

FICTIONAL GEOGRAPHY VERSUS CULTURAL PREJUDICE IN (POST)MODERN MEDIA CULTURE

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Abstract: Television and the Internet are arguably the most significant channels of information in today's global culture, with relativism, imitation and mass-production of symbols at large in the collective consciousness. In a search for cultural myths, the individual, bombarded by often contradictory news and trapped within the self-referential framework of the media, gets involved in the negotiation, recycling and reconstruction of a chaotic assemblage of information items, against the background of simulation, entertainment and multiculturalism.

Keywords: media, geography, simulation, entertainment, cultural myths.

The contemporary social and cultural scene is one bombarded with information – via television, the Internet, newspapers, radio; it is spread almost compulsively, with an audience perpetually in need of it. Information can be considered necessity or currency, obsession and tool for manipulation, a result of objective inquiry or subjective attempts to distort reality. It can even be considered an act of imagination, as (post)modern society does not have a coherent mechanism to control it. Checking facts and sources has become increasingly difficult, on the one hand, due to the inherent complexity of the media, and, on the other hand, because each portion of news, no matter how fascinating, is quickly replaced by yet another one – the “viral” videos on Youtube or Facebook being perhaps symptomatic for this trend. The individual is simultaneously surrounded by sources of information and incapable of discerning between truth and fake, leaving aside the restless interplay of biased perspectives, blurred visions and hidden messages. If we refer strictly to television, it all becomes an equation with two factors, the screen and the viewer, but with no tangible result; the amount of correct or verifiable information, the lenses used for disclosing information, the filters for the world-views assigned to each broadcast, the cultural and personal background of the viewer are all variables that come into play for deciding the degree to which the individual is capable of making sense of what he sees, shifting between trust and distrust, between an automated suspension of disbelief and an information-induced anxiety.

The most prominent names in postmodern theory – Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Best, Kellner - provide useful insight into the functional particularities of contemporary media culture, which is essentially a postmodernist assemblage of simulations, narratives and shifting perspectives. Unlike modernity, where a certain dose of *a priori* trust was present in society, postmodernity needs justification, proof, with emphasis on the potentially practical side of each narrative (focus brought along by the capitalist perspective). Computer technology and media make the process of legitimating even more complex: on one hand, the huge amount of

information transferred at any moment can significantly speed up the popularization of (certain) narratives, and on the other hand, capitalist rules and political influence may become manipulators of this information, diverting meanings and causing perspectives to shift. The capitalism- and technology-induced dissolution of an inherent trust/ faith in (grand) narratives further transforms knowledge into commodity.

Michel Foucault's critique articulates a break with universalist norms and focuses upon the expansion of phenomena related to discontinuity and difference. Conventionalism is dissolved, reduced to contingencies and fragmentariness. While assessing the interconnectedness between truth, power and knowledge, it is argued that each individual is inevitably subjectified by society and its hierarchies; being part of the hierarchical system represents a form of confinement, of disempowering classification. Historical studies, under such circumstances, merely unravel a specific pattern of subjectivity and the shifting design of power.

Rationality no longer governs the interference between knowledge and power; its place is taken by new social and cultural constructs, which are in turn subject to change and complex influences. As a result, the transformations undergone by the power structures – and, consequently, by their respective effects – cannot be objectively apprehended against a background of suppressed norms and consistency.¹ The polarity of the changes can only be deciphered through the socially and culturally ignited power-mechanisms, and there is no universal standpoint in evaluating their potentiality.

Each and every theoretical and critical attempt to produce a coherent and stable representation of these changes is tied to a specific framework, within which their entire discourse can hold its validity. Modern distinctions are deflected by the decentralized perspectives and the conceptual displacement of postmodernity. The only element that is central to each critical interrogation is the viewpoint, the particular departure of each discourse, the perspective from which every critique is being launched. There is no universally valid standard of appropriation, of adequacy, just like there could not be any unifying principle for different theories or ideologies. This perpetual inconsistency regarding the various standpoints of theory, critical interrogation or philosophical inquiry is not destructive in the case of *separate* elements: each assertion can assimilate a variety of interpretations, can resonate with multiple patterns of discourse.

History is depicted as the obsession of the nineteenth century²: with its mythological resources and themes of development and crisis, that was an age when the projection of space was articulate, an instrumental element in any interpretative inquiry. In opposition to this configuration of space and time, postmodernity brings along a new conceptualization of space, in the epoch of simultaneity – camouflaged in the disappearance of distances due to advances in technology, whereas time has lost its progressive features, its formerly implicit manner of flowing. Bound to inhabit a dislocated moment in time, the individual experiences the

1 Steven Best, Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, Guilford Press, New York, 1997, p.157

2 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", in Edmund Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*, Routledge, London, 1997

continuous agonistics of having simultaneously found out about the limits of physical space and the ongoing desanctification of space and time.³

The structural discourses that modelled the concept of knowledge are analyzed with reference to their historical evolution, and, simultaneously, with reference to particular views on power. Discourse is the framework inside which meaning can develop itself. Foucault is not as much interested in the creation of new or radical forms of knowledge as in the deciphering of its functional mechanisms, its operational features; knowledge is inherently connected to the structural evolution of power.

Each discourse is regarded in disjunction with the others, building its own individual textuality not through regularities or continuity, but rather through establishing a system depending upon the evolutionary aspects of history. The chronology of events is not substantial in itself, it gains meaning through the disarticulated, fragmented perspectives of society – and, consequently, culture. Meaning is not historically achieved, but rather culturally and socially defined, in constant interconnectedness with the changes that inevitably occur. Each discourse is regarded as a manifest potentiality within a specific, coherent context, linguistically defined and culturally altered. In Foucault's view, contextualization becomes the explanatory element in assessing the epistemological breaks along the historical evolution.⁴ Nevertheless, the intrinsic value of a particular discourse, document or critical assertion surpasses the strictly contextual environment; the discontinuities of history are ultimately reflected in the study of value itself, as a sum-total of discursive practices, modulations in applying the norms of understanding and the alternation of discourses. The various procedures employed to decode meaning ultimately influence the very production of discourse through intricate patterns of inclusion, exclusion and transformation according to their relationship with the structures of power.⁵ Foucault examines and further elaborates the concept of discourse, starting with hypostasizing it as a tripartite mechanism, having as functional elements the statement, the discursive function and the discursive formations. The focus is placed on the possibilities of inscribing each sentence⁶ within a particular system of order, in order to let it acquire legitimacy. The hierarchy of the different statements is construed in a context-bound manner as well.

Derrida questioned the consistency of considering signs as vehicles for meaning. No sign could be used, explained or decoded without the complex relationship with a *system* of signs; any attempt at encoding truth or reality becomes meaningless, futile, unless the entire system comes into play. Individual signs contain no value for providing adequate, wholesome meaning, it is the differences between signs, their common encoding within a network of signs that can be regarded as constructing meaning. Linguistic chains, systems of signs, relativism are central issues in Derrida's works, employed to validate the idea of limit in human perception, in our view of reality. Functioning exclusively inside particular conceptual systems, one is bound to, and limited by the boundaries of these systems, thus being disabled in ever finding

3 Foucault contends that the anxiety undergone by humankind has much more to do with space, than with time, because of the cumulative effect of science and the philosophical perspective on it – as even the most basic oppositions between various categories of space are re-articulated in our times.

4 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 47

5 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in Hubert Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 208 – 226

6 *Ibid.*, p. 211

ultimate or final truths about reality, or a direct, objective relationship with it. Our perception of the world is perpetually mediated by artificial, linguistic, culturally constructed categories or dichotomies that we eventually use to construct (or re-construct) metanarratives; even if the individual manages to decipher a certain lineage of meaning, it is not objectively valid – it is always hierarchial, labyrinthical, with gaps to be filled using other signs, however disarticulated these might be.

The entire mechanism of deconstruction is by no means purely linguistic, nor textual; it presupposes a broadened definition of text, which can be applied to cinematography, free speech, gestures, visual arts. By enlarging the conceptual area of the text, Derrida is able to expand the limits of his theory so as to include the most various forms of communication, the most diverse social, political or artistic contexts.

A marked link between Derrida and postmodernism is scepticism; deconstruction undermines the authority of the text, challenging meanings and exposing unstable or contradicting standpoints. Denying the logocentric perspective and its ability to act as a foundation for retrieving truth or reason, deconstruction eventually aims at the conclusion that truth and meaning are forever to be captive in a game of difference.⁷

Justin Lewis pinpoints a certain inability in the process of technological advancement, highlighting the possibility for such developments to “occur more rapidly than our ability to understand their social consequences” – and television and Internet best exemplify this idea, against the background of rampant ignorance and a strong tendency for television to “monopolize our free time.”⁸ The frequent exposure to cultural myths, coupled with the above-mentioned ignorance and the inability – or lack of desire – to gain a deeper insight through checking information, leads to a level of cultural prejudice which could be seen as a source of entertainment, but can actually shape worldviews and behaviours, especially in a globalized-but-unregulated world. This phenomenon is perhaps best observed in television shows specifically designed for entertainment purposes, like “Last Week Tonight” with John Oliver, where one can hear humorous definitions of countries and nations, but which can subtextually uncover deeply ingrained cultural misconceptions. Examples are numerous: Japan is “Earth’s pervert uncle”, Mexico is “Spicy Canada”, Denmark is “also known as “Wrong Norway”, “Different Sweden” and “That’s actually not Finland””, Germany is “a country whose idea of a bedtime story is two children being left to die in the forest, before being nearly cooked and eaten, and then murdering an old woman”, Greece is “a country of – and in – ruins” or “the most recent Greek tragedy”, while the United Kingdom is, alternately, “Earth’s least magic Kingdom”, Europe’s America” and “the slightly damp corpse of the British Empire”. As entertaining as these definitions might be for the audience, they become part of the so-called “media spectacle”, a result of the media’s attempt to increase its own profit and which ends up shaping political and social life.⁹ Consequently, such cultural myths become pseudo-norms in the mainstream definitions of countries and nations and provide the conceptual raw material for cultural prejudice and misconceptions, with an uncontrollable influence over generalized patterns of behaviour .

7 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978

8 Justin Lewis, *The Ideological Octopus. An Exploration of Television and Its Audience*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p.14

9 Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle*. New York: Routledge, 2003, p.1

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