Literary Theory: A Survey

Part 4: The Cultural Turn

Lecture 14: Theory in Perspective

1) Looking Back

2) Looking Forward

3) Where Are We Now?

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1) Looking Back

[liberal humanism ↘]

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\begin{array}{l}
\textbf{P} \rightarrow \textbf{NC} \searrow \rightarrow \quad \textbf{PS/D} \quad \rightarrow \quad \textbf{NH/ST} \downarrow \\
\textbf{H} \blacktriangleleft \quad \textbf{RF} \rightarrow \textbf{S} \nearrow \quad \searrow \quad \nearrow \swarrow \quad \updownarrow \quad \updownarrow \quad \textbf{CS/MS} \\
\textbf{M} ----\nearrow\swarrow-----\nearrow\swarrow--\blacktriangleright \textbf{F/GS/PC} \quad \textbf{CM/DA} \uparrow
\end{array}
$$

[↘ critical theory]

Foundations   The Linguistic Turn   The Cultural Turn   Conclusion

2) Looking Forward

Overall development (cf. Iser 2006, 163):

ontological definitions of art/literature
⬇
theoretical definitions of art/literature

theoretical definitions = functional definitions

'Formalism into Functionalism'/ 'Towards a New Eclecticism'
<div align="right">(Pope 2002, 73-166)</div>

What Does the Multiplicity of Theories Tell Us?

Art, so it seems, does not carry its own determination within itself. Yet it provokes determinations of the kind outlined by the theories presented. At the same time, it appears to make allowances for different conceptualizations, all of which – insofar as they are theories – require closure, thus making the work of art seem open-ended, because the theory is unable to encompass it in its entirety. However, our experiences suggest that the work of art is not open-ended but only gives this impression when theories try to capture it. […]
[T]heory confronts us with the paradoxical urge to capture in cognitive terms something which by nature eludes cognition.
<div align="right">(Iser 2006, 170f.)</div>

Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own.
<div align="right">(Eagleton 1983, viii)</div>

It seems to have become the received opinion in literary studies that no reading of a text and therefore no criticism – and, for that matter, no teaching of literature either – can ever be untheoretical [However,] [o]ne cannot help feeling that theory has won in theory only, that the received opinion is far from being a genuinely appropriated one, and that what is common knowledge is by no means common practice as well.
<div align="right">(Bode 1996, 87/88)</div>

'untheoretical readings':   self-affirmative and self-confirmatory poverty
     vs.
'theoretical readings':   "the awareness of these limitations"
        "the self-reflexive assessment of the performance of my approach"
        "*the awareness of the contingency of your own practice*"
        [opposite the text and opposite other possible approaches]
<div align="right">(cf. Bode 1996, 91/92)</div>

▼

Paradoxical Situation:
the evolution of modern culture of modern culture provides a cultural opening for this kind of self-consciousness, for better or worse, while at the same time one of the few ideas generally accepted these days is the conviction that a consciousness cannot see through the historical conditions that have formed it

3) Where Are We Now?

So after all theory is indeed neither a fixed body of work and achievement nor a pluralistic conglomerate of schools and approaches. It is, instead, a complex cultural practice which is first and foremost predicated on questioning, while the *provisional* answers provided within or by a particular theoretical approach should perhaps be considered as side-effects, and, for that matter, as side effects which can, to stick to the medical metaphor, cancel or at least diminish the positive effect of the therapy. This, of course, is bound to happen once theories become canonized and potentially as self-confirmatory as any 'untheoretical' reading. There is a fine balance here which will have to be negotiated carefully. But as we cannot do without theories, we do not have much of a choice.

(Reinfandt 2005, 407)
(cf. Iser 2006, 12 on
'theory' vs. 'discourse')

From the Introduction to Martin Middeke & Christoph Reinfandt, eds.,
      Theory Matters: The Place of Theory in Literary and Cultural Studies
      Today. **Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2016:**

Taking stock of the 'history and current condition of theory' for teaching purposes in 2011, Richard Bradford diagnosed 'the ongoing, curious – though apparently not atrophied – condition of After Theory' for the disciplines of literary and cultural studies (Bradford 2011, 1-2). While there is certainly a lot of theoretical thinking being done, there seems to be no unifying paradigm which could serve as a platform for dialogue between the various theoretical interests that can be identified, such as, for example,
  • the renewed interest in the phenomenological side of reading processes that figures the (reading of a) text as an event,
  • the increased acknowledgement of the foundational importance of media history for all cultural (and that includes: theoretical) practices and formations,
  • the impact of cognitive approaches on a variety of fields in the humanities,
  • the turn towards notions of a cultural ecology in the larger context of complexity thinking (chaos theory, systems theory, self-organisation, posthumanism), or
  • the longing for 'new sociologies of literature'.
[…]

"Doing theory" in its most inclusive sense seems to involve four basic orientations, which can be heuristically mapped onto the vertical axis of abstraction/applicability and the horizontal axis of culture/cognition in the following chart:

metatheory
cultural theory – critical theory
textual theory
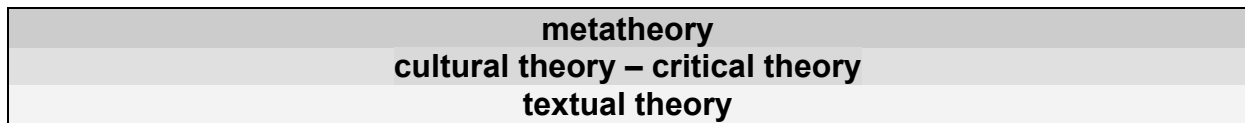
In its most abstract dimension, the condition of After Theory has induced a strong tendency towards **metatheory**, i.e. a theory that reflects upon theory and its most foundational concerns and dimensions such as ontology, epistemology and truth, the roles of representation and mediation, the emergence of constructivism and its relation to fictionality, and finally modern culture's increasing reliance on and acknowledgement of reflexivity. […] Symptomatic in this respect would be recent book titles like *Theory after Theory* (Birns), *Theory after 'Theory'* (Elliot and Attridge), or, in yet another turn of the screw in typically German fashion, *Theorytheory* (Grizelj and Jahraus, our trans.).

The middle layer, where most theoretical activity takes place, ranges from **cultural theory**, which 'opens out from the object(s) under consideration in the effort to provide a broad social and historical context for understanding' to **critical theory**, which 'turns inward to enable us to assess the adequacy of our ways of seeing and thinking.' (Payne and Barbera 2010, xiii) While the "outward" dimension of culture has been customarily addressed in terms of social structure with its concomitant power relations in terms of gender, race, and class by politically oriented approaches, aspects of representation (in both the political and the epistemological sense of the word) and mediation and their influence on the formation of historical semantics have become prominent foci of interest in recent years. It is in this dimension that concepts like ideology or habitus have tried to come to terms with the interface between "outward" culture and the "inward" processes of making sense which have been addressed in more broadly experiential as well as more specialized phenomenological and, more recently, cognitive terms. […]

And finally, on the ground, as it were, there has been a renewed interest in **textual theory.** For a long time this interest has gone hand in hand with a spirit of rehabilitating the virtues of philology with its regard for the material text and the material conditions of its cultural production vis-à-vis the 'specifically literary interpretation of culture' fostered by the modernist turn to language and hermeneutics (or, later, by the post-modernist emergence of 'meta-interpretive interests that played themselves out, in diverse ways, under the banner of theory'; McGann 2009, 13). More recently, textual theory has been reformulated in a spirit of acknowledging that, 'in literary scholarship, the Age of Theory has yielded to the age of the material text and its fortunes.' (Chaudhuri 2010, 2) And yet, the problem of interpretation has not been overcome […]

It is our contention that the borderlines of the dimensions of a theoretical preoccupation with culture and literary texts are not mutually exclusive but permeable. In fact, the reading co-ordinates emerging from any theoretical endeavour would have to bring down the insights of metatheory, cultural theory and critical theory to the level of practice, application, and method, in short: to the level of encounters between readers and texts of all kinds that characterize both contemporary culture at large and the typical teaching situation of the discipline of

literary and cultural studies. Such reading co-ordinates would have to address the relationship between normative and reflexive reading practices with their various individual and institutional contexts as well as the relationship between the long-standing and still valid paradigm of mimesis of reality and the emerging paradigm of mimesis of process.

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Why Is Theory Necessary?

[W]hen you take an evolutionary view of Earth, an astonishing reversal takes place: Suddenly, the things that you think of as real – this cat over here, my cat, whose fur I can stroke – becomes the abstraction, an approximation of flowing, metamorphic processes, processes that are in some sense far more real than the entity I am stroking. The fact that we at present call this flow a cat is a mere matter of convenience. This is not simply about nominalism – a cat by any other name would meow as prettily. The cat as such, no matter what we call it, is not really a cat. The real thing is the evolutionary process – the cat is just an abstraction! The discovery of evolution is nothing less than a Copernican revolution, in which what we take to be immediate and real turns out to be an abstraction of a deeper reality.

(Morton 2011, 19-20)

[Die] Medienrevolution des Computers und damit [die] Rekombinationsmöglichkeit von Daten [bilden] eine strukturelle Parallele zu einer Gesellschaft [...], in der sich Kausalitäten und Zurechnungsmöglichkeiten nicht mehr mit den traditionellen analogen Formen bewerkstelligen lassen. Die Digitaltechnik lässt also hinter der sichtbaren Realität einen Fundus an Zusammenhängen vermuten, der durch analoge Formen der Beobachtung nicht mehr einzuholen ist.

(Nassehi 2015, 200)

Application/Relevance?

Armin Nassehi. "Fatale Blicke." *DIE ZEIT* (14.1.2016), S. 39.

Das Perfide am Generalverdacht gegen eine 'Kultur' besteht darin, dass er einen genauen empirischen Blick behindert. Das hat mit dem zu tun, was ich 'Paradoxie der Sichtbarkeit' nenne. Sie besteht darin, dass Einwanderer, Fremde, Dunkelhäutige angeblich sichtbare Merkmale suggerieren, als handele es sich um homogene Gruppen. Tatsächlich aber ist das Entscheidende in modernen, komplexen Gesellschaften unsichtbar und nur mit statistischen Mitteln darstellbar: dass wir Konkurrenten um Arbeitsplätze sind, um Lebenschancen, um Definitionsmacht, um Aufmerksamkeit um Beschreibbarkeit, um letztlich alles, was ungleich verteilt werden kann. Es ist nicht als homogene soziale Gruppe, sondern nur als statistische, also fast unsichtbare Gruppe darstellbar.

Paradoxie der Sichtbarkeit heißt also: Wenn man genau hinschaut, bleibt nur Unsichtbares, bleiben Verunsicherung, Unübersichtlichkeit. Wenn man aber nicht so genau hinschaut, dann sieht man die 'Anderen' als eine angeblich homogene Gruppe, die man entweder kulturell befreien und integrieren oder aber ablehnen muss. […]

Daraus folgt, dass wir gegen das Beobachtungsschema 'Kultur' aufbegehren müssen, gegen ein Schema, das so tut, als komme der Andere nur in homogenen Großgruppen vor. Wenn wir uns von diesem Blick befreien, wird man sehen, wie heterogen die 'Anderen' sind – und wie heterogen 'wir'. Man wird auch sehen, dass manche Probleme eher struktureller Natur sind als kultureller – zum Beispiel die Gruppendynamik in männlichen Netzwerken. Man wird auch sehen, dass die Integration in eine Gesellschaft viel weniger mit kulturellen Bekenntnissen als mit eingespielten Routinen und möglichen Lebenschancen zu tun hat.

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