What possibilities does globalization open up for literary studies, and more specifically, for our understanding of the politics of the literary today? To put this another way: is it possible to still imagine a social function for literary studies in an era dominated by visual spectacle, the triumph of the private and the apparent dissolution of the public sphere?

To speak of the opening up of new possibilities and even new political functions for literature and literary criticism today might seem quixotic at best: a tilting against the windmills of a radically transformed society that no longer has much use for the written word. But if we attend carefully to globalization and consider how the practices of literature and literary criticism figure in the contemporary social and political landscape, it seems to me that some unexpected political possibilities emerge. While globalization signals the beginning of many new processes, those of us concerned with language, culture and politics have often come to take it only as the name for the end of things: the end of democracy, of unmediated experience, of the public sphere, of the experiment (warts and all) called the Enlightenment and, effectively, of poetry and literature, too. I want to argue that both literature and literary criticism have an essential political role to play in the era of globalization, even if they do so in transformed and difficult circumstances.

Integral to literary studies is the view that the 'real' is always metaphorical in nature. All of our epistemologies, however secure and

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self-satisfied they might be in their ultimate veracity, are constituted by the appearance of 'real' in language: it is only by passing through metaphor that what is 'outside' of language can become linguistic and thus intelligible at all. What better practice to challenge the self-certainties of the narratives of globalization – which function in part by denying their core metaphoricality – than literary theory and criticism? To grasp how and why the literary might provide the conditions for mutinous metaphors against the dominant ones articulated in the discourse of globalization, it is necessary first to describe (yet again) what globalization is (and is not) and how literature and the study of culture fits (or does not fit) into it.

**Globalization is not post-modernism**

At the core of Karl Marx's investigation into the operations of capitalism is a sometimes forgotten critique of scholarly methodology: the political economists of his time mistook the *dramatis personae* of the modern economy – owners and workers – as *a priori* ontological categories, rather than as social positions that come into existence only as the result of a specific course of historical development. This methodological 'failure' describes, of course, a more general process of reification that takes place throughout much of contemporary social reality: our own creations take on the character of 'natural', preordained reality in a way that obscures the quotidian character of their invention. Marx's point goes beyond simply criticizing method. For one of the singular inventions of capitalism is the commodity form, which itself ceaselessly, on an ongoing and daily basis, re-reifies existing social relations. 'The commodity', Marx writes, 'reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' (Marx, 1976:165). The commodity, one might say, acts as an objective reifying force that extends beyond the ideologies of capitalists and capitalism: we live this reification, whether we believe the larger social script in which it is embedded or not.

It should come as no surprise that 'globalization' plays an important role in this ongoing narrative of capitalist reification. Just as surely as political economy for Marx, globalization hides reality from us even as it proposes to explain it. Just how does it do so? At first blush, the promise of the term 'globalization' is that it offers us a way to comprehend a set of massive changes (clustered around the economic and social impact of new communications technologies and the almost unfettered reign of capital across the earth) that have radically redefined contemporary