

Development Showcase

The Werner Grilk Annual Lecture Welcomes Martin Jay

By Michael André

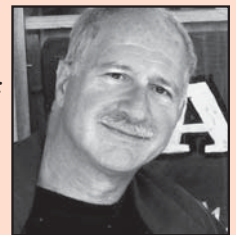
“Aller Anfang ist schwer, am schwersten der Anfang der Wissenschaft.” Not exactly what Goethe wrote in *Hermann und Dorothea*, but no less accurate – “The first step is always difficult, the most difficult in scholarship.” Academics well know the truth of this statement. But, we also know the excitement of beginnings. A most interesting aspect of the annual Werner Grilk lecture is that it allows us, especially graduate students, to hear a senior member of the academy talk about getting a new project off the ground. This year’s lecture remained true to this tradition: Martin Jay, Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of History at The University of California, Berkeley, came to The University of Michigan to discuss his newest work on nominalism and photography.

Martin Jay captured the attention of the academic world with the publication of *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-50* (1973). Based on his dissertation, this book played a crucial role in reintroducing Critical Theory to the American scholarly community. Jay has since held our attention with a stream of publications tackling subjects as diverse as the history of visuality and visual culture, Western Marxism, the life and work of Theodor W. Adorno, and European and American discourses on the nature of experience. Jay spoke to us on Thursday, March 26 on “Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Reenchantment of the World.” Starting with the observation of the “recurrent effect” of nominalism – particularly in 20th-century aesthetics and philosophy – he then turned to its theological bases in the thought of

William of Ockham and Thomas Aquinas, thereby linking their theories of the operations of human sight and knowledge to contemporary art and photographic theory.

A partial list of works by Martin Jay:

- *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-50* (1973)
- *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (1984)
- *Adorno* (1984)
- *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993)
- *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (2004)



In this lecture, as in his other work, Jay took the difficult first step of searching for the beginning of a concept in order to trace it into our own time. Along the way, we witness the unfolding of thought into unexpected and yet familiar forms, a reminder to us of the deep intellectual heritage of the objects and concepts adorning our lives, and of the role we play in an ongoing intellectual history as story, even as adventure – a history perhaps, but by no means finished. As is well attested in his work, Martin Jay reminds us by his own example of the stakes of intellectual activity: not only the danger inherent in separating ourselves from a discourse of which we are very much a part; but also the realization that, by looking back over the manifold conceptual distances traveled, we continue to move forward.

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