Book Review

Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion Rosemary Jackson

Methuen 1981 211pp Pb

ISBN 0-416-71170-7 Hb ISBN 0-416-71180-4 Pb

Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure Terry Lovell

BFI 1980 111pp Pb £2.95

ISBN 0-85170-102-7 Hb ISBN 0-85170-103-5 Pb

It may seem strange, unwise or even malicious to review together two books that take up such diametrically opposed positions within current debate on 'Marxist cultural studies'. My reason for doing so is that each author in fact presents a persuasive argument for her point of view, and on certain points their views converge.

Terry Lovell's short book presents a clear and comprehensive account of debates within Marxist aesthetics, starting from the proposition that sociology has failed to theorize the phenomenon of art and that Marxism alone of the major sociological traditions has addressed the problem. Central, she argues, to all considerations of art and culture in these debates has been the question of realism. Is art a reflection of the real? Is it supposed to show 'the truth'? Or is it simply the production of a 'discourse' that has no connexion with anything else?

In order to home in on the question of the relationship of art to reality Terry Lovell begins with a more general introduction to the question of knowledge, the real, and scientific enquiry. She argues that Marxist realism is the most satisfactory of the three major traditions she identifies since it establishes causal connexions between a real world and theorizations of it (this is a very crude summary of an already condensed presentation). The two other major traditions are empiricism positivism, and what she terms 'conventionalism' – that is, what usually presents itself in contemporary debate as various forms of discourse theory.

An important part of her project is a radical critique of Althusserianism, which she perceives as dominant in the field of Marxist cultural studies. Althusser himself and not only his followers, she claims, are to be rejected for having severed the connexion between theory and a real world external to ourselves and independent of the working of the mind. She relentlessly exposes the weaknesses of Althusser's arguments and particularly his conception of ideology, seeking to substitute for it a narrower definition which returns to some notion of ideology as representing incomplete or

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'distorted' constructions of the real. She also mounts a critique of the post-Althusserians, and argues that Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess in particular have lapsed into a fully fledged relativism; they have retreated from the real world altogether and allow no relationship between a given 'discourse' and anything in an (unknowable) real world. The baneful effect of Hindess and Hirst on Marxist cultural studies, Terry Lovell argues, has been incomprehensibility, elitism and a doctrinaire rejection of any kind of artistic realism. And their position has ultimately led to the questionable view that only avant-garde forms of art can be progressive. This is because only non-realist art, according to this new orthodoxy can question the nature of the 'real'.

However she then turns to discuss the way in which the ongoing tradition of Marxist aesthetics has (thanks to the influence of Georg Lukács) traditionally held to the reflection theory of art – that is, the view that art is a reflection of reality. Both the Althusserian *and* the Lukácsian tradition however have resolutely perpetuated a divide between high art (the realm of truth) and mass art and culture (the realm of ideology). Bertold Brecht and Walter Benjamin alone challenged this view, although Brecht too believed that art should reveal things as they really are.

Terry Lovell concludes by challenging this last view. She suggests that art and culture are not purveyors of truth (as is science) and that we should instead explore the importance of pleasure in the consumption of art.

This brief summary does not do justice to Terry Lovell's condensed but clear argument, nor have I space to develop my disagreements with her wholesale rejection of Althusser. For one thing she does not do justice to the more 'Gramscian' aspects of Althusser; nor does she give him the recognition he deserves for having attempted to confront important problems, even if his answers are not satisfactory. She is very critical of the use he makes of Lacanian psychoanalysis in his discussion of 'ideology in general' and the construction of the subject (which Althusser sees as the sphere of ideology – a view with which Terry Lovell disagrees).

Rosemary Jackson's book on the other hand demonstrates the usefulness of psychoanalysis in analysing certain forms of literature – in this case the fantastic mode. She does not traverse such a wide field of knowledge as Terry Lovell and her book is correspondingly easier to summarize. *Fantasy* is both a theoretical and descriptive account of the literature of the fantastic (and as such comprehensive and scholarly) and a polemic calling for its recognition as an at least potentially subversive literature. It is the literature *par excellence* of the imaginary, of desire, of the unconscious, and 'it seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss'. Analysing the characteristic themes of fantasy – doubles, invisibility, disappearances, transformations – she argues that ultimately it interrogates the 'real' and asks fundamental questions about the relationship of reality to unreality, self to not-self or Other, and conscious to unconscious. It expresses a fundamental anxiety about the limits of reason and consciousness. It does *not* – like the science fiction of Doris Lessing and Ursula Le Guin – create 'marvellous' alternative worlds, but rather attempts to articulate or describe the nothingness we experience when forced to confront that our desire is for something impossible: for unification with the Other as experienced in infancy before we were aware of ourselves as a 'self' – for the reversal of our own cultural formation. In this respect it questions the notion of 'character' in realistic fiction, and Rosemary Jackson quotes Hélène Cixous on this point:

So long as we do not put aside 'character' and everything it implies in terms of illusion and complicity with classical reasoning and the appropriating economy that such reasoning supports, we will remain locked up in the treadmill of reproduction (Jackson, 1981: 84).

Although, in fact, Rosemary Jackson starts from Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny', she

also takes account of Hélène Cixous' critique, arguing that Freud himself returns fantasy to the clear light of an unproblematic reality by imposing his own positivist outlook on it, whereas an analysis of fantasy is not exhausted by understanding it as a projection of unconscious sexual anxieties (Freud's view) but is also a rehearsal of the final encounter with death.

Fantasy also moves towards a more general ideal of undifferentiation. The instinct Freud names Thanatos and which is vulgarly known as the death wish is more properly understood as the longing for nirvana, for 'entropy' – a state of stasis, as Lacan put it: 'an eternal desire for the nonrelationship of zero, where identity is meaningless' (Jackson, 1981:77).

In this human quest for reversal, and the longing to experience this pre-linguistic realm the whole *project* of the literature of the fantastic is ultimately itself contradictory. This is because it seeks a language for the unsayable, a language of/for desire, seeking to translate the irrational into the rational and conscious form of language and literary construction.

Rosemary Jackson recognizes that the fantastic has often operated not as a literature of subversion but rather to reconcile the audience to 'reality', to the world of law and order. Nonetheless she ends by reclaiming it as a subversive literature in that it: 'aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient' (Jackson, 1981:180). She also claims that it is typically a women's mode of writing – partly because female sexuality is part of what is suppressed by the dominant order and also because:

Non-realist narrative forms are increasingly important in feminist writing: no breakthrough of cultural structure seems possible until linear narrative (realism, illusionism, transparent representation) is broken or dissolved (Jackson, 1981:186n)

Yet this suggests a notion I would want to question of what is 'subversive' (and 'subversive' is itself an ambiguous word). The subversive and by implication the revolutionary is identified with that which *transgresses* and contradicts the dominant ideological order. Although Rosemary Jackson attempts to deny this, it is effectively equated with 'misrule', chaos and unconscious irrationality. The irruption of the repressed is itself seen as a radical event leading to real social transformation – which to me seems very similar to Marcusean notions popular in the sixties of the revolutionary power of a polymorphous perverse sexuality.

A second point, made by Terry Lovell, is that there is a danger for women in equating them with the unconscious and irrational:

It is the languages of art and of common sense that are identified with the processes of the unconscious and with ideological production, while the languages of science are excepted and placed behind a *cordon sanitaire* (Lovell, 1980: 48).

In other words, women continue to be identified, just as they are in the dominant culture, with art and irrationalism. Women, in other words, *are* illogical.

Nonetheless, Terry Lovell and Rosemary Jackson are united in their recognition of the importance of utilizing a psychoanalytic perspective in analysis of literature and film. They share too a recognition of the importance of the consumption of works of art – of audience; and a recognition of the importance of pleasure in our response to the cultural and aesthetic.

Both gesture towards the realm of pleasure as needing a theoretical, an analytical and a non individualistic exploration. And both these books might provide a starting point for that enterprise.

Elizabeth Wilson