
The Polysystem Theory and Cultural Studies

I. WHAT IS CULTURE?

It is a common phenomenon that discourse on *culture*, *cultural value*, *cultural identity*, etc. all too often treats the concept of *culture* as un-problematic. Theoretical or academic as well as practical or political discourse on culture shows, however, a number of recurring characteristics that are, at best unsettling, and at worst manipulative. The use of the concept *culture* presents different problems. Firstly, the concept of *culture* is defined and used in different, sometimes contradictory ways. Secondly, with the rise of "Cultural Studies" as a new discipline it is more and more evident that scholars coming from different established disciplines bring along their own terminology and methodology. Looking at *culture* from the perspective of different disciplines, terminologies and methodologies, obviously colors the way the object of study is perceived, described and explained.¹ Moreover, *culture* is often defined in an a-historical, ontological way, as if it were one fixed and homogeneous phenomenon that exists and can be grasped outside any historical context of time and space. *Culture* is often linked to *cultural identity* where *identity* is considered to be a pre-given object that can be fixed and preserved once and for all. All too often, the definition of *culture* is left implicit, the underlying supposition being: "Everyone understands the concept the way we do." Also, *culture* is far too often linked to *cultural value* where a normative approach restricts culture implicitly to those phenomena that have cultural value. *Culture* is then linked with excellence as opposed to inferiority, good taste as opposed to bad taste, quality as opposed to trash. In this context, *popular culture* or *commercial culture* are a contradiction in terms. This approach becomes all the more problematic if the criteria for value judgment are left implicit. One last problem is that the concept of *culture* is often used for different manipulative purposes.

1 For example, Even-Zohar's "Factors and Dependencies in Culture: A Revised Outline for Polysystem Research" (in this volume; in my article referred to by FD) is clearly rooted in a linguistic tradition, whereas the present article bears the stamp of an audio-visual communicational approach.

The question that comes to mind when reflecting on these observations is: How can the functioning of a phenomenon such as culture be studied if there is no certainty about the definition itself? Furthermore, if the concept of culture is used to serve different goals, how can we detect the "real" arguments that are hidden behind the examined discourse?

II. CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE POLYSYSTEM APPROACH

I am not suggesting that the Polysystem approach (PS)² can solve all problems in the field of cultural studies. However, since the PS approach has shown itself to be quite effective in the study of complex, dynamic and heterogeneous phenomena such as literature, cinema and art, it might provide research with some interesting questions and, eventually, some interesting answers. The observations mentioned above suggest that culture could be studied as a polysystem, i.e., as "a heterogeneous and ever-changing set of parameters with the help of which human beings organize their life" (FD 3-4).

A FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Since the very definition of *culture* remains quite problematic, it might be interesting to begin with a dynamic functional inquiry about the *functioning* of the concept in a particular time-space context. In the PS framework, a functional definition of the object of study refers to the way an object of study *functions*, that is the way it presents itself and/or the way it is perceived by one or more users within a particular time-space context. Applying this method, a fixed, static definition of *culture* is replaced by a dynamic description of the way the concept has functioned in a particular historical context. This approach might confirm at least two hypotheses: "Every definition is relative and largely determined by the position and interests of the user." I am referring to Even-Zohar who draws attention to "the possibility of re-defining objects independently of the institutions which may have been established to uphold them" (FD). The concept of *culture* varies in time and space, according to different parameters that might be interesting to study. On this point, I join Even-Zohar when he hypothesizes a link "between system heterogeneity and change on the one hand, and between change and structure on the other" (FD).

A DESCRIPTIVE VERSUS A NORMATIVE APPROACH

Both political and scientific discourses on culture do not always distinguish

clearly between a descriptive and a normative approach. The descriptive approach examines how culture *has functioned* until now. The normative approach stipulates how culture *should have functioned* or *should function* from now on. Within a PS approach, I would plead for a clearer distinction between a descriptive and a normative approach. At the same time, I propose to make a clearer distinction between objectives for research on the one hand and objectives for training or practice (for example national or European politics) on the other. Keeping these pursuits separated is a *sine qua non* for a better understanding of the possible relationships between historical research and training or applied politics. Finally, a descriptive approach might help to clarify in a more detailed way how applied cultural politics have functioned in the past. On this basis, it might be able to provide political suggestions for future practice.

CULTURE AS A (POLY)SYSTEM

In the PS approach, a *system* can be defined as a *phenomenon perceived by the analyst as a unity characterized by a type of non-arbitrariness*. This non-arbitrariness presupposes some systemic coherence. Its organization permits the analyst to distinguish the system from other systemic units. A system can be complex and dynamic, the hypothesis continues. It is complex when it is composed of several sub-systems. Moreover, systemic relations are hypothesized between systems to form clusters of systems or polysystems. On the whole, this is not a revolutionary new idea. In cultural anthropology the concepts of *subsystem* and *polysystem* correspond rather well to the well-known concepts of *substratum* and *superstratum* or *superstructure*. The system is dynamic when it changes in time and space, but the dynamic nature of a system does not necessarily endanger its identification as one system. Finally, systems are considered to be heterogeneous in many respects. Not all aspects or processes within the system function in a systematic way. But how can these theoretical principles be applied to the study of culture?

CULTURE AS A COMPLEX AND COMPOUND SYSTEM

It might well be that until now, too often, the concept of *culture* has been dealt with as a unique and homogeneous concept, while in fact people refer implicitly to different sub-aspects of culture or use a different concept of *culture* all together. In this respect, publications by the European Union provide an interesting working-field. For example, one only has to read the White-and-Green-book on the EU and audio-visual media to encounter numerous contradictions and paradoxes. Whereas some authors defend a globalizing policy, others support a localizing policy. A closer look often reveals that whenever a globalizing point of view is taken, *culture* usually refers to technology or economics, whereas when *culture* is used to justify a localizing policy, it

2 Here, I refer of course to the writings of Itamar Even-Zohar, Gideon Toury, José Lambert, and to my own reflections (see the Works Cited).

frequently serves political objectives. These hypotheses suggest that the concept of *culture* is too compound and far too complex to serve as a solid basis for research or politics. It seems more fruitful to break it down into sub-systems or components, and to describe or explain each of the components separately. Such an approach might provide a more detailed view on the way *culture* functions. It might also reveal some hidden agendas on the level of economics or politics where the culture label is used to serve more specific objectives. In short, a functionalist approach forces analysts and politicians to call a cat a cat. If the so-called "preservation of cultural identity" actually comes down to political protectionism or economical imperialism, would it not be better to drop the euphemism altogether?

CULTURE AS A DYNAMIC SYSTEM

A PS-approach might reveal that cultural units do not necessarily coincide with other pre-established unities such as national, political, linguistic, religious or other unities. According to the way *culturemes* (see FD) are defined, a dynamic functionalist approach might reveal that, on the basis of new types of experiences, new cultural communities or new *culturemes* are constituted. Communicational techniques such as E-mail, electronic discussion groups and the World Wide Web change the way information is produced, passed on, retrieved and processed. Post-structuralism has insisted on the fact that the receiver never plays a passive role in communication. These new types of communication nevertheless upset the traditional roles of the traditional partners on the traditional communicational chessboard. Shifts occur on the level of interactivity, on the level of one-way or two-way communication, on the level of the number of senders and receivers connected, and in the very nature of the traditional communicative functions themselves. New production processes are created which require new competencies that are combined in new ways. New types of messages are created according to new types of conventions, and new skills are required from the reception side to retrieve and process the information. In other words, these new technologies install new types of communications which in turn install new rules of the game. As a consequence, some supplementary questions can be added to Even-Zohar's methodological suggestions in FD.

How does new communicational or information technology (IT) involve innovations on these levels? How do repertoires innovate themselves? How do new communicational conventions install themselves? How do relations evolve on the level of the traditional communicational functions (producer, product, consumer...)? How do new communicational techniques upset traditional functions of "teachers," marketers and students or marketees? Do students, for example, still become "willy-nilly" some sort of consumers, or do IT-revolutions substantially change their communicative role as well as that of the traditional "teachers?" How do new communicational technologies disrupt/deconstruct

existing traditional (for example national?) cultures, and re-constitute and conduct new types of communities, and as a consequence new cultural groups and new cultural identities with new cultural values?

Before answering these questions, we will have to examine more in detail how cultural identities are constructed, how they function and eventually, how they change. Morley suggests that the answers to these questions are related to our knowledge of "the construction of our sense of ourselves, as individuals and as 'members' of communities at various levels, whether as members of families, regions, nations, or communities of other types (81-82).

(TRANSLATION) THEORY AND CULTURAL TRANSFER

The notion of *culture* as a dynamic system leads us to the concept of *cultural transfer*. How does cultural transfer occur? How do acculturation processes take place?³ In the field of Film Adaptation Studies, Asheim and Bluestone have already described some striking examples of American films adapting European literature (see also Cattrysse 1992, 174 ff). It is interesting to notice for instance how cultural transfer and/or acculturation has been studied in terms of "transfers of meaning," as a "passageway from the *culture of origin* toward integration into the *adoptive culture*" (Turgeon 34). In his article on "From Acculturation to Cultural Transfer," Turgeon stresses that:

[He] would like to broaden the concept [of cultural transfer, P.C.] to ... identify mechanisms governing cultural transfer in societies of origin as well as in societies of reception. While recognizing that such transfer is responsive to given needs in the country of reception, at a particular moment in its history and in line with previous borrowings, we plan to study examples of cultural transfer through the dynamics of appropriation and adaptation. ... The goal is ... to pinpoint the actual mechanisms for intercultural exchange over time. (37, 41)

Concepts like *societies of origin* and *societies of reception* still reveal a binary approach and the presence of these terms already suggests the closeness of the applied method with the PS target-oriented terminology and methodology.⁴ Another interesting point is the original French term *le fonctionnement* which has been translated as *actual mechanisms*. The analysis focuses on the *functioning* of the object of study in its historical context. Turgeon borrows here from Certeau, who is a well-known figure in functional historical cultural studies and his *L'Écriture de l'histoire*.

3 Questions like these are addressed particularly in the field of Translation Studies (Even-Zohar, Toury et al.).

4 I have defended the advantages of a multilateral approach elsewhere (1997).

CULTURE AS AN EMBEDDED SYSTEM

Culture does not function in an isolated way. The study of the (systemic) relations between systems and subsystems can give rise to an interesting series of questions: Is it possible to study/manage two adjacent (sub-)systems — for example the political and the economic, or the aesthetic and technological systems — as entirely separated? How are sub-systems related to each other? How do they constitute or change a global cultural polysystem? Only a thorough study of the interrelations between (sub-)systems and their combined functioning within their global context will show if and how this is possible. Frow speaks in this respect of "the relationality of cultural forms" and the "interlocking system of relations" (35). Here also, the object of study seems well suited to the PS approach; or in other words, the PS approach seems befitting to examine such phenomena: not to study sub-systems of the polysystem *culture* as isolated and static domains, but as dynamic historical entities which entertain continuously changing relations with each other.

CONCLUSION

The study of culture assembles know-how, methodology and terminology from different established disciplines. This situation obviously provokes meta-theoretical communicational problems and complicates the comparison of research results. On the other hand, it has the advantage of opening up different points of view in an interdisciplinary environment. Having applied the PS-approach with success to phenomena such as (translated) literature, cinema and art, one might suspect that the approach also proves to be effective in the broader domain of culture research. The obvious strong points are: the historical, descriptive analysis of the object of study, its dynamic-functional "definition," and the descriptive-explanatory subtlety of the terminology and methodology. On a meta-theoretical level, the PS-approach allows taking into account and applying principles of readership: even when reading research texts such as interviews, letters, diaries, etc., the position of the researcher as a reader is always taken into account. This implies that systems, norms and models are not objective, ontological observables, but constructed entities resulting from scientific analysis, that is, analytical reading. The purpose of the meta-theoretical reflection is not to hide this aspect of the analysis, but, on the contrary, to make it as explicit as possible, so as to perceive as clearly as possible the potential implications resulting from the point of view taken.

Finally, a definitive answer to the added value of the PS-approach in Cultural Studies will only become possible when more results become available and when these results are compared with other results obtained through the application of other methods in the field of Cultural Studies.

Works Cited

- Asheim, L. "From Book to Film: Mass Appeals." *Hollywood Quarterly* 5.3 (1951): 334-49.
- Asheim, L. "From Book to Film: Simplification." *Hollywood Quarterly* 5.3 (1951): 289-304.
- Asheim, L. "From Book to Film: The Note of Affirmation." *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* 6 (1951): 54-68.
- Bluestone, G. *Novels into Films: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema*. Berkeley: California UP, 1973.
- Cattrysse, P. *Pour une théorie de l'adaptation filmique. Le film noir américain*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1992.
- Cattrysse, P. "Audiovisual Translation and New Media." *From One Medium to Another: Basic Issues for Communicating the Bible in New Media*. Ed. R. Hodgson, Jr. and P.A. Soukup. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward and the American Bible Society, 1997. 45-67.
- Certeau, M. de. *L'Écriture de l'histoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- Chambers, I. *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Frow, J. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995.
- Morley, D. *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Nightingale, V. "What's 'Ethnographic' about Ethnographic Audience Research?" *Australian Journal of Communication* 16 (1989): 50-63.
- Toury, G. *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995.
- Turgeon, L. "From Acculturation to Cultural Transfer." *Transferts culturels et métissages Amérique/Europe XVIe-XXe siècle / Cultural Transfer, America and Europe: 500 years of Interculturalization*. Ed. L. Turgeon, D. Delâge et R. Ouellet. Montréal: PU Laval, 1996. 33-54.
- Worpole, K. *Reading by Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction*. London: Comedia, 1984.