
New Historicism & Cultural Materialism

Outline

- The Influence of Foucault 1. History; 2. Discourse
 - Other Influences
 - New Historicism examples
 - Cultural Materialism Examples (1); (2); (3)
 - Their Discontents and Your Views
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Foucault: traditional historicism vs. Archaeology

- Traditional Historicism – the ‘past’ as a unified entity, with **coherent development** and organized by fixed categories such as ‘author,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘period’ and ‘nation.’
 - History as Archive: intersections of multiple discourses, with gaps and discontinuity, like book stacks in a library. → archeology: **a painstaking rediscovery of struggles**
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Foucault: “historicize discourse”

- History—textualized; even every sentiment is in a certain discourse, and thus historically conditioned.
- effective history:
 1. knowledge as perspective, with slant and limitations; (e.g. Montrose)
 2. working ‘without constants’;
 3. “Historicity”: Working not to discover ‘ourselves,’ but to introduce **discontinuity in histories as well as in us.**

How does Foucault’s views of discourse influence literary studies?

Other Influences

- Clifford Geertz – Thick Description (e.g. cockfighting)
 - Althusser – ideology;
 - Raymond Williams
 - Derrida – Différance
 - Benjamin
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Paul Klee's
"Angelus Novus"



Klee 1928 32

Benjamin on Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus"

- An angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. **This is how one pictures the angel of history.** His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single **catastrophe** which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. . . . But a storm is blowing from Paradise; . . . irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, **This storm is what we call progress.**” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Ryan 35)
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Benjamin Historical Materialism

- “A historical materialism cannot do without the notion of a present **which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop.** For this notion defines **the present** in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the eternal image of the past; historical materialism supplies **a unique experience with the past.** . . . He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.” (Ryan 39)
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New Criticism $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ New Historicism

- New Criticism: the text and text alone.
 - **History** is brought back to **literary studies** and literature de-centered. Both are in a network of text. (Historicity of text, and textuality of history.)
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New Historicism: principles

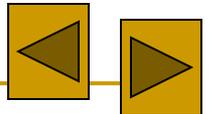
- (Veeseer xi)
 - “Every expressive act (speech or text) is embedded **in a network of material practices**” (production of texts or other types of productions);
 - **Language as context/Historicity**: “Every act of unmasking, critiquing, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes”;
 - **Literature de-centered**: “That literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably”;
 - **Truth is provisional; human nature, a myth**. “ No discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature”
 - “finally, . . . , that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.”
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New Historicism: methods

- Investigates three areas of concern:
 1. the life of the author;
 2. the social rules found within a text;
 3. a reflection of a work's historical situation in the text.
 - Avoiding sweeping generalization of a text or a historical period, a new historicist pays close attention to the conflicts and the apparently insignificant details in history as well as the text.
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New Historicism: examples

- **An anecdote** is used to interpret *Twelfth Night*.
- The **prefaces** to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as contemporary literary reviews and capitalist system, are used to explain his views on poetry.
- **Different versions** of Sonnet 29 are studied to reveal the speaker's economic concerns.



Cultural Materialism

- a literary criticism that places texts in a material, that is socio-political or historical, context in order to show that canonical texts, Shakespeare supremely, are **bound up with a repressive, dominant ideology, yet also provide scope for dissidence**.
- examines ideas and categorize them as radical or non-radical according to whether they contribute to a historical vision of **where we are and where we want to be**. (Wilson 35-36).



Example (1): Paul Brown's reading of *The Tempest*

- Instead of aesthetic harmony, truth and coherence, he sees the text as
 - riven with contradictions which bear the traces of social conflicts.
 - an intervention in contemporary colonialist practices
 - Foregrounds what it seeks to cover (conflicts in colonialist ideologies).
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An example: Paul Brown's reading of *The Tempest* (2)

Kermode – Prospero a disciplined artist

Césaire – Caliban is the productive natural man, the slave that creates history.

Brown: does not do a humanist reading of the characters. Instead, he

-- sets *The Tempest* in the context of contemporary colonial discourses of sexuality, masterlessness and savagism.

-- Caliban unifies the heterogeneous discourses of masterlessness, savagism and sexuality.

Example (2) Barker, et al.

- To de-mystify contemporary Shakespeare --as shown in
 - midsummer tourism at Stratford-upon-Avon → construction of an English past which is picturesque, familiar and untroubled.
 - Arden series of Shakespeare (eternal values of the texts vs. their historical backgrounds)
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Example (2) Barker, et al. (2)

- ♦ through examining his intertextuality or thru' contextualization.
- 1. the inter-textual relations between Prospero's versions of history with that of Ariel's, Miranda's and Caliban's
- 2. The moment of disturbance – when Prospero calls a sudden halt to the celebratory mask. → the real dramatic moment because Prospero is anxious to keep the sub-plot of his play in its place.



Contemporary Shakespearean Discourses in UK – as a ground for discrimination

- GCE (General Certificate Exam) – “A” level at least one Shakespeare play
 - Those on GCE “O” level and CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education) should be steered away from Shakespeare (Sinfield 138) –
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Contemporary Shakespearean Discourses in UK – exam questions

- Assumptions of unchanging or eternal values.
- “At the center of *King Lear* lies the question, “What is a man?” Discuss.”
- “The Winter’s Tale is much more concerned with the qualities of womanhood, its virtue, its insight, and its endurance”. Discuss.”
- “Compare Shakespeare’s treatment of the problem of evil in any *two* plays” (Sinfield 138-39).



Their Discontents and Your Views

- Greenblatt –1) ideology as strategies of containment—no way out.
 - 2) sloganistic: "I do not want history to enable me to escape the effect of the literary but to deepen it by making it touch the effect of the real, a touch that would reciprocally deepen and complicate history" (Learning 6). → n sacrifice the structural investments of marxist thought. (**James J. Paxson**)
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If the motivation for studying history is “passionate curiosity and poignancy” or a cheerfully tolerant “theoretical curiosity,” it can come as no surprise that the result is a rhetoric that moves toward a political argument but never quite gets there. For some readers this kind of poetic history has its special attractions. But while it may show a wide range of sympathy, it fails just where it claims to be strongest—in the implications of rhetoric for politics.

References

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