Marcos’ mantra, by the way) as well as the real, the human, the heartfelt, the interior, etc., is just as mass-produced, mass mediated, clichéd, fabricated and riddled with jargon as any other language. It imports all of its race, gender, class, national and sexual biases under the cloak of an objectively normalized interiority. Today, however, we can see that poetry (at least as the bourgeoisie understands it) is nothing more than a Hallmark card — the jargon of bourgeois sentimentality operating with the authority of Art. The fact that it does not appear as such, is the victory of power as it normalizes, conventionalizes, regiments, universalizes and excludes the radical heterogeneity of perception, thought, feeling and affect that should, would, or at least might be ambient on planet Earth. We become satisfied with pathetic and parsimonious construction of the human, we become teary eyed during trailers for third-rate films and phone-card commercials. We buy diamonds and SUVs, speak our minds and pierce our nipples in accord with the affective protocols programmed by TV.

**Scene 3: The Use-Value of Stupidity, The Exchange-Value of Slang**

As with interiority, so too with the public domain—indeed the commodification of the latter is less surprising: when CNN-Money pretends to interrupt its regular programming with “This just in… six miners trapped in Utah mine,” what is sometimes missed (even though it is so manifestly shown) is that what is being proffered is the
latest commodity – a bit of raw material ready for monetization/domestication by the idiot box, so that the idiots who watch will not have to think much, can get caught up in the use-value of the mini-drama of six suffering American souls and their American families, while six innocent men in Guantanamo, or six children (or six-hundred thousand children) in Iraq go through hell made at once possible and unconscious by the same piece of domesticating machinery. While it is useful to be able to live social contradiction, it is less useful (even dangerous) to think too much about it. We have heard these points before: the “reality” and the “common sense” produced by the culture industry are instrumental techniques for the organization of consciousness and the economy for the benefit of capital, its capitalists and their governments. The capitalist organization of space, time and narrative is also the organization of subjectivity, affect and structures of feeling. The world of the spectacle finds its obverse in the forms of contemporary interiority and both are caught in lockstep with the intensive expansion of capital. Not just the built environment and the visible realm, but also the domain of interiority are fabricated in accord with the requisites of private enterprise and profit.

The dual organization of the interiority/exteriority, subject/object, inside/outside (the deconstruction, convergence and indeed that practical conflation of these) means that the material of signification has come under intensive pressure, shunted as it always already is into mediatic pathways ramified by capital. What we are living through now, along with the conflation in the art world of high and low and in the literary world of Literature and literature is the convergence of jargon and slang. Capitalist jive, to coin a phrase which you can now spend, is everywhere—all languages bear the stamp of their niche markets. Which is to say that in the current version of imperialism (which Lenin called “the highest stage of capitalism” and saw as a necessary extension of the banks’ finance capital that emerges with monopoly capitalism and the formation of conglomerates and cartels) called globalization, the new networks meta-mediate the distribution and coherence of languages through the formation of myriad specialized languages: jargons and slangs (which is not to say that with globalization armies and police have atrophied with disuse). Just as the difference between a language and a dialect is that the former has an army, a flag and an airlines while the latter does not, the difference between jargon and slang is today marked by the degree of institutionalization and enfranchisement. However, different from the heady Dick Hebdige days of subculture, it is starting to seem that the competition among the jargons and slangs is more like the competition among the many capitals for labor and markets. There are various private enterprises and entrepreneurs, but all must compete in the capitalized ether, foraging about for interpellants.

**Scene 4: What Is Sane Has Become Mad and What Is Mad Has Become Sane**

Because this is a “think piece,” for some web journal written with sadly limited ambitions (a line on my cv, an effort to imprint a few phrases or at best an algorithm on your thought process, a very slight and perhaps not entirely sincere hope that the logic elucidated here may contribute to world-wide revolution—or is that simply the marketing hook?), the hope implicit in writing here is way modest. Though it is in poor taste to ask you to recognize that even the language that would launch a radical critique of everything existing is suspect and in certain respects mythical after having asked you
to buy into it (Freud remarked on the offputting character of a writer revealing his true desire), in refusing to avoid such a *faux pas* by being disingenuous, what can this writer possibly hope to accomplish? Is he calling for a new level of cynicism in cultural politics, is he offering himself up for crucifixion, his face a Baudrillarian stepping-stone, that would require a few good combat-boot stamps so that we can beat down the simulations and get on with the revolution? The truth is (and now we are in “sacred” territory), I don’t know and it feels crazy to talk that way. Personally I am appalled at my own limitations and indifference, disgusted by my lack of concern, fearful of my shameless “poetics.” Shouldn’t I sport fire and brimstone, do I dare eat a peach? And even this, the performance of an implosion of critical perspective logically, nay bravely, consistent with its own vision of Armageddon, what scripture has dictated the form of that desire and “creativity?”

No doubt I am traveling down the road to madness leading from the near totalizing critique of commodification set out in a more revolutionary way in my own book *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (which argues that attention has become a form of expropriated labor and that vision and the senses have been industrialized by media-capital) and in another radical way (albeit in a different register) in Paolo Virno’s *The Grammar of the Multitudes* (which argues that capital has captured the cognitive-linguistic capacity of humankind). *The CMP* argues that sensual labor takes place according to protocols set out by media machines and *The GM* argues that discursive production functions in accord with the capitalist “score” orchestrated by what Marx once called “the general intellect.” Given the degree of capture of human cooperation, participation, imagination, cognitive-linguistic function, and all sensuous activity, a capture that implies that even my assertions towards freedom (and your assertions too) are expropriated by capital and made to produce and reproduce capitalist accumulation, hierarchy and the radical inequality implicit in these, what’s an emasculated subject to do? Now even becoming woman, becoming negro and drag itself have become downright suspect, to say nothing of essentialism, or just being yourself, or, for that matter, being. For some time camp, drag, masquerade and most recently perhaps farce have been the modes of appropriation that understand the impossibility for the marginalized in all of us of playing it straight with power. It has been observed and then theorized and then quasi-institutionalized that authenticity was the space of power and that only the failed performance could at once give the lie to all performances and open a space for those of us excluded from the straight discourse of racist, classist, sexist and nationalist hegemony. But now, power itself is becoming farcical, not merely through the appropriation of the weapons of the weak (an old trick), but driven into a situation of such extreme self contradiction and exceptionalism that even it can neither justify itself nor take its own truth claims seriously. However, this discursive breakdown has not made the militarized states of capital any less deadly. Rather, this near total breakdown of sign function even at the level of the state-utterance, a breakdown that allows sanity and madness to turn into their opposites before our very eyes, attests to the radical bankruptcy of political language in general.

**Scene 5: “Don’t Shoot Me, I’m Only the Piano Player”—Or Are You?**
(referring to the infernal oscillation of sanity and madness) “And that’s why you should lay down your arms,” whimper the anti-PC folks from our opening scene who at our pleasure and behest have had their faces to the wall all this time, “no one has the right to tell anyone else how to think.” Or so they say, when it’s convenient for them, which is, notably, most often when they are not the ones answering charges but making them: telling the rest of us from the safety of their bunkers how to properly think about their free markets, rules of law, white supremacism and civilizations. But despite the conservatism of their cowardly, passive-aggressive sincerity (as they squirm and beg for their lives against our imaginary wall or moralize to us about freedom from their gated-community, McMansion layabouts—note the “McM”) there may be something we can agree on from our position of having turned the tables, a truth discerned within their pained right-wing whimpers and amplified hypocritical grandstanding, something we ourselves know to be true, having been on the receiving side of violence oh so often: representation, all that imperial jive, is currently inseparable from contestation and from violence. We might not have the right words, or even any at our full disposal. The anti-PC folks may prefer the likes of us stripped and hooded, connected to electrodes and turned into a trophied photo-op to share with the in-group in moments of repose from their grueling dayjobs of going about the serious business of enforcing freedom, but most of all, they like us silent, unknown, perhaps even to ourselves. For somehow they know very well what we should also know: for anything to change in the current system of super-exploitation (where 100 billionaires own more than half the wealth of the planet), heads must roll. But given the infinite limitations of a schizo-linguistics induced by the apparently helpless necessity that in seeking freedom you must speak in a capitalized tongue, the antic heroism of this necessarily psychopathological critique—where oscillation of sane and insane has a family likeness to the oscillation of "us" and "them"—must also ask, "Is yours one of them?" Oh well, so much for poetry.