

LITERARY THEORY: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

This course of lectures will offer a systematic overview of the most important schools of literary theory. These will be presented in historical perspective: after a brief look at some of the basic assumptions of Western culture we will examine the foundational theories developed in the 18th and 19th century (hermeneutics, positivism, Marxism) and then move on into the 20th century. Here, the philosophical notion of a 'linguistic turn' will provide the background for the story of formalism into structuralism into post-structuralism/deconstruction, while the recent notion of a 'cultural turn' will open up perspectives on more recent approaches such as feminism/gender studies, new historicism/cultural materialism, historical discourse analysis, systems theory, postcolonial theory, cultural studies and media studies.

Part 1: Introduction

Lecture 1: Why Theory?

1) 'Theories' and 'Theory': Some Definitions

2) Additional Distinctions

3) Course Overview

1) 'Theories' and 'Theory': Some Definitions

1986: "The Triumph of Theory" (J. Hillis Miller)

vs.

The Resistance to Theory (de Man)

Against Theory (Mitchell, ed.)

The Limits of Theory (Kavanagh, ed.)

Against Deconstruction (Ellis)

Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory (Tallis)

What's Wrong with Postmodernism (Norris)

The 1980s probably saw the high-water mark of literary theory. That decade was the 'moment' of theory, when the topic was fashionable and controversial. [...]

[A]fter the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the 'hour' of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum. At this stage the glamour fades, the charisma is routinized, and it becomes the day-to-day business of quite a large number of people to learn or teach (or both) this material.

(Barry 1995, 1)

After Theory (Docherty and Eagleton)

Re-Thinking Theory (Seamus Miller)

The State of Theory (Bradford, ed.)

The Point of Theory (Bal/Boer, eds.)

The Direction of Literary Theory (Earnshaw)

Theory after Theory (Birns) / Theory after 'Theory' (Elliott/Attridge)

Theorietheorie (Grizelj/Jahraus)

In literary and cultural studies these days there is a lot of talk about theory – not theory of literature, mind you; just plain 'theory'. To anyone outside the field, this usage must seem very odd. 'Theory of what?' you want to ask. It's surprisingly hard to say. It is not the theory of anything in particular, nor a comprehensive theory of things in general. Sometimes theory seems less an account of anything than an activity – something you do or don't do. You can be involved with theory; you can teach or study theory; you can hate theory or be afraid of it. None of this, though, helps much to understand what theory is. (Culler 1997, 1)

Unser Zeitalter ist das eigentliche Zeitalter der *Kritik*, der sich alles unterwerfen muß.
(Immanuel Kant, Vorwort zur *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781)

↓
a new understanding of
science predicated on the
construction of
unquestionable truth
by means of questioning
the world (model/system/
'schools': 'theories')

↓
construction

↓
acknowledging the potential
inconclusiveness of the
persistent questioning that is
at the heart of the critical
method
(perspective/reflection:
'theory' as attitude)

↓
deconstruction

'Theory' (DCE):

[Greek: *theōria* 'a sight', from *theōrein* 'to gaze upon']

- 1 a statement or group of statements established by reasoned argument based on known facts [...]
[▶ inductive understanding of 'theory']
- 2 the part of a science or art that deals with general principles and methods as opposed to practice; set of rules or principles for the study of a subject
[▶ deductive understanding of 'theory']
- 3 an opinion based on limited information or knowledge; something supposed
[▶ constructivist dimension of 'theory']

[generalization vs. perspectivity]

'Theories': of poetry/drama/the novel
of narrative (narratology)
of fictionality
of reader reception

...

vs.

'Theory':

1. Theory is interdisciplinary – discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative – an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.
3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.

(Culler 1997, 15)

2) Additional Distinctions

- hard-core theories (natural sciences) aimed at prediction/explanation
vs.
soft theories (humanities/social sciences) aimed at mapping/understanding
- tentative/exploratory/heuristic theories
vs.
descriptive theories
vs.
prescriptive/normative/dogmatic theories
- theory (abstraction)
vs.
method (application)
- theory
vs.
discourse

(cf. Iser 2006, 5-13)

Die Umstellung des Wissenschaftssystems von einem ontologischen auf ein konstruktivistisches und von einem einheitstheoretischen [...] auf ein differenztheoretisches Selbstverständnis, wie sie in den zweihundert Jahren seit Kant zu beobachten ist, berührt in sehr tiefgreifender Weise das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft. Man könnte sehr summarisch von einem Autoritätsverlust, ja von einem Autoritätsverzicht der Wissenschaft sprechen. [...] [M]it einem konstruktivistischen Selbstverständnis passt die Wissenschaft sich letztlich einer Lage an, die durch die Evolution der modernen Gesellschaft eingetreten ist [...].
(Luhmann 1990, 627)

► Stichworte: Modernisierung, funktionale Differenzierung, Polykontextualität/Pluralismus, Kontingenz, Reflexivität

Overall development:

objectivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →
*subjectivity → → → → → → → → → → → → →
reflexivity → → → → → → → →
ontology → constructivism
essentialism → difference

Positivism/Marxism
*Hermeneutics
Formalism into Functionalism

Foundations
The Linguistic Turn
The Cultural Turn

3) Course Overview

Part 1: Introduction

22 nd Oct	Lecture 1	Why Theory?
29 th Oct	Lecture 2	The Historical Emergence of Literary Theory

Part 2: Foundations

5 th Nov	Lecture 3	Hermeneutics
12 th Nov	Lecture 4	Positivism
29 th Nov	Lecture 5	Marxism

Part 3: The Linguistic Turn

26 th Nov	Lecture 6	New Criticism / Russian Formalism
3 rd Dec	Lecture 7	From Structuralism to Poststructuralism
10 th Dec	Lecture 8	Poststructuralism and Deconstruction
17 th Dec	Lecture 9	Constructive and Deconstructive Readings

Part 4: The Cultural Turn

7 th Jan	Lecture 10	Feminism and Gender Studies/Postcolonial Theory
14 th Jan	Lecture 11	New Historicism/Cultural Materialism/ Historical Discourse Analysis
21 st Jan	Lecture 12	Systems Theory and Literature/Culture
28 th Jan	Lecture 13	Cultural Studies and Media Studies
4 th Feb	Lecture 14	Theory in Perspective
[11 th Feb	Written Exam]	

Bibliography Lecture 1:

[*recommended titles]

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- Tallis, Raymond, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

Useful Handbooks/Encyclopedias:

- Grodenand, M., M. Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Habib, M.A.R., *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

- *Lentricchia, Frank, Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms in Literary Studies* [1990]. Chicago/London: U of Chicago P, 2nd ed. 1995.
- Makaryk, Irena R., ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Toronto/Buffalo/London: U of Toronto P, 1993.
- *Nünning, Ansgar, ed., *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie. Ansätze – Personen – Grundbegriffe* [1998]. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 3rd ed. 2004.
- Payne, Michael, and Jessica Rae Barbera, eds., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. 2nd ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Useful Introductions/Surveys:

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