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**Back to the Future:
A Note on Literature, Ideology, and Knowledge**

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The life of every creature involves a complex interaction with its surroundings. An organism incapable of responding and adjusting to external influence would inevitably perish. Interaction with one's environment may be viewed as the reception and deciphering of information. . . .

Certain types of information can be stored and transmitted only with the help of specially organized languages. For example, information of the sort provided by chemistry or algebra demands its own language, specially adapted to a given type of modeling and communication.

Art is a magnificently organized generator of languages of a special type, which render an indispensable service to mankind, attending to one of the most complex aspects of human knowledge, one whose mechanism is even now not completely understood.—Jurij Lotman, The Structure of the Artistic Text

The reflection I offer here should in no way be taken as my prescription for solving the problems or ensuring the vitality of Hispanism at large. I write only to indicate the conceptual basis of the kind of literary and



cultural criticism I intend to practice during the decade or so that remains of my academic career. If colleagues, friends, or others find anything useful in what I think, then I will be surprised but grateful.

I am in fact reluctant to address the topic of future directions for Hispanism. My reluctance stems from a belief that university-based literary and cultural criticism accomplishes little in society, and so not much of importance is actually at stake in the exchange of opinions.¹ As any academic publisher can attest, we are but a small, self-enclosed, and self-sustaining market of at most a few thousand people who read and teach each others' articles and books. The cliché that academics tend to exaggerate our worldly impact too often proves true. Nonetheless, it would be mistaken to consider that our scholarship and teaching can have no influence on individual behaviors, social institutions, or the shape and uses of human knowledge. And it would be a colossal error to assume that literature—artistic production in all its forms—plays no determining role in the formation and reproduction of society.

To the extent that our profession remains capable of contributing to human progress, I believe that a successful journey into the future depends, in the first instance, on the rediscovery of abandoned or neglected pathways. The (re)turn to ethics on the part of deconstructionists, for example, is a welcome development in this regard. So also is the interest of feminist critics to include within their research programs a focus, not only on the conditions of *identity*, but also on the realities and possibilities of inter-gender, interethnic and interracial *solidarity*. Such practices of feminism significantly help to resurrect vital aspects of the best traditions of left-wing culture and politics prior to the fragmentation of the social movements in the 1970s and '80s. And although subaltern studies, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies may contain internal debates, contradictions, and blind spots, each contributes—sometimes with greater and sometimes with lesser force—to a millennia-old vision of a world in which oppression and injustice have been eliminated.²

My generation of Hispanists (Marxist and non-Marxist) has always hoped that our activities might embody (at least in the last instance!) elements conducive to global justice. Thus, from early on, we challenged a dominant formalism that tended to abstract literature from society. The original project of the Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities formed a key part of this challenge. The project emphasized “coming to terms with cultural and political ideologies in a sociohistorical context” and “the need for the development of a historical consciousness that extends to creative writing and thus to literary criticism” (“Editorial” 3).



In terms of expanding the realm of a genuinely historical consciousness, our ambition proved more difficult to realize than anticipated. The Prague Spring, the French May, the end of the Portuguese and Spanish dictatorships, and the world-wide surge of social struggles between 1968 and 1981 reminded some of us that history had not ended. But for many (perhaps the majority) in the profession, these same events called into question the very existence, and the potential meaningfulness, of “history” itself. The leading lights became the “poststructuralist” theorists—intellectuals such as François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Henri-Bernard Lévy, André Glucksmann, Michel Foucault, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, and Jacques Derrida—whose writings in one way or another encouraged anti-historical thought.

Despite legitimate efforts to trace the fault-lines of hegemonic and oppressive versions of “Truth”—as represented both by the Stalinist “truth” of the European Communist Parties, as well as by the Western “truth” of what we now know as “neoliberalism”—the poststructuralists refused to preserve the idea of history as a set of *real* processes.³ Their dissolution of an *objective* ground for the concept of history further eroded the notion that *causal* processes might exist on which to base, among other things, political practices devoted to the project of human self-emancipation from material need, economic exploitation, and social oppression. The only “real” bases for such commitments were reduced to idealist ones—ethical decisions, shared (non-class) feelings of identity, etc.—separated from the totality of social relations. “Reality” became a construct of “discourse,” while no ontological or rational criteria survived for evaluating which discursive construction might be correct, or better, or at the very least deserving of further elaboration.

The original *Ideologies and Literature* project produced an intellectually rich collection of research practices and advances in knowledge that reaffirmed the reality of history. Nevertheless, given the largely conservative climate of the late-1970s to the late-1990s, close engagement with the project remained confined to a minority of disciplinary colleagues. *Ideologies & Literature* never required adherence to Marxism from its contributors, of course, and the list of non-Marxist colleagues who participated in the Institute’s celebrated series of conferences attested to a genuine and generous intellectual openness at the project’s heart. But the academic purchase and institutional fortune of the project diminished as Marxism became increasingly unfashionable throughout the period. Important and even ground-breaking works did and still do emerge from the *Hispanic Issues* series—the effective successor of *Ideologies & Literature*—which began publication in the late-1980s. But few of our newest colleagues can claim



much familiarity, if any, with the work of *I&L* or the Institute themselves.

I remain a supporter of the *I&L* project, as well as of *Hispanic Issues*. The core mission of *I&L*, as least as I understood it, was expressed well in the simple formulation that appeared in its inaugural editorial: “Whatever the period or genre, and while stressing the exigencies of literary scholarship and close reading, we adhere to a policy that calls for an explicit knowledge of sociohistorical context and a critical awareness of ideological tenets” (“Editorial” 3). Behind the apparent simplicity of this statement, however, there lay theoretical goals and strategic desires of enormous complexity. These might best be encapsulated by the Althusserian concept of “interpellation,” which can serve as shorthand for the promise of an adequate methodological entry point into the dynamic relations between artistic (literary, cinematic, visual, audiovisual) production and the formation of social subjectivities.

I&L amply fulfilled this promise in regard to the relation between literature and ideology. With hindsight, however, an inadequately theorized moment in the *I&L* project can be identified as its elision of the knowledge-function of literature and in its displacement of this function onto the work of literary criticism and theory. The “explicit knowledge of sociohistorical context and a critical awareness of ideological tenets” invoked by the first editors of *I&L* announces an expectation for literary critics—not of literary texts. Perhaps as a result of such a relocation of the knowledge-function from literature to literary criticism, those of us affiliated with the Institute and journal tended to approach the *ideological* dimensions of literary and artistic representations in a manner that ignored—or at least downplayed—the *cognitive* functions of art.⁴

Althusserian critics recognized early on the role of emotion in the workings of ideological interpellation. Terry Eagleton, for example, once observed that ideological discourse frequently employs the language of fear, loathing, pleasure, ecstasy, etc. He subsequently specified that ideology comprises “those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (Eagleton 15) What escaped the attention of virtually all of us at the time was the fact that the concept of emotion could actually provide a deeper and (for those of us to whom this still matters) more dialectical view of the relations among art, ideology, *and* knowledge. In particular, a concern with emotion might facilitate an approach to aesthetic phenomena that recognizes art’s role in cognition even as it comprehends art’s implication in ideology.

Such an approach is possible as long as one assumes that an “emotion is always *about* certain substantive features of the *relationship* between a person and an environment” (Lazarus 125-126, my emphases), and as long as one affirms that emotions—especially those which are socially and culturally acquired (as opposed to instinctive)—entail evaluations.⁵ That the environmental “stimuli” which give rise to the emotions experienced by readers or viewers of aesthetic texts are fictional need not pose a problem for what is, at rock bottom, a relational theory of emotional meaning.

The evaluations that are central to emotion are best thought of not as beliefs, but as ways of seeing the world. They are not all-things-considered evaluations, but are based on a narrow set of interests and goals. . . . Emotions are ongoing interactions between an individual and an environment, and “the environment” includes not only the world present to our senses but [also] the world as it appears to us in our thoughts and imaginings. This “inner environment” is peopled with events and situations and people who may or may not exist in reality, but I can have emotional reactions to the contents of my thoughts and imaginings just as I can to the objects of [sensory] perception. (Robinson 177, 185).

In this light, a remarkable passage appears in the middle of Leon Trotsky’s discussion of Futurist poetry in *Literature and Revolution*. The context concerns whether Futurism should qualify as “revolutionary” poetry, while the passage itself raises issues of the relationship between literature, emotion, and cognition. Futurists, Trotsky argues, breathe the revolutionary spirit of the times, but their poetry reflects the experience of Bohemia much more so than that of the revolutionary working class. Trotsky does not especially blame the Russian Futurists for this. Instead he points to the difficulties that any contemporary would face in seeking to become a poet of the revolution.

In the field of poetry we deal with the process of feeling the world in images, and not with the process of knowing the world scientifically. Life, the personal environment, the cycle of personal experience exercise, therefore, a determining influence on artistic creation. *To reshape the world of feelings, which one has absorbed from one’s childhood, by means of a scientific programme, is the most difficult inner labour.* Not everyone is capable of it. That is why there are many people in this world

who think as revolutionists and who feel as Philistines. (Trotsky 177, my emphasis)

Trotsky here implies a theory of literature and art that views aesthetic activity as a process of articulating relationships between emotions and the objects, events, and experiences that comprise the world. In childhood and youth, our emotions become attached to certain of these; exactly which ones depends on our individual life circumstances. Yet our emotions continue to develop, and even to attach to new or more complex realities, as experiences accumulate throughout our lives. Changing these attachments, once they have come to form habits of mind and body, requires a new labor of signification, whether primarily conscious or unconscious, mental or corporeal. From the simplest fairy tale to the wildest avant-garde rant, Trotsky considers that aesthetic signification plays a role both in the establishment of habits (dispositions) and in habit-change.

In Trotsky's example, a non-Marxist poet struggles to reshape his or her emotional world according to a new scientific or intellectual understanding of the social world. Yet Trotsky clearly intends the example to apply not only to artistic producers but also to those who experience art as readers, viewers, and listeners. Elsewhere in *Literature and Revolution* he emphasizes art's ability to connect inner emotion with outer experience and its role in helping to shape new forms of social subjectivity. Post-revolutionary society, he avers, needs above all a "Soviet comedy . . . , a comedy of manners, one of laughter and indignation" (267). It requires a new tragedy, based not on the gods but on "social passions", and a new lyric, "because the new man will love in a better and stronger way than did the old people, and he will think about the problems of birth and death" (273).

Jackson Barry has recommended that those who propose a learning- or knowledge-function for artistic experience can benefit greatly from the work of neural researchers (Barry 119). Investigators such as Antonio Damasio have discovered compelling evidence of the close working relationship between emotion and cognition. This relationship holds not only in the case of the primary emotions, such as fear, which "depend on limbic system circuitry, [with] the amygdala and anterior cingulate being the prime players," but also in the case of the secondary emotions, such as grief, for which the neural "network must be broadened" to include "the agency of the prefrontal and of some somatosensory cortices" (Damasio *Error*, 133, 134).

The immediate presence of external physical stimuli, such as a spatio-temporal object, moreover, is not always required to activate the

emotional responses dedicated to cognition. Not only the case of being surprised by the sudden appearance of a bear in the woods, but also the case of reflecting on the loss of an intimate friend, support the general view of an emotional component to cognition: “In many circumstances of our life as social beings, . . . we know that our emotions are triggered only after an evaluative, voluntary, nonautomatic mental process” (*Error* 130). Indeed,

in numerous instances the brain learns to concoct the fainter image of an ‘emotional’ body state, without having to reenact it in the body proper. . . . There are thus neural devices that help us feel ‘as if’ we were having an emotional state, as if the body were being activated and modified. . . . One *really feels* a feeling in the case of ‘as if’ feelings. And, like those feelings that are processed in the body proper, ‘as if’ feelings are *just as cognitive as any other perceptual image*’ (*Error*, 155, 159).

This is not the occasion upon which we can pursue the contributions that neural science makes to our understanding of the formation and reproduction of social subjects. It must suffice here only to have observed that neural science demonstrates the centrality of emotion and feeling to cognition. And this discovery opens vistas for understanding the dialectical relation between emotion and cognition in ideological discourse, and thus for exploring literature’s (art’s, cinema’s, television’s, music’s) dialectical relation to ideology and knowledge.

Artistic production—by which I mean the production of fictions in any media—functionally extends the social reach of what Damasio terms “the brain’s storytelling attitude” (*Feeling* 189). In passages that resonate with Fredric Jameson’s work on “cognitive mapping,” Damasio argues that the “entire construction of knowledge, from simple to complex, from nonverbal imagetic to verbal literacy, depends on the ability to map what happens over time, *inside* our organism, *around* our organism, *to* and *with* our organism, one thing followed by another thing, causing another thing, endlessly” (*Feeling* 189). The primordial form of story-telling is the brain’s “narration,” in images, of the neural events that comprise brain maps.⁶

It is no great leap from there to the larger stories our minds both create and consider—in words as well as images—about the natural and social worlds. Such stories may unfold in fictional or non-fictional genres, but in every case they comprise (successful or unsuccessful) attempts at explaining our worldly entanglement.

Philosophers often puzzle about the problem of so-called 'intentionality', the intriguing fact that mental contents are 'about' things outside the mind. I believe that the mind's pervasive "aboutness" is rooted in the brain's storytelling attitude. The brain inherently represents the structures and states of the organism, and in the course of regulating the organism as it is mandated to do, the brain naturally weaves wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in environment. (Feeling 189)

Notes

¹ And, I suppose, it derives from the anxiety that whatever professional future we attempt to define for ourselves may not matter much in the corporate scheme of things.

² Arguably all methodologies and accumulated bodies of knowledge contain internal debates, contradictions, and blind spots.

³ Against the legitimacy of this refusal, please note Terry Eagleton's succinct criticism: "The notion of absolute truth is simply a bugbear . . . ; we do not need intuitive access to the Platonic Forms to be aware that apartheid is a social system which leaves something to be desired. . . . [F]or oppressed and exploited peoples to emancipate themselves, a knowledge of how the social system works, and how they stand within it, is essential to their project. . . ." Terry Eagleton, "Ideology," *The Terry Eagleton Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 243.

⁴ No doubt our custom also derived from the fact that an anti-Lukácsian stance was *de rigueur* for progressively-minded literary critics in the '70s and '80s. And this seemed all the more natural within the *I&L* project because of the anti-Lukacsian character of the project's two main theoretical avatars: the Frankfurt School and Althusserianism.

⁵ For discussion of the involvement of evaluative judgments in emotion, see Lazarus. Also see Robert C. Solomon, "From Emotions and Choice," in Robert C. Solomon, ed., *What is an Emotion?* (Oxford, UK: Oxford U P, 1984, 2003), 224-235.

⁶ On "cognitive mapping," see Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1988), 347-357. Also see Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke U P, 1991), 409 ff.

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