

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism

A term coined by Raymond Williams and popularised by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (in their collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*), Cultural Materialism refers to a Marxist orientation of New Historicism, characterised by the analysis of any historical material within a politicized framework, in a radical and subversive manner. Cultural Materialism emphasises studying the historical context, looking at those historical aspects that have been discarded or silenced in other narratives of history, through an eclectic theoretical approach, backed by the political commitment arising from the influence of Marxist and Feminist perspective and thus executing a textual analysis—close reading that critiques traditional approaches, especially on canonical texts

“New Historicism,” a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt, designates a body of theoretical and interpretive practices that began largely with the study of early modern literature in the United States. “New Historicism” in America had been somewhat anticipated by the theorists of “Cultural Materialism” in Britain, which, in the words of their leading advocate, Raymond Williams describes “the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production.”

Both “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” seek to understand literary texts historically and reject the formalizing influence of previous literary studies, including “New Criticism,” “Structuralism” and “Deconstruction,” all of which in varying ways privilege the literary text and place only secondary emphasis on historical and social context. According to “New Historicism,” the circulation of literary and non-literary texts produces relations of social power

within a culture. New Historicist thought differs from traditional historicism in literary studies in several crucial ways.

Rejecting traditional historicism's premise of neutral inquiry, "New Historicism" accepts the necessity of making historical value judgments. According to "New Historicism," we can only know the textual history of the past because it is "embedded," a key term, in the textuality of the present and its concerns. Text and context are less clearly distinct in New Historicist practice. Traditional separations of literary and non-literary texts, "great" literature and popular literature, are also fundamentally challenged.

For the "New Historicist," all acts of expression are embedded in the material conditions of a culture. Texts are examined with an eye for how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion. Like much of the emergent European social history of the 1980s, "New Historicism" takes particular interest in representations of marginal/marginalized groups and non-normative behaviors—witchcraft, cross-dressing, peasant revolts, and exorcisms—as exemplary of the need for power to represent subversive alternatives, the Other, to legitimize itself.

Louis Montrose, another major innovator and exponent of "New Historicism," describes a fundamental axiom of the movement as an intellectual belief in "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts." "New Historicism" draws on the work of Levi-Strauss, in particular his notion of culture as a "self-regulating system." The Foucauldian premise that power is ubiquitous and cannot be equated with state or economic power and Gramsci's conception of "hegemony," i.e., that domination is often achieved through culturally-orchestrated consent rather than force, are critical underpinnings to the "New Historicist" perspective.

The translation of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival coincided with the rise of the “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” and left a legacy in work of other theorists of influence like Peter Stallybrass and Jonathan Dollimore. In its period of ascendancy during the 1980s, “New Historicism” drew criticism from the political left for its depiction of counter-cultural expression as always co-opted by the dominant discourses. Equally, “New Historicism’s” lack of emphasis on “literariness” and formal literary concerns brought disdain from traditional literary scholars. However, “New Historicism” continues to exercise a major influence in the humanities and in the extended conception of literary studies. 7.

Cultural Studies

Much of the intellectual legacy of “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” can now be felt in the “Cultural Studies” movement in departments of literature, a movement not identifiable in terms of a single theoretical school, but one that embraces a wide array of perspectives—media studies, social criticism, anthropology, and literary theory—as they apply to the general study of culture. “Cultural Studies” arose quite self-consciously in the 80s to provide a means of analysis of the rapidly expanding global culture industry that includes entertainment, advertising, publishing, television, film, computers and the Internet.

“Cultural Studies” brings scrutiny not only to these varied categories of culture, and not only to the decreasing margins of difference between these realms of expression, but just as importantly to the politics and ideology that make contemporary culture possible. “Cultural Studies” became notorious in the 90s for its emphasis on pop music icons and music video in place of canonical literature, and extends the ideas of the Frankfurt School on the transition from a truly popular culture to mass culture in late capitalist societies, emphasizing the significance of the patterns of consumption of cultural artifacts. “Cultural

Studies” has been interdisciplinary, even antidisciplinary, from its inception; indeed, “Cultural Studies” can be understood as a set of sometimes conflicting methods and approaches applied to a questioning of current cultural categories. Stuart Hall, Meaghan Morris, Tony Bennett and Simon During are some of the important advocates of a “Cultural Studies” that seeks to displace the traditional model of literary studies. 10.