

Cultural and Literary Studies

We all know the experience which we have so frequently when using a foreign language. A pop song says it all: "Words don't come easy to me". Sometimes they will not come at all. Then we have to search for them – or ask for them – or use circumscriptions and look for verbal detours. But sometimes all these tricks will not work because the word you are looking for simply does not exist. And exactly this is the dilemma I am facing.

In spite of the title of my contribution I will not deal with cultural studies as you probably know them – or rather I will use them but as a foil for my real subject. What I want to discuss would be called "Kulturwissenschaft" in German or rather "kulturwissenschaftliche Literaturwissenschaft." And these terms can be translated into English only by using the false friend "cultural studies" and turning it into "cultural literary studies."

Cultural Studies

I will start by trying to outline what Cultural Studies means in the Anglo-American context focusing especially on those aspects which some people certainly will consider as the main advantages and achievements of the paradigm. If, however, you are not interested in giving up literary studies you might regard many of these achievements as steps in a wrong direction.

As we all know, Cultural Studies originated in Great Britain around the CCS – the *Centre for Contemporary Studies* – in Birmingham, founded in 1964 by Richard Hoggart Hoggart, his successor Stuart Hall (and maybe also Raymond Williams) were the founding fathers of British Cultural Studies. In a way, they could be called the academic wing of the "Angry Young Men" Movement. This early variant of the paradigm was characterized by a Marxist world view, at least a Marxist set of values, it was decidedly political

and interventionistic – aiming at the emancipation of the lower classes –, and it was decidedly anti-"high culture" and pro-"popular culture."

The real success story of Cultural Studies, however, was written in the United States. The blurb of the book might read: "British Cultural Studies meets French Poststructuralism in the USA – and their children go to university and live happily ever after." The "New Historicism" – invented by Stephen Greenblatt in Berkeley in the late 80s after intellectual affairs with Michel Foucault and Clifford Geertz – might well be considered as a step-brother or step-sister. This reformulated version of Cultural Studies adopts the poststructuralist preference for discontinuity over continuity, for difference over identity, for diversity over unity, etc. It also adopts Foucault's obsession with power, but completely changes its meaning. For Foucault, power is phenomenological, it is just there, it has no individual or social subject. The American Cultural Studies Movement has, so to speak, re-socialised Foucault's abstract power-concept and is – as its British counter-part – actively fighting for the under-privileged, no longer the underprivileged working-classes but all sorts of minorities.

Cultural Studies is not only trans-disciplinary but violently anti-disciplinary. Even more: having no clearly defined methodology is considered as a virtue, not as a vice. If you look at its actual practice, however, the basic pattern is very simple. As your domain of studies you can choose any area of present day culture. Then you ask, how race, class, and gender are represented here, and inevitably you will find out that they are misrepresented. If you want a short formula I personally would call Cultural Studies the High Court of political correctness, with every critic acting as a self-appointed High Judge.

This, roughly, is probably what you would expect to hear about when you read an article on Cultural Studies. If you are a follower of the paradigm you might as well stop reading now – maybe start reading a good book instead (it should be a book of popular culture, of course), because the rest of my contribution can hardly be of much interest to you.

And I certainly would want to convince you that you are wrong. All I will do is give my very personal reasons for my dissatisfaction with this version of cultural studies. Firstly, I am probably not a very interventionist person and I certainly do not like passing moral judgements. I feel too imperfect, and as all attempts to reform myself have failed abysmally I would rather not try and reform the world. Secondly (and more importantly), I believe that literary studies has developed a certain set of

skills which only it can practice and teach; if it does not they will be lost. It took me a long time to learn them – in a way – and as I am not young anymore I would rather stick to literary studies than start anew as a beginner. Or, to put it differently: a literary critic who uses his elaborated tools of analysis on popular literature in my opinion resembles a *chef de cuisine* who gives up his job in a renowned restaurant and henceforward works for McDonald's only. I certainly would not want to discriminate against hamburgers – but connoisseurs of good food will perhaps understand that I tend to prefer *haute cuisine* if I have the choice.

“Kulturwissenschaft”

The sort of Cultural Studies which are the subject of my article are of a different kind. They have been developed in the last twenty years in the field of German studies and have become one of their most popular and influential paradigms. At the last congress of the IVG (Internationale Vereinigung für Germanische Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft) almost 20% of the 550 literary studies presentations belonged to this new paradigm.

To call it a paradigm may, however, be somewhat premature. At the moment it is rather an agglomeration of three rather different tendencies. Firstly, of course, all of the intellectual tenets of Postmodernism and New Historicism have been more than eagerly absorbed. Secondly, there has been a long debate on the “modernisation” of the humanities, which in Germany still carry the rather old-fashioned sounding name “Geisteswissenschaften” (Humanities), dating back, of course, to the philosophical tradition of German idealism. So the project of cultural studies was not restricted to literary studies only but aimed at the combination of several or even all of the humanities for the exploration of trans-disciplinary objects. Thirdly (and most importantly), it tries to link back to the German tradition of *Kulturphilosophie* and *Kulturwissenschaft* – which originated around 1900 and is associated with names like Heinrich Rickert, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Ernst Cassirer.

You will not be astonished to learn that these very different intellectual currents have not been integrated into a single and coherent paradigm. Even though several elementary-books and a three-volume handbook of *Kulturwissenschaft* have recently been published, the discussion about conceptualisation, heuristics, and methodology is still in full progress. To

talk in detail about all the warring factions of *Kulturwissenschaft* in current German Studies would neither be possible within the limits of a short essay, nor would it be particularly illuminating. So I will try to sketch only one of the many variants of the new paradigm – the version that in my personal opinion is the most promising one. I will try to outline this variant of cultural studies by sketching four of its characteristics.

1. *A new option for old disciplines.* *Kulturwissenschaft* is a transdisciplinary concept for the study of culture which may be practiced as a new discipline in its own right. It can, however, also be combined with existing disciplines. This will result in new paradigms like cultural history, cultural literary studies, etc. All of them will share a common heuristics, maybe even elements of a common methodology – which should greatly facilitate interdisciplinary co-operations. These new paradigms or sub-paradigms could be considered as global reformulations of the old disciplines (which is what the phrase “cultural turn” usually means). So, for instance, cultural literary studies could claim to be the new and only version of literary studies. In my opinion, this makes but little sense. Literary studies has a set of core tasks and core skills which not only constitute its disciplinary identity but also are the foundation of its social relevance because they are in social demand. These core tasks and core skills are, for instance: editing texts, commenting on them, interpreting them, and analysing literary forms and devices in a historical or systematic way. Certainly, it will neither be possible nor necessary to reformulate all these aspects of literary studies in a global “cultural turn.” So what I am talking about is a new, additional option *within* literary studies.

2. *What sort of culture?* Quite obviously, a definition of culture would do much to further our understanding of cultural literary studies. In the golden olden days one might have used the simple dichotomy of nature vs. culture. But today culture has become a fairly global concept. Therefore it can no longer be defined as a domain of objects. Rather, culture is a specific aspect of all sorts of objects, concepts, actions, institutions, forms of knowledge, etc. A cultural research-object is constituted by a special form of heuristics which can be applied to all sorts of objects. This heuristics can be roughly characterized by its constructionist and its semiotic approach. Constructivism means that nothing will be accepted at face value; nothing is a mere fact or self-evident truth, everything must be considered as a cultural construction. Deciphering these constructions means reading them as the results of symbolic actions. What, however, are the *signifiés* of these

signifiants? To answer this question we would need a semiotic theory of culture which, of course, I cannot outline in detail. Let me suggest an abbreviated formula instead, the shorthand of a definition, so to speak: Culture makes sense – quite literally, of course; it is a machinery to produce meaning, coherence, purpose, teleology. So a semiotics of culture has to search for the questions which these symbolic actions try to answer. The specific task of cultural literary studies is, of course, to find out the specific ways in which literary texts can become co-workers in the production of meaning for certain cultural areas.

3. *Cultural Literary Studies and the "Literature in context"-project*: Since the days of New Criticism there have been quite a few attempts to consider literary texts as parts of a larger context. Intellectual history, social history, and the history of mentalities are three paradigms for the definition and reconstruction of contexts. Culture is a fourth one – and one which is in many ways superior to its predecessors. Again, I cannot go into details. But it is perhaps sufficient to point out that culture and literature are semiotic universes. Hence, texts and contexts share a common ground which makes them highly compatible. So in a way, cultural literary studies can be considered as a new version of the text-context-model. There is, however, one important and obvious difference between contextualising a text and reconstructing a cultural object. If you focus on a single literary text this text will determine which parts of the cultural context are relevant for its understanding. If you focus on a specific cultural object you will have to consider many literary texts or parts of them – and this corpus of literary texts will be but *one* of the many partners in a cultural joint-venture, co-operating with other media and arts, texts and discourses, cultural techniques and social institutions. Naturally, there are many different ways of grouping and weighing these very different workmen. For the cultural literary critic, however, there will always be a binary opposition: literature and all the rest. Not because this is the only possible distinction – or even the most important or most obvious one – but for the simple reason that our disciplinary point of view, the special sort of spectacles which we as literary critics wear, forces us to postulate this fundamental opposition.

4. *Areas of cultural literary studies*: To cut things short I will here simply quote a paragraph from the introduction to the first number of *KulturPoetik. Zeitschrift für kulturgeschichtliche Literaturwissenschaft* – a journal for cultural literary studies which three colleagues and I are editing (for more information see www.culturalpoetics.com):

Cultural literary studies is, first of all, marked by its special point of view and its characteristic thematic attention: it regards literature as a part of overall culture, focussing on its participation in constituting, handing down and altering cultural meaning and signs. Hence, it pays particular attention to basic anthropological topics (such as: love, death, states of ecstasy and intoxication, insanity, dreams, the body, social conventions, gender, etc.) and the corresponding cultural techniques as well as to intercultural contacts and conflicts. It examines interactions between literature and the system of knowledge, between literature and other media [...] and the specific medial contribution of literature to cultural communication, sign-formation, and the shaping of perceptions. Yet, it also reflects the poetics of culture, proto-poetic elements [like ritual, performance, mimesis, narration] within the system of knowledge, the media, social relationships and everyday life.

Goethe and Mephisto would have called my short sketch of cultural literary studies “grey” – nothing but abstract theory, and much of it more than provisional. To add at least a few patches of green, I have appended a third and last chapter where I will try to put theory into practice and outline one of my own research projects as an example: the cultural and literary history of the dream.

Cultural and literary history of the dream

Before I talk about the dos let me talk about the don'ts. Basically there are two: Firstly, as a cultural literary critic you will not interpret literary dreams with the help of the dream-theories of modern psychology – so forget Freud, Jung, Lacan, and all the rest. All of them are mere objects of your research, not part of your professional heuristics. Secondly, you will not try to develop a dream-theory of your own – you may do this in your spare-time as a sort of hobby, but it will not be part of your professional occupation. You will not even be allowed to evaluate existing theories; they all have an equal status; none of them is “better” or “truer” than the rest.

If all existing dream-theories are mere objects, what, you may well ask, shall guide me in my research? Probably there are several solutions to this problem. My personal one would be: Search for the question which the dream discourse and the many associated practices and institutions seek to answer. Or, to put it differently: Find an answer to the question “Why have dreams always fascinated and irritated mankind?” My suggestion would be: The dream is irritating and alluring, because it confronts us with worlds and modes of experience which are – evidently, and yet mysteriously – different

from those of our waking lives. Such encounters with an inner form of "otherness" link the dream with states of madness, ecstasy, and intoxication. But whereas those are exceptional experiences dreams represent everybody's daily – or rather nightly – rendezvous with the "other." In a poem entitled "The Dream," Lord Byron has put it in a nutshell: "our life is two-fold: Sleep has its own world [...] and a wide realm of wild reality."

This experience of living in two worlds which are not completely but significantly different is the anthropological scandalon which the cultural dream-work of all ages has tried to cope with. Basically, two strategies were used: (1) There is no "other," "second" world; dreams are nothing but a distorted, a deficient version of our waking life. (2) The existence of two worlds is accepted and linked with contemporary two-world-theories. The otherness of the dream may, for instance, be linked to the otherness of a supernatural realm. Or it may be linked to an inner otherness, for instance the realm of our subconscious life. If you use strategy number one you will explain dreams by giving a rather mechanical description of their genesis: I dreamt of a gigantic banana threatening to kill me – because yesterday I ate three pounds of bananas and was suffering from indigestion. If you use strategy two explaining dreams means deciphering them as messages – messages sent by the gods, messages sent by our subconscious, etc. Then the dream of the gigantic banana threatening to kill me could mean that ... (if you know Freud, and who does not, you will certainly be able to replace the dots with a psychoanalytically plausible conjecture of your own). But, of course, you could also consult a dream-book or, if you are a religious person, you might contact your priest (and hope that he is not a follower of Freud).

Of course, these two strategies are but a simplified, yet fairly potent matrix. You might call it the deep structure of the dream-discourse, which will help you to order the endless variants of theories which appear at its surface.

Finding the basic question and reconstructing and analysing the answers will lead you to the reconstruction of the dream-discourse. But what about literature? In which way can literary texts take part in the cultural dream-work, how can they help us to come to terms with the dream-scandalon? Basically – again I have to simplify – there are four answers (most of them could also be applied to other art-forms or media but to cut things short I will ignore this and discuss literature only):

1. Literary texts can take part in the extra-literary dream-discourse. They can affirm or discredit existing dream-theories or take their stand in on-going debates. They even can – explicitly or implicitly – develop dream theories of their own.

2. Literary texts represent – or rather present – dreams. Just as fictional texts generally enrich and multiply our real-life experiences, so literary dreams enrich our dream-life. They may even influence our own dreams, which often follow pre-shaped cultural patterns. And they will do much to shape our dream-mentality, our habitual attitude towards dreams, and our way of narrating and interpreting them.

3. But the main contribution of literary texts to the cultural dream-work certainly is the imaginary use and the poetic functionalization of dreams. Our real dreams may or may not have a meaning and a function. Literary dreams certainly have both. The literary use of the dream is a specifically literary form of dream-cultivation which helps to reduce the otherness of the dream, but also imports parts of this otherness into our waking life.

4. In many respects literature can be understood as a highly elaborated version of all the poetic and aesthetic operations which shape our daily life. Narration, for instance, is one of these daily cultural practices which are elaborated, refined, and playfully redesigned in literary texts. Maybe we could compare this to the relation between *haute couture* and ready-to-wear clothes. Dreaming and the practices of the cultural dream-work, too, can serve as a sort of raw material which literature uses to develop its repertoire of poetic devices. Here the literary system is not acting as a co-worker in the cultural dream-work, at least not in a strict sense. Instead, it satisfies its own needs. To give just two examples: The symbolic interpretations of dreams can help to develop literary techniques of symbolization. And the imagery and the narrative structure of dreams can be used to develop what we call fantastic literature.

Here my short sketch ends. The details of my example are of little importance. But it may have helped to illustrate the rich field of research which cultural literary studies offer. Far from degrading literature, far from reducing it to a mere document, the new paradigm reveals its active and important role in shaping our cultural universe – not in spite of but because of its specific aesthetic qualities.