

Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

What is new about New Historicism?

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER:

Until around the mid 1980s, the dominant form of literary and cultural theory in the US and many other corners of the world was Deconstruction. Inspired by the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstructionists zoomed in on those moments in literary texts where the binary oppositions on which the texts are based break down. The binary oppositions such as nature versus culture, beauty versus ugliness, the singular versus the plural break down. Different in many ways from New Criticism, Deconstructionists shared something with the New Critics. Both focus on the text itself to the exclusion of all historical, social, and political contexts.

And it was against this, against a formalist and ahistorical approach to literature that New Historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt, and later Jane Tompkins rebelled. These New Historicists developed a new historical approach to literature and culture. And in the US and England at least, New Historicism is still the dominant variety of literary and cultural theory today.

But what is new about New Historicism? Well, first of all New Historicists no longer believe that any historical era is dominated by one worldview shared by all. Now this might seem banal. But think about it. We often fall into this trap.

For instance, when we speak of 17th century America as Puritan America, completely ignoring that the Puritans only ruled in New England, while other parts - for example, the middle colonies around present day Pennsylvania and New York - were shaped by very different norms and values, mercantile, middle class norms and values. New Historicists then insist that any era is shaped by competing worldviews and ideologies.

New Historicists also say that history is neither progressive nor teleological. Let's start with progressive. By saying that history is not progressive, New Historicists say that the world is not continually improving. For if that were the case, something like the Holocaust could have never happened. And for New Historicists, history is full of such breaks and ruptures.

For New Historicists, history is also not teleological. What does this mean? This means that history does not move toward a telos, an end or a goal. A teleological view of history would for instance argue that eventually, all the world will resemble Western liberal democracies. Against such a teleological understanding of history, New Historicists propose that history is much rather shaped by competing forces and changing power relations.

Now New Historicists also note that historians' desire to fully know and understand the past is illusory. The past is the past and as such, never directly accessible to us. The American literary theorist Louis Montrose puts it memorably when he speaks of the 'historicity of texts' and the 'textuality of history'. The first half of this double formula is quite straightforward. By the historicity of texts, Montrose means that when we read literary texts, we need to take into consideration that they were written and read at a specific moment in history. That is, at a specific time and place whose social and cultural configurations were different from our own time. Not only that, the texts that historians and literary scholars write are also shaped by their time and place.

The second part of the formula, the textuality of history, is the most difficult one. The textuality of history means that the past is the past and as such, never directly accessible to us. In most cases, the past comes to us in the form of surviving texts. Those texts that historians call sources. And we need to understand - New Historicists remind us - that the texts from the past that historians call sources always already interpret the past, provide a certain perspective on the past that needs to be interpreted by us.

Not only that, New Historicists also note that the texts from the past that we actually have access to today are only a minute fraction of the texts that were actually produced. Because some texts - say royal proclamations - were considered worthy of preserving, while other texts - say peasants' protest notes - were not considered worthy of preserving. Thus the texts we read from the past only give us certain perspectives on the past, and they're only a small selection of the total of texts produced.

But perhaps the most important notion of New Historicism is 'cultural work'. The idea that literary texts perform cultural work goes against another idea. Namely that literary texts simply mirror or reflect the world.

For New Historicists, literary texts are an integral part of the world in which they are read. They negotiate, comment on, and intervene in social and political debates of the time. The New Historicist critic Jane Tompkins coined the phrase 'cultural work'. And Tompkins gives Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the most powerful example of a literary text that performs cultural work. Quite obviously, this text did not just reflect or mirror a slave holding society. By calling upon its readers' empathy with the victims of slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contributed significantly to galvanising support for the abolition of slavery in the American North.

It is said that Abraham Lincoln told Harriet Beecher Stowe somewhat condescendingly, 'so you're the little woman that created this great war'. Certainly Uncle Tom's Cabin is an extreme example. But don't all texts perform cultural work? What about 'In a Station of the Metro'?