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Curriculum Development (Culture), SS 2007 for WS 2007/08 and beyond

1 The problem

The main problem encountered in attempting to plan courses on culture is the almost total absence of THEORY. The solution is to switch the main didactic focus from systems of ideas (theories in the classical sense) to strategies of information gathering and processes of information structuring ...

In a period of social reaction such as the present, theoryless in the humanities acquires the status of dogma, becoming something like 'philological atheoreticism'. The proponents of this position mistake their stance for a kind of metatheory and therefore impudently claim a licence to adjudicate and thus trivialize all other theoretical disputes—except those that directly question the appropriacy and usefulness of philological atheoreticism, of course!

2 My own position ...

... is a Hjelmslevian and Malinowskian one. I see culture as a content plane that is shared by a number of partly overlapping semiotic systems, each of which in its entirety constitutes a partial expression plane for the culture. 'Knowing the culture' would therefore imply being familiar with all the combinations of signs that are routinely used by members of that culture, whether they be conversational, cinematic, literary, sartorial, culinary, ...

3 The primacy of the visual

Given that we are working with a generation of young people who have grown up in a world of moving pictures, the best way to begin the study of culture might be to treat first and foremost visual texts, such as films, rather than products of the linguistic semiotic. It might seem at first as though this also involved a saving of time; faced with a choice between 'reading the novel' and 'seeing the film', most students usually choose the film, because it takes less time. But working with film in a classroom situation is difficult.

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4 Towards a cinematic canon

In collaboration with Werner Stein, M.A., from Germanistik, I have been putting together a list of 'essential' cinematic experiences for students of British culture, concentrating on the two areas of socioeconomic change in Britain and the British education system. Some consideration has also been given to the inclusion of films dealing with the Irish experience. Here, as also to a lesser degree with Britain as well, the main limiting factor is my lack of familiarity with the English-speaking cultures of the northern hemisphere.

It is interesting to speculate how the current human resources of the English Department of FR 4.6 would be employed if we were living through a less reactionary period in the history of the world. But economic revolutions, such as the information revolution still underway, typically go hand in hand with retrograde political developments, and it is only after the economic transformation has been essentially completed that the political and social institutions of the culture that is at risk begin to become aware of the need to catch up.

The tendency to make decisions about 'who teaches what' on the basis of 'what I'd like to do' or 'what I thought you might prefer to do' may thus be expected to continue for quite some time to be dominated by the absurd but all-pervasive view that higher education is a kind of amateur pursuit engaged in by landed gentlemen, and is thus—as a matter of course—a question of personal taste rather than utility right from the very beginning.

5 Working list of essential films

... still to come ...

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