

Literary Theory: A Survey

Part 4: The Cultural Turn

Lecture 11:

New Historicism/Cultural Materialism/ Historical Discourse Analysis

1) New Historicism (US)

2) Cultural Materialism (GB)

3) Historical Discourse Analysis (F)

1) New Historicism (US)

Background:

- attempt at counterbalancing the 'pure theory'-tendency of poststructuralism by emphasizing the historical dimension
- based on poststructuralist ideas supplemented by Foucault's brand of historical discourse analysis and Clifford Geertz' cultural anthropology ('thick description')
- central concept: textuality
 - reality as a network of texts relating to each other in cultural processes of mutual interpretation (vs. causality, transparency)
 - texts are part of social practice and symptoms of power interests; social power is determined by the forms and media of its representation
- history as a decentralized intertextual process (contingency)

What is new about the New Historicism?

- continuation and modification of ideas of German ('old') historicists such as Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm Dilthey
- rejection of the base-superstructure model of vulgar Marxism because of its economic determinism and its unilinear explanation of historical determinations, but it retains the Marxist notion that human beings and their artefacts are socially and historically constructed
- rejection of the monological and homogeneous constructions of the history-of-ideas approaches as epitomized by E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943)
 - history is not a 'picture' or 'background order' ontologically separated from literature
 - social reality cannot be conceived of as a 'collective mind' that is expressed by canonical literary works and, at the same time, transcended from a vantage point of 'universal human nature'

What New Historicists do:

- they reflect critically on the manipulatory potential of master discourses by privileging a 'microhistorical' perspective and avoiding theoretical abstraction
- they juxtapose literary and non-literary text, reading the former in the light of the latter
- they thereby 'defamiliarize' the canonical literary text, detaching it from the accumulated weight of previous literary scholarship and seeing it anew
- they focus attention (within both text and co-text) on issues of state power and how it is maintained, on patriarchal structures and their perpetuation, and on the process of colonisation, with its accompanying 'mind set'
- they make use, in doing so, of aspects of the poststructuralist outlook, especially Derrida's notion that every facet of reality is textualised, and Foucault's idea of social structures as determined by dominant 'discursive practises'

(cf. Barry 1995, 179)

Literature:

- framed by culture which is in turn partly constituted by it
- linguistically condensed staging field of political power structures
 - the literary text is removed from its aesthetic isolation and positioned in the force-field of socio-historical tensions
 - it is not the expression of an individual subject, but symptomatic of collective cultural and social 'energies'
 - contact zones between literature and other discourses are of particular interest

Stephen Greenblatt:

Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980)

Shakespearean Negotiations:

The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England (1988)

"The work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or a class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society."

- literary texts are paradigmatic stagings of historical models of practice and thought (decentering)
- literary criticism as a medium of critical self-reflection within the humanist tradition of Western culture

Problems:

- critical reflection is based on humanist values such as freedom, equality etc. which are taken to embody a timeless morality/ethics (vs. poststructuralism)
 - rejection of abstraction/theorization does not avoid implicit generalizations
 - view of literature as a privileged medium is taken over from older theories
- ▶ continuation or critique? subversion or affirmation?

2) Cultural Materialism (GB)

Background:

- sometimes subsumed under the heading 'New Historicism'
- similar basic assumptions, but more pronounced influence of Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist positions
 - more radical and more political than New Historicism in US
e.g. John Dollimore,
Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries (1984)
 - rejection of traditional Christian-humanist readings of Renaissance drama as essentialist projections which avoid an engagement with historical and social conditions
- What are the norms of understanding/critique?
 - Cultural Materialism tends opt for a neo-Marxist essentialism as an alternative to the liberal-humanist essentialism perpetuated by the New Historicists
(cf. 'Foundations': Postivism vs. Marxism)

What Cultural Materialists do:

- they read the literary text in such a way as to enable us to 'recover its histories,' that is, the context of exploitation from which it emerged.
- they foreground those elements in the work's present status which are symptomatic of the loss of those histories, e.g. the heritage industry's packaging of Shakespeare in terms of history-as-pageant, national bard, cultural icon, etc.
- they use a combination of Marxist and feminist approaches in order to fracture the dominance of conservative social, political, and religious assumptions in literary criticism
- they employ structuralist and poststructuralist techniques in order to mark a break with the inherited tradition of close textual analysis
- they work mainly within traditional notions of the canon because writing about more obscure texts hardly ever constitutes an effective political intervention in debates about the school curriculum or national identity
(cf. Barry 1995, 187)

3) Historical Discourse Analysis (F)

Background

- method for analysing historical knowledge formations and epistemological paradigms inaugurated by Michel Foucault
- rejection of hermeneutics:
discourse analysis (immanent, 'horizontal', difference)
vs.
interpretation (metaphysical, 'vertical', essence/substance/origin)

Discourse:

- the limits of certain kinds of language use
- the materiality of discourse: disciplines and institutions that sustain and distribute the effects of power
- power is both repression/domination/inhibition *and* 'a making possible'

Discursive practice:

- rules within certain formations (referentiality, repeatability)
- rules generate and determine subject positions

'Archaeology':

- the analysis of discursive formations with their respective pattern of knowledge production

'Genealogy':

- the tracing of the interplay between discursive and non-discursive forms of practice (institutions, power structures: the power of knowledge)
- 'disciplines'

Literature:

- the function of discourse is to reign in the anarchic potential of language which stems from its fundamental autoreferentiality (cf. poststructuralism, deconstruction)
- modern literature's engagement with this potential loosens the disciplinary effects of discourses
- literature is no discourse (Foucault) or a special kind of discourse (e.g. Jürgen Link: Interdiskurs)
- modern literature illustrates the bottomlessness of modern culture
- subversive of affirmative function?

Consequences in Literary Studies:

- privileging of literature as 'counter-discourse'
 - positivistic documentation of discourses in their relation to literature
 - critical engagement with the political dimension of the relationship between discourses and power
- selective and eclectic reception of discourse analysis in poststructuralist, hermeneutic (!) and empiricist contexts

Re-formulation of central terms with regard to their function in discursive practices:

author: no autonomous subject, but occupying functional position between inhibition and making possible
(Diskursverknappung vs. Diskursivitätsbegründung)

work: no transcendent unity, but historically changing nodal point in discursive practice of literature

periods: historically specific conditions regulating the actualization of author- and work-functions

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