

THE POLITICAL IN THE LITERARY

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Abstract: The present study is an enquiry into the complex relationship between literature and politics, a connection that has been denied at times and distorted and abused in some cases. We seek to reveal how the relationship has always depended on the definitions of the two terms and thus on theory. After 1990, there have been many attacks on theory and they have represented, as this paper tries to demonstrate, attacks on literature. Literary and critical theory through authors and definitions relevant for the present times provide the source for the framework and themes of this study which tries to present a credible case for a politics of literature.

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“L’art ne voit pas; il métamorphose”¹. Given that this expression belongs to Jean-Luc Godard and that it appears in an aside-work done during the conception of his monumental project about the history of cinema (which is at the same time a work about the history of Western art and its forms of understanding), the relation it discusses - among art, seeing and metamorphosis - is food for thought for our present. These are not happy times for the theory of art and its position inside our understanding of the world and ourselves. The near-global dominance of capitalism and its powerful effects in the field of knowledge were deplored as recently as 2012 in a book by Terry Eagleton who observes that “literary theory has been rather out of fashion for the last couple of decades” (Eagleton 2012, ix). The explanation is to be found mainly in the increasing power of a system which has slowly reduced the “ambitious questioning of the social order” that the political Left is able to propose, as well as in the current dominance of a “cultural and political conservatism” that has transformed literature and literary theory into meaningless or, at best, marginal preoccupations in relation to the powerful and almost unique criterium of the market forces that traverses our world. In the triumphant global world trumpeted in 1989 by Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama 1989), the place of theory has been repeatedly questioned, from the hysteria of countless articles, conferences and books about *post, after, beyond* theory to the institutional change that has seen the gradual reduction and marginalization of the departments of literature in American universities. For one should make no mistakes: the attack against theory has been an attack against literature and mainly against its powers to question rigid frames and simple narratives.

In an introduction to his book from 2007, Jonathan Culler observes that the death of theory was in the beginning an attempt of its opponents to effect it in a performative way (taking advantage of the favouring political context), but the fact that in educational capitalism academics must never be out of touch, theorists themselves joined the discussions and the hysterical chorus: “declarations of the death of theory have long been attempts by

¹ The expression appears as a phrase written on the screen during a 4 minute short film from 1996 - entitled *Plus Oh!* - directed by Jean-Luc Godard, a film that deals with the relation between art, beauty, love and cinema. It is worth noticing here that this work is a result of a project proposed to Godard by the singer France Gall, and it takes place during his intense work on *Histoire(s) du cinema* which was to appear two years later.

opponents to bring about, performatively, the demise they purport to describe, but such titles do not come only from the opponents of theory. Since the activities that have come to answer to the nickname *theory* are no longer the latest thing in the humanities, theorists themselves, not wanting to be left behind defending something thought to belong to the past, have been swift to write about theory after theory, post-theory, and so on” (Culler 2007, 1). The author, of course, is a strong opponent to this wave in fashion and his *The Literary in Theory* brings credible proof to the fact that theory is not at all dead, but instead it is at work everywhere, even in the texts of those who celebrate its death. It is important to note here that this survival of theory is, for Jonathan Culler, also a survival of literature and its relevance to our contemporary world. The relation between the two terms (*literary* and *theory*) is so complex and multi-layered that any attempt to simplify it is bound in the short or long term to a predictable failure.

The attacks against theory (and thus against literature) have come mainly from the Anglo-Saxon world, being afterwards mimicked everywhere in order to globalize what Culler calls “the American penchant - ‘Everything’s up to date in Kansas City” (Culler 2007, 1). The French have been reluctant to join the parade. In a round-table discussion from 2001, later published in a volume (Payne, Shad 2003) that pretended very much to be *up to date*, Jacques Derrida noticed the fact that the French do not use the word *theory* in the American way and they prefer to (still) talk about *philosophy*: “I never use the word *theory* in the way that you do here; I don’t use the word *theory* after you, after the Americans and the English speakers. So, I would translate this into French as *life after philosophy*, after deconstruction, after literature and so on and so forth” (Payne, Shad 2003, 8). While the other participants in the discussion, among whom Frank Kermode and Christopher Norris, are convinced about the fact that one can only talk *after* theory, with a distance from what they perceive as the excesses of the previous decades (Norris is going as far as to distance himself from his own books in the 80s and to offer a *mea culpa* for what he now considers to have been his political and theoretical errors), Jacques Derrida refuses this periodization and the talk of stages and prefers to go back to themes relating to ethics, alterity, specters and survival. In the language of Culler, we could say that Derrida is still doing theory, while the others pretend to be outside and thus capable, in their view, of a language and vision that is more clear and structured.² For the author of *The Literary in Theory*, what is denied through the rejection of theory is the relevance of the literary discourse beyond its supposedly-enclosed frames, in other words its capacity to challenge the narratives of other discourses: “Literature has become less a distinct object, fixed in a canon, than a property of discourse of diverse sorts, whose literariness - its narrative, rhetorical, performative qualities - can be studied by what were hitherto methods of literary analysis” (Culler 2007, 18). A theorist will start from this assumption, which is in no small measure already a case for the political effect of literature. As Culler says, “literature

² The relevant position in this round-table discussion is the one taken by Frank Kermode who, while clearly succumbing to the opponents of theory’s assertion that concepts used by theorists do not actually mean anything (he speaks approvingly about a book in which the author “gives a list of certain expressions which recur in modern theoretical discussion; he simply asks what they mean, and whether the people who are using them have any idea what they mean” - (Payne, Shad 2003, p. 66), admits, albeit in passing, that there are entire parts of philosophy, like hermeneutics, “which we haven’t really been bothering much about” - *Ibid*, 127. For more about the difference in understanding theory and philosophy, see Terry Eagleton. *The Event of Literature*, p. xi.

may have lost its centrality as a specific object of study, but its modes have conquered: in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences everything is literary. Indeed, if literature is, as we used to say, that mode of discourse which knows its own fictionality, then, insofar as the effect of theory has been to inform disciplines of both the fictionality and the performative efficacy of their constructions (...) the disciplines participate in the literary” (Culler 2007, 41).

We can now return to the phrase of Jean-Luc Godard. Although written (on the screen, a detail that is not secondary) in 1996, it still seems relevant in the context of today. The assumption that art is the one that *sees* is as old as the ideas of Aristotle and even Plato (though, for him, art does not see the truth and thus succumbs to the illusion of reality). The entire Western culture has been built on the supposition that art only represents, mimics or copies reality, even when it seems to be, with Aristotle, accorded the privilege of representing not that which is but that which could be (and in this way respecting a logic that is not of its own making). The idea that the essence of art lies not in its capacity to see but in its ability to produce changes has obviously powerful implications in relation to the relevance of art, its powers and its effects in the so-called *real* world. All of these lead to politics. The work of the political deals with filiations, intersections and effects that build or modify our understanding of the main identities: what is a subject, what is a community, what is reality, etc. In fact Godard’s monumental work *Histoire(s) du cinema* is entirely theoretical and (thus) political. What Godard knows is that cinema is a way of thinking and as such, through it, one can understand reality and history as well as the ethics of living. Many times, the director returns to the idea that there is a responsibility, a function or even a mission at work in the creative work, precisely because some things (like our understanding or even the possibility of a community) can only come into being through the work of the image. Cinema is not only the privileged witness of the 20th century, it is in fact writing and making possible the history of the era.

We understand now that the relation between the work of art, reality and politics is always complex. That’s why we still return to theory, a theory that however needs to be defined in relation to this web of intersections and relations that are at work in art and taking into account the metamorphoses that art produces.

One of the definitions of theory that, in our view, still works today was concocted in 1985 by Gilles Deleuze and it is to be found at the very end of his monumental opus about cinema (Deleuze, Tomlinson, Galeta 2007). After a detailed and erudite survey of the history of cinema from its period between the two world wars when the image is conceived mainly in terms of movement to the after-WWII era in which images mostly deal with time, in a single page the author discusses the relevance of his book and of his entire act of analysing cinema through repeated intersections with thinkers like Henri Bergson and Charles Sanders Peirce, but even more importantly through what Deleuze believes to be the way in which cinema thinks. The essential point lies here: through what at surface is an analysis of cinema we are actually dealing with an analysis of thinking itself. On the one hand “philosophical theory is itself a practice, just as much as its object. It is no more abstract than its object. It is a practice of concepts, and it must be judged in the light of the other practices with which it interferes” (Deleuze, Tomlinson, Galeta 2007, 280). The old adage about philosophy being a detached and reflective act which strives to find out and legitimize an order which is pre-existent is no

longer at work here, but this does not mean the complete end of theory itself. As long as a process of thinking takes place, we are in the field of theory. An important detail must however be noted here and it is the focus of Deleuze's interest. This process of thinking is not, when we talk with or about cinema, something that appears beyond it or supplements it by translating, let us say, images into concepts. It is essential to notice here that this thinking is the one that cinema itself produces and it can only be produced through it. Art does not translate/ expose/ present ideas through beautiful forms. Rather the forms of art (that only art can produce) *think*. It is this thinking at work in art and only functioning through its specific means that theory must carry further. In the language of Deleuze, "a theory of cinema is not *about* cinema, but about the concepts that cinema gives rise to and which are themselves related to other concepts corresponding to other practices" (Deleuze, Tomlinson, Galeta 2007, 280). The French author, sometimes in his collaboration with Felix Guattari, has always paid attention to the intersection of such practices of thinking, from what occurs in Franz Kafka's texts to the painting of Francis Bacon.³

A thinking process is at work in each art and it cannot be translated or exposed through an already available language. This had been the process of metaphysics as imagined in the works of Plato, but contemporary thought has renounced this easy explanation. Cinema thinks just as painting or literature do. Each different style (the different editing of Godard, for example, or the construction of a painting by Francis Bacon) gives rise to a new logic, an original mechanism of thought. For Deleuze, the specificity of a medium produces thinking and, for example, the thinking of painting (the way painting thinks) is what defines painting and not a sum of techniques or of empiric qualities. These procedures of thought intersect with other procedures coming from different practices. They are not enclosed in the autonomy of a system. It is the task of theory to follow these intersections, to study their effects and understand the changes and mutations that they contain.

One could note here that this understanding of theory is not miles away from the way in which Russian Formalists tried to explain the relation between form and content. In order to notice that, it is obviously important to re-read them carefully and to pare away the clichés and rigid understandings that tradition has attached to their texts (especially during the structuralist period). For the Russian authors,⁴ form is in fact content because it does something, it thinks something that cannot be done or thought otherwise. They fought powerfully against understanding art as simply the borrowing of ideas from other fields (philosophy, reality, etc.) in order to present them dressed in beautiful forms. The fact that poetry and literature are autonomous means, in the language of Deleuze, that they have their own practices of thinking. And essentially these practices meet other ones and in these intersections theory finds its place and mission: "it is at the level of interference of many practices that things happen, beings, images, concepts, all the kinds of events" (Deleuze,

³ The reader can follow the complex and highly original way in which Deleuze exposes the theoretical mechanisms of Kafka's literature in Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, while the works of Francis Bacon give rise to a theory of sensation and perception in (Deleuze 2004).

⁴ One can and should always go back to fundamental texts like Victor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*. Elmwood Park, IL, USA: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991 or *Theorie de la littérature: textes des formalistes russes*. Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1965.

Tomlinson, Galeta 2007, 280). It is our belief that this understanding of theory is still relevant for our time and also that it already tells something about the politics of literature. Given the fact that we no longer think inside the old frames of clear-cut distinctions (between fields of knowledge, between reality and fiction, reflection and act, etc.), it is perhaps more relevant to reflect on how a thinking of/ about art is already a thinking about how reality (or community, or politics) functions. To go once more back to Deleuze, we should try to go further than his connecting cinema and philosophy by connecting art and politics: “cinema’s concepts are not given in cinema. And yet they are cinema’s concepts, not theories about cinema. So that there is always a time, midday-midnight, when we must no longer ask ourselves, ‘What is cinema?’ but ‘What is philosophy?’” (Deleuze, Tomlinson, Galeta 2007, 280).

We will return to the fact that the specificity of a medium (be it the cinematic one or the language and the style of a literary author) is already a restructuring of the world we live in, a questioning, a deconstruction and even a production of different relations between what is visible and what is not, between what is said and what is not, etc. In many ways the works of Deleuze are a testament to that and we must retain from him this placement of theory in the ever-changing spot where practices meet and concepts are produced by them, a spot that contains potentially the identity of our world.

Jonathan Culler has always thought in similar terms. In his 1982 book about deconstruction (Culler 1982), he was already arguing that theory is the work that challenges and modifies thinking in fields that are different than those in which it originates. This is exactly what made possible the triumph of literary theory for several decades, namely its ability to explain and reorient the discourses, procedures and narratives of fields other than the literary one. This is also the main reason why the conservative reaction and the hysterical attacks against theory gathered force at the end of the last decade. What is important is that Jonathan Culler re-enforces this definition of theory in 2007: “we use the term *theory* to designate discourses that come to exercise influence outside their apparent disciplinary realm because they offer new and persuasive characterizations of problems and phenomena of general interest (...) Theory in this sense is inescapably interdisciplinary” (Culler 2007, 4). The author notices that because of this extension of the relevance of literary theory beyond the canonical enclosure of the literary field its adversaries claim that it lost any connection to literature and thus it can no longer be called literary theory. The accusation is quickly rebuffed: “the essays collected here contest that view, arguing that the apparent eclipse of the literary is something of an illusion. Wherever the discourses of theory originate, they generally work to alert us to versions of literariness at work in discourses of all sorts and thus reaffirm, in their way, the centrality of the literary” (Culler 2007, 5). We should also draw attention here - although we have no time to dwell on it - to the way in which Culler discusses the various contemporary forms of resisting theory,⁵ all of them relevant to the politics involved in the assumptions and speculations of their authors.

The Godardian accent placed on modification and change instead of the ability of art to see (mimic, represent, etc.) has a direct effect on theory. The academic canon is based on

⁵ Chapter 3 of the book starts from the well-known text by Paul de Man (*The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and goes through the various texts opposing theory from the last two decades.

the assumption that any theoretical survey must be detached, objective and evidence-based. This scientific utopia is in essence another form of resisting theory, in tune with old forms of trying to tame the literary (and the aesthetic) through the establishment of clear models of thought. Literature has had the power to disturb and question norms of all kinds ever since Plato's attack on poets in *The Republic* tried to raise attention to the fact that the literary presented a danger that was in essence political and social. Slavoj Žižek observes that "in all great 'anti-philosophers', from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to the late work of Wittgenstein, the most radical authentic core of being-human is perceived as a *concrete practico-ethical engagement and/or choice which precedes (and grounds) every 'theory'*" (Žižek 2006, 75). Kierkegaard observed that "the systematizing mortification of thought is the business of the university discourse" (Žižek 2006, 75) and thus the space for active intervention is consistently barred. This intervention is the work of the political in the very core of art and theory. The core of ideology is in fact the claim of neutrality. This is also what is at work in each attempt to de-politicize thought, art or/ and theory. For the Slovenian philosopher, "there is no 'objective', expert position simply waiting to be applied; one just has to take one side or the other, politically" (Žižek 2009, 16). This is legitimized by an understanding of truth that the academic neutrality fails to grasp: "*truth is partial, accessible only when one takes sides, and is no less universal for this reason*" (Žižek 2009, 6).

Gilles Deleuze explains how theory is itself a practice and how thinking takes place at the intersection of different practices. Jonathan Culler insists on the fact that we are always inside theory and that the very core of it lies in the capacity of the literary to have an effect and reorient practices from different fields of knowledge. To all this, Slavoj Žižek (who is just one of a number of theorists that have been revigorating in the past years a theory of the Left) adds that theory is always in a strong relation with ethics and engagement, that it rather studies problems (instead of offering solutions) and that it has a concrete effect. The simplified frames of reading history seem to lose ground. Francis Fukuyama is all but forgotten now when the actual events of our contemporary world refuse to submit to his idea of the global triumph of neo-liberal capitalism. The rigid framing of the history of theory (from structuralism to post-structuralism to multiculturalism to the death of theory) is less and less taken seriously nowadays. Three terms that have been key to all the misunderstandings about theory and the relation between literature and politics are to be re-read in a more complex way. Art itself is one of the terms in need of a re-reading. One of the main focus of literary theory has been to question the assumed secondariness of literature/ art. It has also questioned the simplified understanding of the autonomy of art as something that has no important relation of influence upon other discourses (art as safe entertainment that disconnects one from the real political world). Theory itself has suffered from a reduction to a set of methods and criteria that could be applied to literature/ art in order to extract stable meanings from them. The Russian Formalists have been the first authors to strongly oppose this view and an entire history of theory could be written from the perspective of its resistance to this reduction. And the third term in search of a re-reading is politics, often reduced to ideological content. We will now deal with this relation between art and politics that proves essential for the re-evaluation of the importance of literature and literary theory for our times.

The place and the condition of literature, in its function of representation, is often a supplement, something that goes unnoticed and many times it is meant to go unnoticed. We can refer here to the way visual signs are built and perceived in visual arts. On the one hand their main function for much of the history of Western painting has been to represent as clearly as possible, in other words to become, as signs, transparent: the viewer sees (and should see) an object, not a trace of paint. On the other hand (and not so rarely as it might seem), sometimes attention is drawn to the sign itself, to its pictorial being: the viewer sees the trace of the paint, not the object it should represent. This is not only a feature of modern art and we should not fall here in a too simplistic parting of the history of art between classicism and modernism. Even Renaissance art is often meant to be read at least in parts with a pictorial eye.⁶ There is a politics at work in the construction of each image: a mechanism in which the visual world is organized and meant to be perceived. The eye of the beholder learns how to see the world and also what is important and what is not inside it. This politics is a supplement: it works like traces of paint do, most of the time not being meant to be noticed at surface. It however always reveals what we have called the place and condition of representation and what is paramount is that the problem of representation is not limited to the frames of the art in which it appears. This is where our understanding of formalism must be expanded. Aesthetic forms are not relevant only as means to understand how the mechanisms of a certain art function. They are always relevant to how our larger understanding of the world (the relation between what is seen and what is said, the relation between what is/ seems important and what is not, etc.). Art historians and literary theorists have long⁷ since talked about art mechanisms but have often treated their relevance beyond the frames of an art as something of a supplement: in the words of Daniel Arasse, “un écart local de la peinture” (Arasse 1992, 281) something secondary that can arise curiosity but it would not be essential to the understanding of a specific work of art.

What happens in the world of visual signs is not exclusive to this field. Literature has its own processes that work alike. Perhaps the best recent analyses of such mechanisms belong to Jacques Rancière who in his book from 2007 entitled *Politique de la littérature*, in an essay that deals with the importance of Flaubert from the point of view of the relation between art and politics, defines literature as a “manière de lier le dicible et le visible, les mots et les choses” (Rancière 2007, 17). The importance of the French novelist lies in the fact that he ushers in a new regime of art, one that modifies the ways in which the understanding of the world used to function. What is essential to note here is that Flaubert doesn’t make this change possible through an ideological intent or a direct engagement at the level of ideas and content, but through stylistic changes, in other words through pure aesthetic means. These changes have a greater political effect than any ideas or themes that the author would have proposed and defended in his texts. An entire democratization of the visible takes place, for example, in *Madame Bovary* and, in Rancière’s view, this was the real scandal that the novel

⁶ There are many authors who pay attention to this and we will send the reader here to the works of only two of them: Louis Marin, *Word and Image*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1988 and Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail: Pour Une Histoire Rapprochée De La Peinture*. Paris: Flammarion, 1992.

⁷ Starting with Aristotle himself who talked about the pleasure one can take in the material dimension of an art. See Aristoteles. *Poetics*; Aristotle. *On Style, and Other Classical Writings on Criticism*; Demetrius. London: Dent, 1947.

produced in its time: the equal importance accorded in his descriptions to people and things, the derailment of the classic hierarchy of genres, the construction of a novel entirely with mediocre characters (in sharp contrast with the Romantic canon of portraying exceptional heroes), etc. “cette formule ne renversait pas seulement les règles des arts poétiques mais tout un ordre du monde, tout un système de rapports entre des manières d’être, des manières de faire et des manières de dire” (Rancière 2007, 19).

The literary is political through and because of the specific features of literature. A clear distinction needs to be made and protected between critical thinking (in which politics is related to the forms that constitute reality through discourse and art) and political ideology (where politics means dogmas and the idea that a certain kind and order of reality precedes any discourse). Walter Benjamin put things very clearly when he made a distinction between a *prise de parti* and a *prise de position*, (Didi-Huberman 2009, 120), which is at the core of his essential essay about theory, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1968). He considers that concepts can become tools for various ideologies (especially fascism) and when that happens it is the responsibility of critical thinking to introduce new concepts, preferably unusable by fascism and containing a revolutionary potential. It is important to note here that this *introduction* is not done through the classic philosophical means, but by following the changes in arts. The essay deals with how the impact of the new technologies in photography and cinema already produces a new way of dealing with the visible. It offers new procedures of doing, new modes of language and new forms of understanding. Exactly what later Jacques Rancière will define as *partage du sensible*: “cette distribution et cette redistribution des places et des identités, ce découpage et ce redécoupage des espaces et des temps, du visible et de l’invisible, du bruit et de la parole constituent ce que j’appelle le partage du sensible” (Rancière 2004 (2), 38).

Literature contributes directly to this process of distribution and redistribution and it does so through its specific means, what the Formalists called *literariness*, in the way in which the stylistic innovations of Flaubert or the technological changes observed by Benjamin were directly political: “c’est en fonction de sa pureté que la matérialité de l’art a pu se proposer comme la matérialité anticipée d’une autre configuration de la communauté” (Rancière 2004 (2), 48). In an essay from 1991 republished later in book form (Rancière 2004 (1)), Rancière makes a distinction between two understandings of politics, both at work in our contemporary world. One of them would be *the police*: “il consiste à organiser le rassemblement des hommes en communauté et leur consentement et repose sur la distribution hiérarchique des places et des fonctions” (Rancière 2004 (1), 112). The other one is called *emancipation*: “il consiste dans le jeu des pratiques guidées par la présupposition de l’égalité de n’importe qui avec n’importe qui et par le souci de la vérifier” (Rancière 2004 (1), 112). It was not by chance that we used the reference to the history of painting. Indeed, visual art has always questioned and verified the equal relevance of people and things, of portraits and still lifes, of light and colour, etc. It has always contained, in different degrees and in opposition to a belief in strict hierarchies and structures, a politics of emancipation. But undoubtedly this could also be a definition of literature. The relation between literary theory and the political left has not been a simple coincidence and the fact that most attacks on theory have come from the political right is also suggestive. There is an important issue at stake today: the place

and condition of literature in the intersection and hierarchy of discourses at all levels: in institutions, in the mass-media, in the mentality of a community, etc. It is probably our responsibility to verify continuously the presumption of equality. In the words of Godard, we should pay attention to the constant *metamorphosis* in art and reality and question the assumption that we see things how they are. And this politics is at work everywhere. We are inside it. So whenever we refuse to talk about the politics of art (and we often do it in the name of art, for the benefit of it), we may well be in fact refusing what is art's very essence.

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