

Text Wars: Textual Analysis in Cultural Studies

Introduction to the ACSIS seminar
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The theme of this workshop is “textual analysis in cultural studies”. We opened up this theme with the metaphor of “text wars”, intended as a pun to hint at the debates that have taken place around the role of textual analysis and interpretation. The responses we got to this invitation has made it clear (a) that these debates are not particularly well known in Sweden and (b) that there are many more ways to understand the title of the workshop than I first thought. Anyway, these various directions in which our choice of metaphors do point are obviously interconnected, and we want to keep at least six issues open for discussion today.

1. First, what is the position and role of textual analysis within the field of interdisciplinary cultural studies in Sweden and internationally today? Is there a need for interpretations or close readings of texts? Mieke Bal belong to those who have vigorously argued for the centrality of textual interpretations in cultural research. In Nordic media studies, there was a debate in the early 90s, where Kirsten Drotner, Kim Schrøder and others (like myself) argued for the inclusion of analyses of media texts in reception studies, against such studies that only looked at media users and never bothered about what the media products looked like that they used. Since the textual focus of 1980s’ poststructuralism, various cultural studies proponents have raised criticism against “textualism” and/or interpretation, from positions of discourse analysis (Foucault, Grossberg) and literary media theory (Kittler), everyday life ethnography and lived experience (McRobbie, Pickering), taste sociology (Bourdieu), political economy or institutional analysis (Garnham, Jameson, Ferguson, Golding). There is a similar tendency in our own Linköping environments for the study of culture, where there is often an emphasis on processes of production, distribution, reception and regulation that may lead to a certain marginalisation of studies of texts in favour of their contexts in practices and societal institutions. This may in turn alienate researchers from the humanities for which textual forms and meanings are often focal. So what is the place of close analyses of texts today?
2. Second, there is a hidden polysemy in the concept of text. After the 1960s’ and 70s’ semiotic wave, I mainly use it in the wide sense that is dominant in cultural studies, including not only written and printed verbal texts but also spoken words, visual images and music. However, the issue can also be formulated for texts in a more narrow sense. Literary theory has long had a rather privileged position as source of theoretical models in cultural studies. This dominance has now and again been challenged by other perspectives, attacking logocentrism and verbocentrism. I experienced this some twenty years ago in studies of popular music, where musicology had a kind of inferiority complex and felt a need to defend itself against the dominance of literary models of culture. A more well-known example is the recent growth of a body of visual cultural studies. Which

is today the role of literary or printed texts in culture, and the role of literary theory in the theoretical bricolage of cultural studies at large?

3. Returning to the wider concept of text: if there is indeed a remaining need for textual analysis, how should it be done? What do we actually do with texts in daily teaching and research activities? How do they contribute to insights on processes and forms of power, identity and community? Contextualisation is always important to cultural studies, but which contexts should be prioritised: intertextual and generic, subjective and psychological or social and institutional? The demand for wider intertextual readings of media texts and forms of everyday life puts a heavy burden on the analyst. How can a single researcher carry out such all-encompassing interpretations in a qualified way, and how can scholars with shifting background co-operate around such ambitious tasks? Outside images and music there are also much wider circuits of visual forms and soundscapes for which there are very scarce analytic tools. Not to talk about quasi-textual forms directed towards taste, smell, tactility and our other mostly forgotten senses.
4. There is a further issue here in certain poststructuralist attacks on hermeneutics and interpretation. They may be highly relevant for older, romantic versions of hermeneutics, but rarely get into clinch with more developed forms (specifically including the critical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur). Still, there are important issues here of whether we want to discover meanings in texts or rather just map out their material shapes and study their embodied effects in society (Foucault, Tolson, Grossberg, Kittler). We can perhaps argue that all ethnography and even statistical methods presuppose and are based on moments of interpretation (of sources and of results), but I also want to argue that we need to make rich interpretations not only of the texts we create in our research but also of the cultural texts that circulate in society. (Cf. also Ricoeur's discussion of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*.)
5. The problem of how to analyse and interpret texts also concerns conflicts of interpretation (Ricoeur, Fish). If meanings arise in encounters between texts and text users in interpretative communities, can academic communities claim to discover and formulate such meanings with any more legitimate authority than other specific groups? This opens an ocean of methodological and ethical problems of preferential rights of interpretation. Along roughly the same direction, the metaphor of "text wars" points towards the struggle between competing views on the cultural (literary, musical, medial etc.) canon (Harold Bloom et al.).
6. And finally, the idea of intertextuality and dialogicity in texts and genres point at yet another aspect of this big complex, namely those struggles that take place within cultural texts: wars between tones of voice, perspectives and positions that confront each other in any textual universe. How can a critical analysis disclose such inner contradictions and avoid reducing textual compounds to simple homologies, but instead find methods – in the spirit of Bakhtin – to trace how societal and cultural tensions are played out in the textual universe as well, in forms of heterology that propel the development of culture into an endless series of future textualisations.

All these aspects can of course not be covered today, but they have been a motivating force behind our workshop invitation. All in all, we hope that today's discussion will develop new

insights into the relations between humanities and social sciences, the disciplines of literature, arts and musicology, issues of method and ethics, and many other things. There are text wars on many different levels, and I hope we will get a glimpse of how they are actually interrelated and important for the development of cultural studies.

LECTURE:

- **Janice Radway**: "Cultural Studies and the Political Economy of Interpretation: On the Necessity and Difficulties of Textual Analysis."

WORKSHOP PAPERS:

- **Thaïs Machado-Borges** (Social Anthropology Stockholm): "Going with the flow: a dialogic approach to the reception of Brazilian telenovelas."
- **Anders Öhman** (Literature Umeå): "An Archeology of the Text."

Janice Radway became widely renowned among literature sociologists, media researchers, popular culture scholars and feminists for her study of Harlequin readers: *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984). Since then, she is a key figure in cultural studies. This position was further solidified by her second larger study, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle Class Desire* (1997). She is now doing research on the cultural production and media use of teenage girls. After her 1977 dissertation in English literature at the American Studies Program, Michigan State University, she became Professor of literature 1988 at Duke University in Durham NC, USA, where she is now Frances Hill Fox Professor in Humanities. 1996-99 she was also President of the American Studies Association. In March 2003, she is the first Visiting Professor of ACSIS. During this stay, she also has a public lecture at ACSIS on "Girls as Alternative Cultural Producers: Attempting to Think Against and Outside Gender Categories", and a higher seminar at the Department of Gender Studies (Tema G) on "American Studies and Transnationalism", besides giving lectures at the universities of Göteborg (Dept. of literature), Uppsala (Gender research) and Stockholm (Journalism, Media and Communications).