Not many people around here seem to think that literary studies has problems – but I do. Some people think that I think that because I have ‘gone over’ to cultural studies. As it happens, I adore novels and all kind of literature. I just don’t much like the way we read anymore. I love literariness, actually, and I like reality – with no scare-quotes too.

Haven’t we come now towards the end of a way of reading that has evolved into a big sophisticated machine since the 70s but may no longer be right for its time? Don’t we feel a little tired now of critique as we have come to know it, of the work of detection involved in identifying the Marxian or psychoanalytic symptom? Are we any longer convinced by the work of ‘literary criticism’ (certainly publishers are not, as they watch sales plummeting), and the lifting of the veil which Freud, Althusser and Marx all suggested would lead to ideological demystification and the truth of the symbolic? Is it that we have become intellectually lazy or politically morbid in the meantime, saturated with reality hunger, to use David Shields’ redolent term?

Symptomatic reading is increasingly unable to respond to the wider culture we inhabit. The work of literary criticism has lost its claim to the political edge, the activist possibility that if we see differently we can change the world. And a rising hunger for reality – not just in others, in some risible middle class which we despise – but in ourselves.

In this new century of ours, the surface (the screen, the interface, but also the skin-like surface of a (literary) text) is emerging as a much more potent space than it used to be. Frederic Jameson, great literary architect of the idea of the ‘political conscious’, said in 1981: ‘If everything were transparent then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either’ and went on to explain that therefore, interpretation could never operate on the assumption that ‘the text means just what it says’. That position is now clearly wrong.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus put it very well: ‘Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideological critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet; the real time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication the state’s abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognised as lies political statements such as ‘mission accomplished’.

One can of course, as Best and Marcus well know, make these assertions while still understanding the uses of a hermeneutics of suspicion (although in recent months Wikileaks is instituting precisely such a hermeneutical practice more effectively than literary critics possibly could!). The point is, things have changed, and the literary project has not changed enough in response. Bruno Latour has been a powerful voice in wanting to move away from excessive emphasis on ideological demystification. He points out how social conservatives use that mode of reading for their own benefit perfectly well: for instance they question global warming by referring to it as a social construction rather than a scientific truth. It seems clear now that when students complain that they don’t want to study race and gender anymore, it is based on their intuition and understanding that the culture has shifted and that the earlier work of critique doesn’t quite get how power works these days and that the critic as detective who will tell us how the world really works, is no longer so convincing.

I love what Rita Felski said recently about suspicion. She says it is a curiously non-emotional emotion, an ‘asocial emotion’ synonymous with a professional culture which values detachment. It is linked to mistrust, ‘a low-grade affective stance’. Suspicious reading is an exercise in plotting. It is not, says Felski in a take-that final kick-ass assertion, that suspicious reading kills a text but that it induces a shadow of banality into it, a banality that relies on underestimating the text’s pleasure and under-reading its affective powers.

Might there be a connection between the denigration of affect in the work of literary and more widely political critique and the rise of reality as an in-your-face phenomenon? The
rise, that is, of non-fiction, of memoir in the terrain of ‘literature’, and of the essay as a more fluid, open and pleasurable form of writing than the academic article. Beyond the terrain of the literary is reality TV, the multiple uses of documentary, the rise of the figure of the curator, the cult of the back-story. Isn’t it true that we are putting novels aside more often to engage with a reality phenomenon that may include many features of the unreal or the fictional in any case? Shields thinks so. Doesn’t the imaginative power of pure fiction, as in the novel, feel less central to the culture than it did before, even though it can pull us in powerfully at moments, in patchy sequences streaming through our lives?
Might this be because, to put it pejoratively, we are at the tail end of a certain set of Cold War approaches to the world and the text? I mean, doesn’t Jamesonian reading begin to sound Cold War-esque when it proclaims so authoritatively that what a text means lies in what it does not say, which can then be used to rewrite the text in terms of a hidden master-code!

Sharon Marcus, who I am reading, wonders about the value of ‘just reading’. Can we let ghosts be ghosts instead of saying what they are ghosts of? This is not an anti-theory position (theory can illuminate the pleasure of the text, it would be silly to deny that), nor does it imply the end of critique. It just says let’s let go of the practice of ideological demystification as the only or major work that we do when we read, and teach others about reading.

Lots more to say. Like, remember Sontag? 1966, Against Interpretation: ‘Show what [the work] is, even that it is, rather than...show what it means’. And what about reading the South African contemporary? I wish we would more often read down – for the past, the allegorical, the metaphoric, the symptom, apartheid – but also across – the horizontal, the surface, the new – the place where paradoxically the fugitive meanings of the now might reside. At some point, when I felt that SA novels were just not getting anywhere near the edge of the South African present in its most interesting forms, I started staring at paintings instead. Penny Siopis’ Pinky Pinky-paintings got to me: the saturated pink canvases, now skin, now party-madness. Plastic wounds, along with false nails and eyes, rupture the surface. The referential connection to ‘wound’ remains, but meaning and recourse to metaphor and the past becomes increasingly nominal. It could be there but maybe it isn’t. The life of allegory, of the wound, resumes (how can it not?) but then it recedes into the surface again – into pinkness, into thingness, into surfaces whose meanings are not fully inscribed. It is not alterity, the other and all that, it is thingness, strangeness, that Siopis wants us now to see. The surface becomes suggestive of a somewhere else in South Africa.

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Theory Bytes
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Surfaces and Depths: A Response to Sarah Nuttall | SLiP http://slipnet.co.za/view/blog/theory-bytes/surfaces-and-depths...
Posted on March 31, 2011 by Daniel Roux (http://slipnet.co.za/view/author/daniel-roux/)
I was going to continue my thoughts from last time about the role of theory in literary and cultural studies, but then I read Sarah Nuttall’s blog on this site – “The Way We Read Now” (http://slipnet.co.za/view/blog/sarah-nuttall/the-way-we-read-now/) – and I couldn’t resist responding, partly because I have been mulling over these issues myself recently, and partly because I have just finished Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis, the excellent book that Nuttall edited with Achille Mbembe in 2008.

In her latest work, and in her blog, Nuttall raises the possibility of abandoning symptomatic readings. She asks: “don’t we feel a little tired now of critique as we have come to know it, of the work of detection involved in identifying the Marxian or psychoanalytic symptom?” As
an alternative, she suggests an attentiveness to surfaces: the surface of the text, but also the contiguous cultural, economic, geographic and architectural surfaces that connect to and through the text. Perhaps, she suggests, we need to abandon the idea of penetrating the surface of a text in order to uncover its true meaning and its wellspring. Maybe, to follow Susan Sontag, we can talk about what a work is, rather than what it means, and consider the ways in which meaning transforms continually into something else.

I can see why one might be wary of this approach. Partly it has to do with the metaphors in which it is couched, as provocative and suggestive as they are. We have been taught in literary studies that “surface readings” are bad; the opposite of “close criticism”. The idea of a metonymic slipping from one part of a surface to another sounds like slipping on ice: a potentially infinite skimming across a wide and undifferentiated landscape only tangentially and occasionally connected to the literary, which should surely be our own special object of study. Are we supposed simply to produce a map of some vast terrain, ultimately global in its scope, without reflecting on meaning at all? How is it possible not to read for “deeper meaning”?

Nonetheless, I find myself in the final instance agreeing very strongly with Nuttall’s appraisal of our current predicament in our discipline at this time and in this place, and with her suggestions for the way ahead. Perhaps it is easy to miss the real import of Nuttall’s observations because the metaphors of “surface” and “symptom” are, for all their explanatory power, also potentially misleading. A text, after all, does not really have a surface, and meaning is not a troll that lurks “underneath” anything. In fact, the surface/depth binary is the foundational metaphor of the kind of reading practice that Nuttall seeks to challenge here, so we might do well to defamiliarise the metaphor before we invoke it.

What I want to suggest is that many of the sciences have been dealing with the same issues for a while now under the rubric systems theory. Let me be clear: I am not trying to draw some analogy between current thinking in cultural theory and a particular trend in “hard science”: I find such analogies invariably tedious and wrong. I am suggesting that Nuttall is a systems biologist. The central question of systems biology relates to the way “underlying” cause and “surface” effects are conceptually related in living systems, which include human beings and their culture. The word “conceptual” is important here because what is at stake is not really the empirical content of any particular discipline, but the way the discipline frames its content. The conceptual nature of systems biology secures a position for it in that small domain where some productive conversation between the humanities and the life sciences remain possible and necessary.

Let’s look at the way systems biology considers the genome. This should give you some sense of the extraordinarily subtle and far-reaching theoretical shift that it effects in the way we think about life systems. I am particularly interested in the way system biology treats the genome because DNA has always been understood as a kind of text that is realised in actual living forms: biologists use notions such as “nucleotide transcription”, “amino acid sequence translation” and “gene expression” in ways that are directly analogous to the way textual theorists tend to use the same terms.

In the widely popularised accounts of the last few decades, the genome is a “book of life”: fundamentally a blueprint for making a living organism and defining its orientation towards its environment. A gene for blue eyes, for instance, is an instruction that is translated into an amino acid sequence when the protein is made. Conversely, if we want to understand why someone has blue eyes, we simply need to look beneath the surface: literally, using technology, we have to penetrate the cell membrane and retrieve the appropriate gene sequence. The gene is the cause, the blue eye is the effect. The gene is literally and figuratively below the surface in this case, and its translation is visible on the surface. We can read the pigmentation in the eye as a symptom of an underlying process, a structure that bears no resemblance to its effects, but nonetheless accounts for it fully. The colour of the eye can be translated “back into” the gene. Systems biology rejects this account as profoundly misleading.
In contrast, systems theory offers a different kind of account of the relationship between a gene and a living being. What is fascinating about the difference is that there is no argument about the empirical facts. In other words, it is simply a different way of looking at the same phenomenon: one that provokes different kinds of research questions. For systems biology, DNA is a database: a relatively small number of “instructions” that are inseparable from the environment that makes the instructions meaningful. The “book of life” is not the DNA. It is life itself, to borrow Denis Noble’s formulation.

Here is the extraordinary part of the insight: the living body selects appropriate “instructions” from the DNA database in response to environmental and physiological conditions. Living organisms and their attributes are not “created” by the DNA: living organisms are built by the environment, and that environment includes DNA. It is impossible, by implication, to look at a sequence of nucleotides and to use that to explain the behaviour or characteristics of the organism: the environment essentially determines which genes are chosen, and how they should be expressed, even while – in a wonderful Escher-like twist – the genes themselves belong to the total environment of the organism. It really is very difficult to convey the power of this idea in such a short space. The point is not merely that life is comprised of many different systems that interact with one another, although this is also true. The point is really that there is no system that somehow accounts for or underlies or causes the others. If there is a “cause” at all, it is entirely on the surface, in the domain of the interactions themselves. Does it make sense to talk about “translation” in this context? There is no underlying blueprint that requires “translation” for full realisation. Rather, the process of “translation” is the organism; life is a manifestation of a kind of reciprocal feedback system between complexly interlocked domains, none of which carries any explanatory force in isolation. Not by analogy but rather by extension, what we like to call “ideology” or “jouissance” or “semiotic play” or “historical process” are fundamentally interlocked domains that extend beyond culture to our living environment and beyond that to geographic space. In the same way that no amount of “close reading” of DNA will explain why I fell in love with you rather than with him, or her, and why it happened on a Monday, or after I fell off my horse under the rising moon, pale yet as a cloud, the “close reading” of a text in isolation from the systems that sustain it are simply wrong. The idea that a text can or should be translated into some underlying explanatory code is misleading: not because the text is somehow free of ideology, or structure, but because the interactions of the total environment of the text are what calls it into being. Perhaps it makes sense to return to the metaphor of surface and depth from this perspective. To look at the text rather than under the text means to see it not as a surface that hides its meanings, but as a surface that connects to other surfaces. This is what Slavoj Zizek has in mind when he claims in A Plague of Fantasies (as elsewhere, and incessantly) that “the Unconscious is outside, not hidden in any unfathomable depths”: material externality ultimately holds the key to the antagonisms of an ideological edifice not as a “symptom” of some “hidden cause”, but as a disavowed element on the surface of public life, a reification of an ideological fantasy engaged in a complexly reciprocal flow of meaning regulated by the symbolic order. For instance, the windowless Arts building where I have my office is not an architectural “symptom” of apartheid isolationism. It is (amongst other things, to be fair) a remnant of apartheid isolationism in architectural form, and the physical movements in the building as well as the flow of ideas have to traverse, ignore, bemoan, accommodate and generally inhabit this fossilized, imperfectly air-conditioned piece of time. This is where I teach literature, on this surface, in this place.