Anxieties of Commentary: Interpretation in Recent Literary, Film and Cultural Criticism

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Abstract

This thesis claims that a distinctive anxiety of commentary has entered literary, film and cultural criticism over the last thirty years, gathering particular force in relation to debates around postmodernism and fictocriticism and those debates which are concerned to determine the most appropriate ways of discussing popular cultural texts. I argue that one now regularly encounters the figure of the hesitant, self-doubting cultural critic, a person who wonders whether the critical discourse about to be produced will prove either redundant (since the work will already include its own commentary) or else prove a misdescription of some kind (since the criticism will be unable to convey the essence of, say, the popular cultural object).

In order to understand the emergence of this figure of the self-doubting cultural critic as one who is no longer confident that available forms of critical description are adequate and/or as one who is worried that the critical writing produced will not connect with a readership that might also have formed a constituency, the thesis proposes notions of “critical occasions,” “critical assemblages,” “critical postures,” and “critical alibis.” These are presented as a way of indicating that “interpretative occasions” are simultaneously rhetorical and ethical. They are site-specific occasions in the sense that the critic activates a rhetorical-discursive apparatus and are also site-specific in the sense that the critic is using the cultural object (book, film) as an occasion to call him or herself into question as one who requires a further work of self-stylisation (which might take the form of a practice of self-problematisation).
The thesis focusses this general theoretical discussion on a series of case-studies of films (Gillian Leahy's *My Life Without Steve*, Hollywood teen movies, Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*, Nicholas Roeg's *Bad Timing*) and novels (Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Jane DeLynn's *Lon Juan in the Village*). On each occasion the unit of analysis becomes both the text (novel, film) and the public space of critical debate into which it is pulled. Thus the writing that attaches to these texts — both in the form of immediate journalistic reviews and the later academic writing — is regarded together with the text in question, as forming the overall unit of textual analysis.

The thesis regularly moves between a discussion of meta-theoretical issues (for example, the literary criticism of Ian Hunter, the debate about how to constitute popular cultural texts as objects of academic critical analysis, the debates around postmodernism, fictocriticism and the paraliterary, the positions on film criticism contained in David Bordwell's *Making Meaning*) and an assembling of its own readings of particular texts. This is done to keep in play a connection between the performance of one's own interpretative occasion and the meditation on what is involved (ethically, rhetorically) in the performance of such a critical occasion.