Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 3: The Linguistic Turn

Lecture 7: From Structuralism to Poststructuralism

1) **Historical Stages**

   a) **Jan Mukařovský**

   b) **Structuralism in the West**

2) **Structuralism in Literary Studies**

3) **From Structuralism to Poststructuralism**

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1) Historical Stages

a) Jan Mukařovský and Prague Structuralism

- inspired by the 1928 "Structuralist Manifesto"
- 'structure' replaces 'form' as central concept:
  → the meaning of textual elements results from their function for the dynamic structure of the text in its entirety, society as a 'structure of structures' conditioning each other, no hierarchical order
- 'aesthetic function' as defining characteristic of the structure of literature: reflexivity, detachment from extrinsic goals/reality/everyday life
  → the aesthetic function dominates other linguistic functions (cf. Karl Bühler's '*Organon*-Modell' 1934: expressive/darstellende/appellative Funktionen) and organizes them into an aesthetic structure

- 'aesthetic norms' are social and thus historical facts and should thus be conceived of as processes
- 'aesthetic value' exists only with reference to human beings as social beings
- the artist produces a 'material artefact' which is only transformed into an 'aesthetic object' by acts of reception

$$\text{reader}_{1,2,3...} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{artefact} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{aesthetic object}_{1,2,3...}$$
$$\text{(individual contexts)}*\text{(cultural contexts)}$$

- art and literature as social phenomena and part of historical evolution + acknowledgement of specifically aesthetic/literary dimension
- acknowledgement of constitutive role of recipient leads to an aesthetics of reception which combines hermeneutics and structuralism

b) Structuralism in the West

Heavily influenced by the emergence of modern linguistics
→ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916)
- language as a system or structure of elements whose relation or opposition to each other is governed by codes
- meaning emerges from these relations and oppositions rather than from the signs' reference
  → it is conventional and arbitrary
- dichotomies: *langue / parole*
        signifiant /signifié
        synchronic / diachronic
- relations between signs:
  paradigmatic (axis of selection, principle of equivalence)
  vs.
  syntagmatic (axis of combination, principle of contiguity)
  → a basic paradigm of human perception and activity

2) Structuralism in Literary Studies

Roman Jakobson:

a) model of language functions

emotive   (→ addresser)
referential (→ context)
conative   (→ addressee)   [cf. Bühler]
poetic   (→ message/autoreferentiality)   [cf. Mukařovský]
phatic   (→ medium)
metalingual (→ code)

b) poetic language vs. everyday/'normal' language

"The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."

→ poetic texts are marked by their 'density' of additional relations of equivalence and opposition
→ the stucturalist method of reading literary texts is to trace these relations in the text (cf. Jakobson's and Claude Levi-Strauss's famous reading of Baudelaire's *Les Chats*)
   1) analysis of relations on various linguistically defined levels (graphic, rhythmic, phonological, morphological, syntactical, semantic)
   2) synthesis of results with regard to the text as a whole

Problems:

1) subjective element, hermeneutical circle
2) neglect of social/cultural dimension of reception as acknowledged by Mukařovský
   → 'objectification' of text as source of its meaning
   → reductive reception of structuralism in the West, heavily influenced by the New Criticism dominating literary studies in the English-speaking world at the time

c) metaphor vs. metonomy

two fundamental axes of human language which can be detected by paying attention to cases of language disorder (aphasia):

metaphor (principle of equivalence)
→ continuity disorder (substitutions based on wrong selection)
metonymy (principle of contiguity)
→ similarity disorder (substitutions based on associations)

Application to literature:
e.g. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977)
metaphoric writing dominant in Romanticism and modernism,
metonymic writing dominant in realism

Problems:

1) attribution based on quantitative or qualitative criteria?
2) role of intuition/subjectivity?

Structuralist Narratology:

a)   Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928; engl. 1958)
31 structural functions ⇔ 9 settings
Problem:
The model works only with formulaic texts and is not open for innovations/deviations. Even a more subtle approach by Todorov and Greimas based on Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar (deep structure vs. surface structure) and introducing various roles (hero/helper/opponent etc.) could never really account for the complexity of modern fiction
b)   Widely used and generally accepted terminology as introduced by Gérard Genette based on the distinction between narration (hetero- vs. homodiegetic) and focalisation (internal/external/zero)

3) From Structuralism to Poststructuralism

Semiotics:

the systematic study of all the factors involved in the production and interpretation of signs or in the process of signification

- largely based on concepts of the sign as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce
- a widening of the frame beyond literature
  (cf. Roland Barthes on the *Mythologies* of everyday life, Umberto Eco on film, painting and architecture)
  → preparing the shift towards cultural studies
- e.g. Iurii M. Lotman's structural semiotics (art and literature as the densest forms of information storage and transmission → deviation from normal activities; Natural language as 'primary modelling system' (PMS)
  vs. 'secondary modelling systems' (SMS):
  art, music and literature → artistic series
  myth, religion and folklore → non-artistic series;
  SMS add up to a complex semiotic totality: culture

Roland Barthes, *Elemente der Semiologie* (1964; Frankfurt/M. 1983)

- combines an aesthetics of deviation (cf. Russian Formalism and Lotman) with Mukařovský's socially embedded aesthetics
- language + secondary systems of signification

(...)
Barthes: **signifiant   /   signifié**
Saussure: signifiant/signifié

- model is open for addressing larger cultural frameworks
- literature as an autonomous but embedded system which cannot be reduced to normal linguistic codes but does not necessarily break them (deviation is possible, but not obligatory)
- the signifié of the secondary (tertiary ...) level is never fixed
  → meaning production (semiosis) as a never-ending process

► **Poststructuralism**

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