Philosophy Insights

General Editor: Mark Addis

Critical Theory
An Introduction

Jennifer Rich

Is 'the truth' 'out there'?

Publication Data

Reading and Listening Options

* To use the navigation tools, the search facility, and other features of the Adobe toolbar, this Ebook should be read in default view.
* To navigate through the contents use the hyperlinked 'Bookmarks' at the left of the screen.
* To search, expand the search column at the right of the screen or click on the binocular symbol in the toolbar.
* For ease of reading, use <CTRL+L> to enlarge the page to full screen
* Use <Esc> to return to the full menu.
* Hyperlinks (if any) appear in Blue Underlined Text.

Licence and permissions

An Introduction to Critical Theory

Jennifer Rich

A Note on the Author

Jennifer A. Rich is an Assistant Professor of English at Hofstra University. Her pub-
lished work includes essays on film, rhetoric, Shakespeare and composition.
She is currently working on an overview of Feminist Theory, forthcoming from the
Humanities Insights Series.

Contents

Introduction

"The Truth is Out There"

In the 1990s, an American television show *The X Files* featured two intrepid FBI agents who were charged with solving 'X files', cases that were unsolvable through traditional FBI methods. These cases defied rational approach: science wouldn't explain them; psychology was useless; motivation was difficult if not impossible to establish; the X files, in their very nature, rendered positivist explanations—ones that rely on the careful observation of phenomenon—quaint, useless and naïve. The agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, were frequently oppositional in their approach—although their differences complemented each other in their attempts to explain the phenomena they investigated. While Dana Scully was a medical scientist, believing passionately in the ability of science to explain all phenomena, Fox Mulder was a discontented behavioural psychologist—a maverick who believed just as passionately that conventional scientific methods were useless against what he saw were the manifestations of governmental conspiracy manipulating extraterrestrial phenomena for malevolent purposes (although sometimes 'X file' cases were extra-governmental and extra-extra terrestrial in nature). For Mulder, parapsychology, the occult, and extra-terrestrial abductees were the sole sources for reliable—if positivistically immune—explanations. Despite their considerable philosophical differences, Mulder and Scully shared a belief that would become the mantra for the show itself, that the 'THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE.' The opening sequence of *The X Files*, scored with spooky music and featuring Munch-like faces, ended with a shot of the sky overwritten with the words 'the truth is out there' in capital letters. Thus, Mulder and Scully both believed in some kind of discoverable truth immune from governmental manipulations, psychological neuroses and all of the other elements that might compromise its clear apprehension.

The theorists in this volume would all disagree with Mulder and Scully. Although their theories differ considerably in methodology, in philosophical outlook, and in expression, they all contain within them one common thread—that is, they no longer believe in a 'Truth' free from the compromising complications of the nature of lan-

guage, culture, power relations, rhetoric, discourse racism, and so on. This notion of a 'Truth'—outside of culture, outside of language—is roundly rejected by all the theorists that we will study. Their interest, then, is not so much how to discover a new *real* truth, but how to understand the way in which what we recognize as 'truth' comes about.

Russian Formalism

Russian formalism (1910–1930) was a movement devoted to creating a *science* of literary theory, particularly in regard to the study of poetic language. Formalists were keen to establish literary study as a discipline as rigorous as psychology and sociology. In so doing, Russian formalists adopted a variety of methodologies: Viktor Shklovsky, for example (a pre-eminent formalist in his day), approached literary texts as if they were machines and the literary critic the mechanic who is able to isolate the text's internal workings. As George Steiner remarks in considering Shklovsky's works, 'Literary works, according to this model, resemble machines: they are the result of an intentional human activity in which a specific skill transforms raw material into a complex mechanism suitable for a particular purpose' (*Russian Formalism* 18). Shklovsky's model, however, was unable to account for literary growth and change, so it was quickly and quietly abandoned by the formalist school.

Roman Jakobson

Roman Jakobson's contributions to this school of theory remain influential: they incorporate linguistics into literary study in ways that anticipate the structuralist movement, although he was not Saussurian (see below) in his approach to linguistics. Jakobson differed from other formalists in methodology but not in intention. He too was concerned to develop a clear science of the text. His approach, however, is marked by a reliance on linguistics in order to reveal the characteristic that defines literature as literature, or more particularly, poetic language as poetic. The question that dominates his most famous work 'Linguistics and Poetics' is, quite simply, 'what makes a verbal message a work of art?' (Richter 852)

Linguistics and Poetics (1960)

Published in 1960, some thirty years after the heyday of Russian formalism, 'Linguistics and Poetics' is Jakobson's manifesto of critical practice. It carefully and clearly sets out the tenets and methodology of formalist analysis. For this reason, it is important

to consider in order to understand the particular contribution Jakobson makes to both critical theory and literary studies.

The article begins with a call for the recognition of 'Poetics' as a necessary subfield of literary studies. Poetics, according to Jakobson, is the study of what distinguishes a literary, poetic verbal message from one that is not literary or poetic. It asks, what linguistically identifies poetry as poetry? How can we distinguish poetry from other forms of communication in speech or writing? This may seem like a rather naïve question—poems, usually, are pretty easy to spot—they rhyme, they have regular meter, they have distinct line breaks and so on. Yet if we remember that one of William Carlos Williams' (an American poet) notes to his wife was published as a poem, then the question takes on a new urgency.[1] And indeed, as Jakobson will argue, clearly non-poetical verbal utterances, such as political slogans, can have all the linguistic qualities of a poem. For Jakobson, poetics must be investigated via linguistics since 'poetics deals with problems of verbal structure, just as the analysis of painting is concerned with pictorial structure' (Richter 852). Since linguistics is the study of how language functions it is the only appropriate vehicle for understanding the specific verbal and communicative attributes of poetry. In fact, Jakobson argues that poetics should not be considered a sub-field of literary studies, but rather 'an integral part of linguistics' (Richter 852).

Since poetics is part of linguistics for Jakobson, the critic must first establish what she understands as the basic constituents of a verbal utterance; only after so doing, can she understand where to place poetics in this overall structure. Jakobson is keen to distinguish his understanding of the constituent parts of a speech act (a speech act is any intentional utterance, such as 'where's the bus-stop?') from other linguistics who have similarly anatomized speech-acts. For Jakobson, traditional linguistics—such as the theories advanced by his contemporaries C. F. Voegelin and E. Sapir—are flawed because they do not account for the emotional register of language—what Jakobson calls 'the emotive'. The emotive, for many of his Jakobson's contemporaries, was not considered integral to the study of linguistics/speech acts, but was rather relegated to an annoying distraction. Jakobson rescues the emotive from this disregard and considers it a key element of communication. The emotive controls inflection and as such determines the way in which a speech act is received by the listener. Illustrating this point, Jakobson provides the example of an actor who at an audition was asked to say 'this evening' in forty different ways, all with distinct inflections registering a different emotion.

---

1   See the poem 'This is Just to Say' by William Carlos Williams.

Is this sample what you are looking for?

If so, please browse our lists
or look for different formats at:

http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk

or buy this PDF book

HERE

About Humanities Ebooks