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## ENCODING REALITY INTO FICTION/ DECODING FICTION AS REALITY: POSTMODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY AS CRITICAL THEORY

Oana Celia Gheorghiu (a)

"Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania, [oana.gheorghiu@ugal.ro](mailto:oana.gheorghiu@ugal.ro)

### *Abstract*

This paper is intended as a brief critical review of three interrelated, fairly similar critical theories, born out the necessity of looking into cultural forms and products with a view to finding the politics at work therein. While American New Historicism is more historically oriented, British Cultural Materialism, with its more obvious influence from Marxism, Postcolonialism and other theories which place the margin at their centre, seems to be more in tune with contemporaneity, and so is the area of Cultural Studies, with its emphasis on cultural representations. It is advocated here that contemporary fiction cannot be fully separated from other textual forms, which are considered here historiographic (not historical) because of their nature of texts produced subjectively, within a certain political, social and cultural context, irrespective of their assumed scientific objectivity. Literature, it is further argued, has become a discourse-oriented endeavour with an active participation, an idea supported in the present study by making reference to several critical and polemic writings by Salman Rushdie, which, in a topsy-turvy, postmodernist manner, are foregrounded before, and not after the literature review proper.

**Keywords:** Cultural Theory; New Historicism; Cultural Materialism; Cultural Studies; contemporary fiction; politics;

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally regarded as a playground where 'the limits of interpretation' (Eco, 1991) are pushed to the boundaries of psychoanalysis, to an almost grammatical parsing of the narrative structure, to deconstructing the binarism, opposition and hierarchies of form and meaning, to symbolically 'killing the author' with a view to granting all the power to the reader, or to embracing militant causes in the fashion of the age, the area of literary theory and criticism has become, since the twentieth century, a discourse-oriented endeavour. Resting on the binary categories of truth and reality, postmodernism questions both their very *truth* and *reality* at the level of fiction, and not only. It is this "not only" what brings in New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies, all, critical theories which deal,



aside from literature, with fictionalisation through discursive practices in texts that are customarily perceived as pertaining to the domain of reality, such as history books, political speeches and, above all, the media. Twenty-first century political fiction, for instance, seems realistic at first sight; however, due to this influence, as well as to the ideological and contextual constraints added to its essence as representation, it employs layers of fictionalisation: created worlds that describe other created worlds which are marketed as reality to their audience, and which contribute to creating and imparting knowledge.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Literature has become, since the end of the twentieth century, a discourse-oriented endeavour with an active participation. Writers should “rebuild their readers’ belief in argument from factual evidence and do what fiction has always been good at doing—to construct, between the writer and the reader, an understanding about what is real” (Rushdie 2018). A good example is Salman Rushdie’s treatment of his most famous novel, *Midnight’s Children*, exposed in “‘Errata’: or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children*” (1983). He observes that history is always ambiguous, and that literature is not history, but plays with history forms. Analysing his goals pursued in writing this novel, Rushdie asserts that he was, at first, in a Proustian *search for lost time*. In time, however, he realised that he was searching for a way *to reconstruct the past so as to suit his own ends*, using memory as a tool. Saleem Sinai (the central character and narrator), far from being an objective historian, attempts to “cut up history to suit himself, just as he did when he cut up newspapers to compose his earlier text” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 24). It is thus obvious that the author’s motivation is to endow his narrator with a cultural materialist-type of reasoning. In admitting the unreliability of his narrator, Rushdie lays emphasis on the fact that *Midnight’s Children* is a novel, and not “some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopaedia” (1991, p. 25), however, as he stresses in another article (‘Outside the Whale’, 1984) in which he polemicizes with Orwell’s ‘Inside the Whale’ (1940) and ‘Politics of the English Language’ (1946), the need of politics in literature is very actual: “it becomes necessary, and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material, because politics is, by turns, farce and tragedy” (1991, p. 100).

Yet another one of Rushdie’s observations, namely that the writer “need not always be the servant of some beetle-browed ideology” and that “he can also be its critic, his antagonist, its scourge” (1991, p. 98) is also close to the cultural materialist discussion of literature in terms of compliance versus resistance to ideology and superstructures. In *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-war Britain*, Alan Sinfield enlarges upon society being forced “to reproduce itself both culturally and materially by putting in circulation stories of how the world goes” (1989: 2). Various institutions considered *dominant structures* are responsible with this (the media, religion, education, the political parties), and so is literature, which may either reinforce or contest the narratives of these structures. This contestation occurs when literature resists the ideology imposed by the State apparatus and focuses on “dissident politics of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation” (Sinfield, 1992, p. 10).

As a parenthesis, the word *dissident* (a term often used in political discourse to denote a person who dissents from an established policy) comes to underline the Foucauldian concept of subversion constructed within the discourse of power. Sinfield notes in *Faultlines – Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (1992) that “dissidence operates necessarily in reference to dominant structures; it has to invoke those structures to oppose them and therefore can always, *ipso facto*, be discovered re-inscribing that which it proposes to critique” (1992, p. 47). At the same time, dissidence represents a statement of intent made by the cultural materialist critics. It challenges the idealist view of literature as being somehow placed above the material conditions of production and reception, society and politics. This is because such an “honourable placement” would confine literature to an area of “limited influence, marginality, even irrelevance” (Sinfield 1989, p. 28), denying its status as an actual institution, a significant “cultural apparatus” or a source of knowledge.

More recently, in the article entitled “Truths, Lies and Literature”, Salman Rushdie refines the ideas he has been advocated since the 1980s, maintaining that “the world can perhaps best be explained in terms of conflicting and often incompatible narratives. In Kashmir and in the Middle East, and in the

battle between progressive America and Trumpistan, we see examples of such incompatibilities. The consequences of this new, argumentative, even polemical attitude to the real has profound implications for literature—that we can't, or ought not to, pretend it isn't there. I believe that the influence on public discourse of more varied voices has been a good thing, enriching our literatures and making more complex our understanding of the world" (2018). It is, then, a reiteration of the idea that literature should, now more than ever, have "overt political ends in the contemporary world" (Brannigan, 1998, p. 98)

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Before embarking on a review of critical modes, it seems appropriate to justify the choice. Why New Historicism and/or Cultural Materialism/ Cultural Studies? As Jonathan Culler, Structuralist critic, observes, critical theory is "inescapably interdisciplinary" (1997, p. 4), relying on philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, political or social theory, history, psychoanalysis, gender studies, etc. It follows that approaches like New Historicism, Cultural Materialism or Cultural Studies, which bring all these together, are the least likely to let various aspects related to text and to its textuality escape. Though it has been suggested that any grid of interpretation may be applied with reasonable results to any text – since one may grasp whatever one regards as relevant in that text and subsequently ground his/her line of argumentation in the theory which seems the most appropriate to make a point in that respect –, one cannot discuss contemporary fiction along lines which are not tangent with culture and politics. As such, the statement "literary criticism is the application of critical theory to a literary text, whether or not a given critic is aware of the theoretical assumptions informing her or his interpretation" (Tyson, 1999, p. 7) is contradicted, the views adopted being firstly that a critic should be at least familiarised with critical theory in general before opting for one analytical grid or another, and, secondly, that literary texts have a way of 'suggesting' the path that should be best followed in their deciphering, no matter how neutral the inquiring eye might imagine itself to be.

### 4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY/ RESEARCH METHODS

In contemporary fiction, the literary texts foreground, more often than not, a tight relation to non-literary contemporary events which constitute topics of discussion for political and journalistic texts. Therefore, the choice for a critical theory informed by the necessity to regard literature in a wider context comes naturally. Focus could not be laid on either author or text; neither could marginal and marginalising issues be underlined, as that would render the analysis incomplete. Which is not to say that issues informed by principles of exclusion and differentiation should be disregarded, but rather that they are inscribed within a wider frame of cultural dynamics, and that laying emphasis exclusively on particular aspects (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) might hinder access to the bigger picture. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to advocate for the necessity of a critical theory informed by its relation to reality and politics, while the method employed is, for the most part, that of forwarding a critical review of the fundamental tenets of New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies.

### 5. FINDINGS

#### 5.1. New Historicism

Starting from Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, according to which "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (1973, p. 11), where culture is regarded as "a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions" and less as a "complex of concrete behaviour patterns – customs, usages, tradition, habit clusters" (1973, p. 8), Stephen Greenblatt advocates for New Historicism in the introduction to his most influential *Renaissance Self-Fashioning – From More to Shakespeare* (1980, 2005). Thus, he redefines Geertz's 'control mechanisms' as a cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals. Literature, appertaining both to the wider cultural system and to the individuals that create it, functions, in Greenblatt's view, in three ways: "as a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of its particular author, as itself expression of the codes by which this behaviour is shaped, and as a reflection upon these codes" (2005, p. 4). Failure to concern with these interrelated aspects in a critical essay may result either in biographical or psychoanalytical criticism or, if the literary work is regarded "exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions", in a piece of Marxist representation of ideological superstructures. By contrast, if the three aspects are grasped in the analysis by using cultural and anthropological criticism, literature becomes "part of the system of signs that

constitutes a given culture” (2005, p. 6). The goal of this method, which Greenblatt names, at this point, cultural poetics, is “to investigate both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (2005, p. 6).

Greenblatt acknowledges his influences coming from both Marxism and Poststructuralism, although neither of them satisfactorily explains, in his view, the relation between art and society. He stresses that this relation should not be regarded as a transfer, as an appropriation from social and political discursive practices to the artistic ones, but sooner as an exchange:

We need to develop terms to describe the ways in which material – here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth – is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property. It would, I think, be a mistake to regard this process as unidirectional – from social discourse to aesthetic discourse – not only because the aesthetic discourse in this case is so entirely bound up with capitalist venture but because the social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies (2005, p. 27).

The first to actually create a methodological framework for New Historicism is Harold Aram Veesper, editor of the volume *The New Historicism* (1989), who identifies five major assumptions that inform the new historicist thinking:

1. That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. That every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. That literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably;
4. That no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. Finally [...], that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (Veesper, 1989, p. xi).

## 5.2. Cultural Materialism

Fairly similar to New Historicism in views and approach, but much more politicised, Cultural Materialism (term coined by Raymond Williams in 1980) designates that analysis which examines culture “less as a set of isolated artistic monuments” and more “as a material formation, complete with its own modes of production, power-effects, social relation, identifiable audience and historically conditioned thought forms” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 198). Cultural Materialism as literary theory is even farther from any orientation towards new critical aestheticism or structuralist linguistics than New Historicism. Instead, the connection to Marxist criticism becomes more sensible. It is the critical mode that brings literature closer to sociology than it has ever been, considering the former “a practice in the society [...] which is no fully available for analysis until each of its practices is included” (Williams, 2005, p. 44). The relation between art and society is discussed in terms similar to those proposed by New Historicism, regarding writing as a form of contribution to the dominant culture. To Williams, literature, the visual arts, music and “the powerful arts of film and broadcasting” possess the “capacity to embody and enact and perform meanings and values” and cannot be given “a uniform, static and ahistorical relation to some abstract social formation” (2005, p. 45). As part of the cultural process, these ‘practices’ contribute to the dominant culture and transform it (2005, p. 45).

The politics of race, class, gender and sexual orientation are overtly indicated as focal points in cultural materialist readings, and one cannot but acknowledge that Marxist, feminist and postcolonialist issues have been present on the cultural materialist agenda starting with the early writings in the field. This was, in the 1980s, the most significant difference between New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics, but the former were to tackle these issues in the following decades. Forty years later, this difference can only be traced when attempting a diachronic survey of the cultural theories towards the end of the twentieth century, so it would not be inappropriate to discuss the connexion with the aforesaid theories and politics as a specific trait of Cultural Materialism. It might be worth mentioning here Brannigan’s comparative analysis (1998, pp. 119-120), which posits that, in approaching the text from these perspectives, cultural materialist critics identify two major dichotomies: a diachronic one, in which

they analyse the differences between then and now, that is to say, the extent to which the past is constructed as otherness from the contemporary point of view; and a synchronic one, in which they examine alterity in its occurrence within the past culture.

One may argue that, despite the critique addressed for its disfavoured of the close analysis of the literary text and its prevalent obsession with social and political context that shape the individuals (both the representing and the represented ones), Cultural Materialism has its merits in gearing literary criticism towards the study of historical context and the understanding of cultural and social differences. Today, Cultural Materialism broadened its scope to address the question of (marginalised) identity more and more thoroughly. As “the disciplinary societies” (Foucault, 1975)/ “the societies of control” (Deleuze, 1992)/ “the ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser, 1970) have gone global, it is only natural that the literary theories which examine their effects at the level of material practices represented in literature should also have been affected by globalization. What is more, in an electronic age, the cornucopia of information outside the literary text determines the critic to expand his/ her contextual analysis even further than in the case of the texts belonging to the historical past. Ultimately, it is still about **historical context + theoretical method + political commitment + textual analysis**, as the proponents of the theory in focus argued in the 1980s, and which this study attempts to reinforce.

### 5.3. Cultural Studies

However, as the sense of ‘historicity’ is altered due to its temporal vicinity with its witnesses and to a certain form of misapprehension which compulsorily places it in a more or less distant past, the analysis of its occurrence in and around discourses of the present may find a more suitable umbrella in *Cultural Studies*. The *historical*, the *material* and the *political* blended in the ‘composition’ of the two theories may be complemented with cultural studies operational concepts, such as *hegemony*, *agency*, *globalization*, *mass-culture*, *subculture*, and the overarching *discourse* and *representation*, as they seem adequate in the analysis of contemporary *texts* – in the broader sense of this term, which goes beyond language, covering all the conveyors of meaning. At this point, it seems necessary to state that Cultural Studies has been regarded, over the years, either as a different approach, divergent from Cultural Materialism, with a parallel development in the British academia in the 1970s-1980s, or as an extension of it, intended to put to good use the democratisation of culture advocated by Raymond Williams, and also to “tactfully remove the suggestion of Marxism” (Young 2004, p. 126). This latter understanding has been advanced by the postcolonial theorist Robert Young who, in his work, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990/ 2004), comments on the abandonment of the traditional, Marxist use of history as a ground for truth in favour of regarding it as a mirror for potential contemporary political aspects, by making an “identification with parallel forms of political struggle in our own day” (2004, p. 126).

Texts do not exist in isolation, establishing relations both synchronically (with parallel/ contemporary texts) and diachronically (with texts written before them), which give access to present and past, but only to a limited extent. This very simple interconnection has been termed in various ways; however, the term which best serves our purpose is that of *intertextuality*, as texts can only *represent* aspects and facts, not transpose them from the realm of the real into that of the written. “Life is the non-representable origin of representation”, Derrida (2005, p. 295) notes, in relation to Antonin Artaud’s theatre, but the statement can also be read as generalisation, in which case, this sentence alone suffices to explain Foucault’s and his followers’ understanding of discourse as **constructed representation of reality**. Representation is thus construed as an imperfect form of life imitation, and this imperfection is related to a series of factors outside the text: the author’s distance from the represented factual aspect/ event (in time and space), his/ her subjectivity (which may be wilful, with manipulative ends), but also various societal, political, economic and cultural constraints, which, for the sake of brevity, will be included here under the term *context*.

In cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s words, “representation does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and has been *represented*” (1997, p. 6). This ‘something’ may range from topics, people, events, situations, to politics and ideologies, etc. which are endowed with meanings through words or images. Hence, Hall’s definition of representation is: “the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted through the images or whatever it is, on screens or the words on a page which *stand for* what we’re talking about” (1997, p. 6).

A foundational concept in aesthetics, semiotics and political theory, representation is... represented (*faute de mieux*) as a triangular relationship: “[it] is always *of* something or someone *by* something or someone *to* someone” (Hall, 1997, p. 12). Representation “is an extremely elastic notion which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing a day in the life of several Dubliners” (Hall, 1997, p. 13) – and it goes without saying that, when one speaks of literature, only the latter type of representation applies. As it is, ultimately, an issue of social agreement (“let us agree to represent *this* with *that* in *this way*” (Hall, 1997, p. 13)), literary representation functions through codes and conventions (language, tonality, representational schemes, styles, genres) and “can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions” (Hall, 1997, p. 15). The notions of ideology and identity in the contemporary historical context and truth as a discursive construct influenced by power structures, together with the assessment of the media – as communicator of politics, but also as a steady and reliable provider of non-literary texts necessary in the contextual analysis – justify the choice of New Historicism/ Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies as critical theories appropriate in analysing contemporary fiction.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, it needs to be reiterated that Cultural Materialism analyses the interaction between the power of State and cultural forms, and traces the way in which dominant structures, carriers of ideology, inform identity at the individual level, but may be also expanded to the level of national/ Westernized/ globalized identity. To these ends, it relies on the concepts of truth and power, borrowed from Michel Foucault’s theorization of discourse, whilst laying great emphasis, in Marxist spirit, on the way in which the political, social and economic contexts inform the aesthetics of cultural artefacts at a given time in its development. Literature becomes, in turn, a political, economic and social factor, able to communicate and even fight. Conversely, through their nature as constructed discourses, but also through their incorporation into the literary text, politics and history become literature, which substantiates looking into both literary and non-literary texts for that illusory truth and/or reality.

The textual analysis proposed by New Historicism/ Cultural Materialism/ Cultural Studies points to a form of virtually encompassing everything that may go under the term *culture*. In this context, the awareness of culture allows an expanded target audience unhindered by possible misapprehensions owed to incomprehensibly formulated theories. Whether termed interchangeably based on geographical and/ or ideological criteria or considered individually, in point of specific traits which differentiate them from one another, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism or Cultural Studies still represent actual and rewarding modes of critically approaching the (literary) text, owing precisely to this weaving of influences which constitutes their common core. The combination of Poststructuralism, cultural theory, analyses of discourses of otherness (postcolonial and feminist studies, with their subsequent developments and ramifications) and Marxism leaves no stone unturned in the process of identification and understanding of the general context, whose conditions are, at the same time, abided by and replicated by discourse and representation. Without proposing a definitive grid of analysis, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism (and/ or Cultural Studies) provide the readers multifaceted possibilities to look at/ into the text.

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