

The Dynamics of Cultural Writing in Postmodernity

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the upheaval generated by the change of epistemes, from modernity to postmodernity (structuralism to poststructuralism) at the level where it is not only self-assumed, but also stated: at the writing level. On final analysis, the outlines of what might be called the “agenda” of poststructuralism will reveal an opposition to meaning, to rigid structure, to universality, to transcendence and an embracing of endless difference, of free play, of irreducible immanence, or ‘here and now’ within-the-world-ness. It conceptualises the relation to the other in general. The cultural writing thus becomes a companionship, hospitable to the movement of otherness.

1. Introduction

“Opposition ceases its labour and difference begins its play”. This is Gilles Deleuze’s terse statement in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, underwriting the critical malaise of (post-)modern critics that makes them long for a “beyond opposition” and measure swords with the structuralist agenda that set it in place. (Deleuze, 2006)

To all intents and purposes, the present work is meant to make avail of the potential interpretative yield that derives from the denegation of the structuralist acquis, in the aftermath of which an ever-burgeoning “post” conceptualisation is seen to work its wiles in displacing the conceptual “obsolete”. Though not mentioned *expressis verbis* throughout the undertaken analysis, the intentionality underlying it is to evade an “archaeological”, and “archivistic” definitional procedure which would extract “samples” of structuralist or post-structuralist thought for museification. Rather, the analytic purpose is to precipitate the crisis and to expose the newcomer as not only rule-breaking, but also rule-making.

To be in keeping with the set aim, the article investigates the upheaval generated by the change of epistemes at the only level where it is not only self-assumed, but also declared, stated: at the writing level. By means of example, James Clifford’s self-reflexive assessment of the new writing protocols (in anthropology), elaborately conducted in *Introduction: Partial Truths* and *On Ethnographic Allegory* (Clifford, 2003; 2008) sets the “post”-structuralist paradigm by a refusal of “defleshing” the empirical cultural reality and reducing it to neat, unambiguous models and taxonomies, which is tantamount to a refusal of the structuralist centripetal interiority, where the world gathered around the disjuncture set by the binary oppositions. Instead, he opts for a centrifugal exteriority, for the non-subsumability of reality to a conventional, ossified grid of comprehension, for writing as “invention”, not as “method”.

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2. Body of the Paper

Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appears mainly as writing, as collecting. Viewed most broadly, perhaps, it is a mode of travel, a way of understanding and getting around in a diverse world that, since the sixteenth century, has been cartographically unified.

Ethnography's tradition is that of Herodotus and of Montesquieu's Persian. It looks obliquely at all collective arrangements, distant or nearby. It makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian. Ethnography cultivates an engaged clarity", Clifford professes, "like that urged by Virginia Woolf: "Let us never cease from thinking – what is this "civilization" in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men? (Clifford, 2003, p. 2)

One of the principal functions of cartography is "orientation" (a term left over time when Europe travelled and invented itself with respect to a fantastically unified "East"). But in the twentieth century ethnography reflects new "spatial practices," (de Certeau, 1986, vii) new forms of dwelling and circulating.

Classic ethnography, Clifford recapitulates, used writing as a method in investigating the aforementioned "spatial practices". It demanded "transparency of representation", sheer factuality and objectivity. So, again, "writing reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, "writing up" results.

Against the grain of "classicism", the essays in the anthology – Clifford strongly maintains – struggle with these received definitions, in an attempt at investigating the limits of representation itself. In fact, they want to wipe the slate clean and do away altogether with representation:

They assume that academic and literary genres interpenetrate and that the writing of cultural descriptions is properly experimental and ethical. Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. It undermines overly transparent modes of authority, and it draws attention to the historical predicament of ethnography: the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation of cultures. (Clifford, 2003, p. 2)

Anthropologic knowledge could not be the property of a single discourse or discipline: the condition of off-centredness in a world of distinct meaning systems, a state of being in culture while looking at a culture, permeates twentieth-century writing.

Thus, to an important degree, the truth recorded is a truth *provoked* by ethnography – as Clifford acknowledges.

As mentioned earlier, the investigation will be distrustful of establishing clear-cut, black and white definitions, whereby prioritising or privileging one methodological "trend" to the other. Consequently, post-structuralism will be exposed, in concurrence with Vattimo's theorisation, (Vattimo, 1993; 2002) as an instantiation of "weak thinking" and epistemological laxity.

The same gestaltist, holistic way of perceiving reality, that bracketed the world and left structure in its stead is rejected not only in cultural criticism, but also in psychoanalytic theory. In the wake of Jacques Lacan, for whom the structuralist abstractedness took the shape of a linguistically organised unconscious, advocates of "post"-structuralism will make a plea for corporality, to the point of declaring – as Didier Anzieu does (Anzieu, 1996) – that the unconscious is the body.

Consequently, the poststructuralist solution is constructed on multiple tiers, be it as free play, indeterminacy, “partiality”, which counter the refuted rigidity professed before, be it as non-abstractedness (as is the case with psychoanalysis), which opts out of the norms and takes up a (post-)modern anomie (a+nomos, lack of laws), a (sometimes stigmatised) epistemological laxity.

As commonly known, Martin Heidegger described the status of culture in late modernity as a time of the end of the metaphysics. (Heidegger, 2008) His words perhaps fully saturate the context of what might be called, in Gaston Bachelard’s terms, an epistemological break: the “emergence” of poststructuralism as a counter to the structuralist tradition, which was ascribed, in the aftermath, a position in which thought was deemed as conventionalised and ossified. (Bachelard, 2016)

Since Aristotle conceived of the beginning of philosophy in wonder – the *Grundstimmung* of philosophical thought, as Heidegger calls it – philosophy requires that it always be re-enacted as if for the first time. A radical break with the tradition and its limits – as was the one heralded by poststructuralism secures the freshness of the beginning of a thinking that lives up to the initial pathos of the philosophical *thaumazein* (‘wonder’). As Julia Kristeva said, in *System and the Speaking Subject*: “The moment of transgression is the key moment of practice: we can speak of practice wherever there is a transgression of systematicity”. (Kristeva, 1997)

In my attempt to hark back to the ideas that shaped this era, I will give a cursory glance and inspection to the agglutination of events and the ideology that triggered them. The end result of such an investigation, meant to have history “lower its defences” and give away its secrets will, hopefully, provide us with the “toolkit” necessary in a later textual application.

Quintessentially, structuralism used linguistics to find order everywhere and, in the process, reduced the densely textured facts of reality to value systems, which were indeed logically equivalent, yet per force, substantively different from their referents.

According to Rivkin and Ryan, the three major assumptions of structuralism were the following: “the notion that knowable structures underlie empirical events, the assumption that knowledge operates according to procedures that are axiomatic or not open to question, and the belief that reality is not radically contingent, not a play of forces without order or a series of accidents or events without meaning or logical sequence.” (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 38) Consequently, structuralism is to be equated with a “desire to find knowable orders everywhere, to break down the flow of the world into unities that could be understood as so many languages or orders of meaning”. (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 40) It spoke in the voice and style of high reason: order, meaning, categorization, grammars, logic.

Levi-Strauss allows a privileged place to the linguistic model in his anthropological approach, making avail of Jakobson’s phonological templates: the binary oppositions. (Levi-Strauss, 1988) Given his attention to the decoding of signs, Levi-Strauss might be said to have oriented anthropology in a cultural direction (Dosse, 2006, p. 129), safeguarding, at the same time, an ambition for unity. The totality to which Levi-Strauss aspires is, consequently, “in compliance with Marcel Mauss’s ambition to construct ‘the total social fact’” (Dosse, 2006, p. 130), engulfing under its investigating umbrella the societies without history, without written records, globe wide.

The anthropologist hopes to gain access to the unconscious of social practices, whose complex combinations of rules he would reconstitute for all human societies.

Linguistics will have powerful echoes in psychoanalysis, too. We need only look into Lacan’s statement: “Linguistics can serve here as a guide, since it has the role of spearheading contemporary anthropology, and this shouldn’t be lost on us.” (Lacan, 1989, p. 45) The

reference is explicitly made to Levi-Strauss, the one who, in Lacan's view, had advanced in the domain of Freudian unconscious farther than professional psychoanalysts, and the key to his success was the employing of the linguistic structures.

Lacan's re-reading of Freud is performed in Saussurian vein, placing the emphasis on the synchronic dimension:

[T]he reference to linguistics will introduce us into method which, by distinguishing les synchronic from diachronic structures in language, allows us to better comprehend the different values taken by our langue in the interpretation of resistance and of transfer. (Lacan, 1989: 56)

This makes him a full-time advocate of the structuralist paradigm, whereof his radical conceiving of the subject as the product of language, stated in the famous formula according to which: "the unconscious is structured as a language". In other words, only language can lodge the essence of humanity. As a consequence, Lacan identifies the Saussurian sign, abstracted from its referent, as the quasi-ontological locus of human condition: "I we wanted to characterise this doctrine of the language, we would have to say that it is altogether creationist. Language creates." (Lacan, 1989, p. 48)

So, he offers psychoanalysis the possibility to defy philosophy, to rub shoulders with it, by de-medicalising the discourse on the unconscious and proposing, instead, the unconscious *as* discourse.

On assessment of the epistemological regime which governs both ethnology and psychoanalysis at this stage, Foucault remarks: "we can say about these two what Levi-Strauss was saying about ethnology: that they dissolve the man." (qtd. in Dosse, 2006, p. 39) Structuralism is to be construed, consequently, as "the guardian of man's absence." (qtd. in Dosse, 2006, p. 41)

At an abstract level of existence, the textual one, Barthes will, in his turn, decree the absence (in extremis, the death) of "man" in its auctorial instantiation: "Language is, therefore, a subject in itself, which is substituted for the notion of author. The search for a hidden, ultimate meaning of the text is futile, since it rests on a notion of the subject which is, in fact, an absence. Literature only enunciates the absence of said subject". And the *écriture* ('writing') seals its disappearance: "From the moment an event is recounted, for intransitive purposes...the author enters their own death, l'écriture commences." (qtd. in Dosse, 2006, p. 52)

Jacques Derrida's three books *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference* and *Speech and Phenomenon* constitute a major landmark in the history of poststructuralism. His principal quarrel is with the metaphysical tradition, which he calls "logocentrism". The de-construction he undertakes, wedged at the very root of this logocentrism is meant to allow for plurality, dissemination, tearing apart the reference to a structural centre, to the uniqueness of a structuring principle. Metaphors of uncertainty and even "chaos" replace those of order and systematicity. Rather than conceptualise the world – and, adjacently, culture – in terms of one-way determinations, we might, then, see the poststructuralist operation as "rhizomorphic", in Deleuzian parlance:

To be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to new uses. We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. (Deleuze, 2006, p. 62)

The various binary couples – signified/signifier, nature/culture, speech/writing, which were the very instruments of analysis in structuralism are, one by one, re-examined, pluralised, disseminated, in an endless play which stretches, dismantles and dissects the meaning of words. An almighty, forged Derridean language is set in motion to destabilise the traditional oppositions. Ironically, Derrida takes over his ambivalent concepts from tradition proper. (Dosse, 2006, p. 89) From Plato he “borrows” the term *pharmakon*, which is neither the cure, nor the poison, neither the good, nor the evil. From Rousseau he “salvages” the *supplément* lost to memory: neither a more, nor a less. All these concepts, which are as many instruments of deconstruction, have one thing in common: “They erase the opposition from within and from without.” (Gasché, 1995, p. 25)

On final analysis, the outlines of what might be called the “agenda” of poststructuralism will reveal an opposition to meaning, to rigid structure, to universality, to transcendence and an embracing of endless difference, of free play, of irreducible immanence, or ‘here and now’ within-the-world-ness. It conceptualises the relation to the other in general.

The ‘other’ is a term that can name other people or other things, but it also implies the idea of a relation beyond oneself to something or someone else. We all appear to be identities, to possess selves, but the mark of ‘other’ people is on us in the form of relations or experiences we have had with them. Similarly, no object stands apart from some relation to a field of perception containing other objects in which it is situated.

Cultural writing thus becomes a companionship, or, rather, readiness for companionship, hospitable to the movement of otherness.

3. Conclusion

James Clifford’s (a chronologically “post”-structuralist anthropologist) writings, in which he ponders upon the “partiality of truth” and *On Ethnographic Allegory*, both of which are meant as explorations into anthropological *writing* – the main ethnological instrument – wherein the (cultural) “other” is lodged probes the extent to which writers, in the aftermath of structuralism, recede in absence, and equally, whether they downsize their contribution, stepping behind de-emotionalised forms and allow the (sometimes) cumbersome presence of the other to have its say. The expectations are that the cultural text should emerge from its cocoon-den and provide an answer to a question: can it seize upon the otherness it witnesses and embed it within itself?

Clifford’s *Partial Truths* can, thus, be perceived as illustrative of a historical and theoretical movement, of a conceptual shift, consisting in a sharp separation of form from content to its utmost degree, the fetishizing of form:

We begin not with participant-observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts. No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter. (Clifford, 2003, p. 2)

The critical attitude I investigated, then, is one that lodges hospitality, not closure. And such an attitude, in post-structuralist vein, is one of a deep hospitality, transforming reading into an *event*, arising through the defamiliarizing contact with the unknown. And, if properly performed, it could be ticked out as a successful attempt to bypass the structuralist reading protocols, where the text was, in Clifford’s words “always-already-read”, the text paralysed, the cultural event or history arrested. (Clifford, 2008)

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