

FILM ANALYSIS

VII: THEORY

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Theory

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1. What is Literature?
2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis
3. Literary and Cultural Theory
4. Film and Theory

1. What is Literature?

What distinguishes literature from other texts?

1. What is Literature?

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Texts can be

- fiction
- non-fiction

- poetry
- prose
- drama

- „merely“ text
- audio-visual

1. What is Literature?

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Texts can be

- of „high quality“
- of „low quality“

- assigned to specific ethnic, social, gender, age groups

- canonized (belonging to an elite body of work)
- outside the canon

1. What is Literature?

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- ❑ literature is communication
- ❑ literature is storytelling (in a general sense)
- ❑ stories are a basic part of the human condition and reflect upon that
- ❑ stories are told by someone, and/or written down by someone
- ❑ the teller / author / writer of the story is influenced by several factors (cultural background, social circumstances, psychology, history, other texts)
- ❑ it is usually possible to discern literature from other texts
- ❑ there must be some things that differentiate literature from other forms of human communication

1. What is Literature?

Working Definition:

- literature is a form of communication that differs from “everyday” usage of language and communication – this is contingent upon local, temporal, social contexts
- certain markers and conventions designate a text as literature, and as belonging to a specific literary genre

this can be achieved by:

- a more or less slightly different way of speaking (use of metaphors, symbols, etc.)
- structural conventions of narration
- setting the story in surroundings not coinciding with those of the speaker

2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis

Genre and Narration

2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis

Genre can designate:

- classical formal categories (poetry, prose, drama)
- text types (poem, novel, diary, autobiography, essay, scholarly article, newspaper article, song, ...)
- topical categories (comedy, tragedy; science fiction, horror, romance, Western, ...)

Genre is

- classification of existing texts
- guiding production of texts
- guiding / arising from user expectation

2. Some Basics for Literary Analysis

Narration

- is a function of the text

the narrator

- is NEVER the author
- the narrator is the instance in the text from whose perspective the text is told
- can be omniscient or not, first-person, third-person

3. Literary & Cultural Theory

An overview of schools and approaches

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (1)

- What are facts?
- What is history?
- How do we know what we know?
- What is objective – and what subjective?

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (2)

- Epistemology (επιστήμη =knowledge):
the science of knowledge

- knowledge can be
 - gained
 - transmitted

- knowledge is dependent on what you have learnt before – and the context you are in

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (3)

- determinism: how free are we in a certain choice
- discourse (lat. *discurrere*: to run around):
the general discussion on a certain theme
in a specific society
- presentism: the assumption that things in the past can be
directly compared to things now
- “THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY;
THEY DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY THERE.”
(Leslie Poles Hartley, *The Go-Between*)

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (4)

- who speaks – for whom?
- who can represent themselves – who is represented?
- e.g. history – herstory
- whose perspective has shaped the text?

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (5)

- knowledge is mostly communicated through texts
- texts have a writer, and a writer lives in a specific context
- texts need to be interpreted in order to understand them, they need to be questioned
- who wrote the text – why – how
- limitations may be conscious or unconscious

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (6)

- knowledge consists of
 - **facts** (what happened, how are things like)
 - **theory** (why did x happen, why is x like this)
- theory (θεωρεῖν: to see) always influences facts:
it is difficult (but not impossible) to find something you are not looking for
- Plato: οἶδα οὐδὲν εἰδώς: „I know as one who doesn't know“
- new theories eventually arise when old theories cannot be brought together with facts

3. Theory: Epistemological Prelude (7)

- all knowledge is tentative
- new information can always change the way the world is seen
- there exist different **readings** of history
- objectivity is difficult – but it may be reached by
 - trying to incorporate diverse perspectives
 - by staying open to new information
 - by being aware of one's subjective perspective

3. Theory

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Theory is

- a way of seeing
- a model of understanding

- never exclusive (although it is often claimed to be)
- always evolving

- several approaches can be applied to the same text
- the richness of theoretical approaches is what makes literary analysis “fun”

3. Theory

There exists a “classical” or “aesthetic” approach to literature which is often taught in schools or poetry seminars.

It is often not called “theory,” but that does not mean that there is no theory behind it – only that the theory is hidden, or unspecified.

3. Theory: Aesthetic Approach

- a text is analyzed for what makes it special or “good” and to explain how an aesthetic effect is achieved
- this may also expose “hidden” meanings and connections

- several formal criteria are looked for in the text and used towards “interpretation” or analysis, such as
 - finding figures of speech, rhetorical or figurative devices (alliteration, rhyme, irony, metaphor, symbol, etc. etc. etc.),
 - analyzing meter in poetry and
 - analyzing structuring of partial or entire texts

- frequent key question: “what did the author mean to tell us”?
- this is an outdated and oftentimes fallacious approach

3. Theory: Schools

Various other ways of approaching literature have been developed in the past.

Mostly, these theories originate from other fields (like philosophy) and may be applied to literature.

Some of these will now be introduced very briefly.

3. Theory: Various Schools (1)

Various ways of approaching literature have been developed in the past, such as:

- **Hermeneutics** (Heidegger, Husserl, Gadamer; gk. *heurisko*: to find)
19th century : trying to find the original intention of the author,
20th century: focus on understanding, knowledge dependent on interpretation
- **Semiotics** (Saussure, Peirce, Eco; gk. *sêmeion*: sign):
investigating structures and occurrences of processes of signification and understanding, focus on signs and symbols and extra-language communication
- **Structuralism** (Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Chomsky, Jakobson):
strong linguistic focus, texts consist of signs, signs are arbitrary (no relation between the form and the sign necessary), analysis of how signs are used in the text

3. Theory: Various Schools (2)

- **New Criticism** (Brooks, Blackmur, Tate, Wimsatt, Warren): close reading, less focus on extra-textual elements
- **New Historicism** (Greenblatt): investigating historical and cultural contexts of texts
- **Reader-Response Criticism** (Holland, Stanley, Fish, Iser): focusing on how the text is taken up by the reader
- **Post-Structuralism & Deconstruction** (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Jameson, Culler): increasing the focus on language and interconnectivity of texts (**discourse**), breaking barriers between genres and media, stressing arbitrariness and richness of possible explanations, “death” of the author (more later on that subject)

3. Theory

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Some bodies and elements of theory will now be discussed in greater detail.

3. Theory: Death of the Author

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intentional fallacy: Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954

“[T]he design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”

death of the author: Barthes, 1968

- text creation is more complex than the mere writing down of words by a romantic creator-genius
- texts may get a different meaning independent from the writer's intention
- the “author” is not the best authority on the text

3. Theory: Psychoanalysis

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- ❑ are human beings the masters of their soul (psychê)?
- ❑ how are humans subjected to inner drives and motivations?

- ❑ ancient stories carry information about human psychology (Oedipus, Elektra, Narcissus)
- ❑ dreams have psychological meaning
- ❑ sexuality plays a major part in psychology
- ❑ childhood experiences are formative; violence and abuse are not forgotten

- ❑ Jung: archetypes can be found in stories that may contain very old images within a cultural imaginary (e.g. serpents, night, heights...)

3. Theory: The Canon Debate

- oftentimes, “literature” means “great literature”
- this refers to a body of works considered cornerstones of culture (called canon)
- such a body of work always reflects attitudes and power structures

- this canon is questioned by three overall trends:
 - the rise of democracy (**class**)
 - female and gay/lesbian emancipation (**gender**)
 - the end of slavery, the quest for civil rights for minorities, as well as decolonization; and critique of racism (**race**)

- this generally means that the canon is being enlarged by new titles, and that some older titles may no longer be considered “canonical”
- this also, however, may question the very reliance upon a canon as such!

3. Theory: Marxist Criticism

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- ❑ based on a materialist critique of society and culture: analyzing constraints and (hidden or overt) power structures
- ❑ dialectics: thesis + antithesis = synthesis
- ❑ “being determines consciousness”: a person’s state of mind is determined by their material living conditions and their place in society (CAUTION: determinism may be too mono-causal)
- ❑ how are lower and middle classes presented? / quest for realism
- ❑ battling the myth of a classless or a middle class society

- ❑ how does society function? (=is / descriptive/a question of truth value)
- ❑ is this the way society should function? (=ought / normative/evaluative/prescriptive)
- ❑ how are these political levels represented in the text?

- ❑ are people represented as people, or according to stereotypes? (focus on depictions of race, class, and gender)

3. Theory: Gender Studies

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- ❑ gender studies has its origin in women's studies
- ❑ focus on depictions of gender:
especially stereotypes of both men and women (and others)
- ❑ sex: biological attributes
- ❑ gender: cultural roles (may coincide with biology or not)
- ❑ leads to: discussions on prevalence of **nature** or **culture** (or both)
- ❑ presentations of gender / stereotyping of human beings by sex and/or gender **roles**: is the individual shown, or a caricature?
- ❑ heterosexuality – homosexuality – trans-gender discussions
- ❑ family roles: private sphere (female?) vs. public sphere (male?)

3. Theory: Postcolonialism

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- inclusion of other voices into the canon which do not generally belong to the privileged classes
- “subalternity”: a position of being disadvantaged/colonized opposite a “hegemonic”/colonizing structure
- is the subaltern subject allowed to speak for themselves?
- who owns the representation of others?
- is an “other” needed to depict one’s own culture? do alien cultures appear different and less human through a process of “othering”?
- inclusion of others means to question one’s own self
- but: critique of nationalism oftentimes creates new nationalisms

3. Theory: Preliminary Summary

Literature is

- a constantly evolving body of works of not merely descriptive, documentary, or everyday nature (depending on context)
- derived from the entirety of the cultural discourse
- written (or filmed, photographed, ...) by one or more persons
- who are only one authority amongst many on the respective text

- Literature can be approached in many ways.
- none of these ways need to be “better” than others
- which theoretical approach is used depends on the text, and the main questions asked by the respective scholar

4. Film and Theory

What do we do with literary theory now in film?

4. Film and Theory

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- Film, like literature, is a complex medium
- it may be easier to define what a film is, however:
 - there are other audiovisual media (news, home movies, etc.)
 - ways to distinguish “literature” from simply “writing” may be also used to distinguish “film” from “something caught on tape”

4. Film and Theory

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- some specific technical levels of analysis are different with film
- some, however, are the same or very similar
- literary categories of analysis (metaphor, symbol, etc.) are a sub-set of text analysis and will apply to film scripts just as to drama

4. Film and Theory

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- the body of literary and cultural theory can be applied as well
 - with additions/modifications relating to audio-visual aspects

- this concerns aspects we have already talked about previously
 - and others

- in order to analyze and describe film
 - be as precise as you would be when dealing with literature
 - quote precisely (timecode)
 - shot breakdowns (Sequenzanalyse/Szenenprotokoll)
 - adapt your methodology to your research question!

References

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- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 21996.
- Wimsatt, William Kurtz Jr., Monroe C. Beardsley. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954.

recommended:

- **Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997/2000.**
- **Yale Film Analysis Web Site, <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>**