31 May 2013: Travel and Theory I

From Rosie Lavan

Readings
Edward Said, ‘Traveling Theory’ (from The World, the Text, and the Critic, 1983)
Edwin Ardener, ‘“Remote Areas”: Some Theoretical Considerations’
James Clifford, ‘Notes on Travel and Theory’

Initial points about each text

- Said: is engaging with ideas about space and geography in literature; looking at theories (Lukács, Goldmann, Williams) which have been influential for him and thinking about how they operate under different historical circumstances
- Clifford: as literary anthropologist, proposes there’s a different kind of relationship between text/theory and reader now—that it’s difficult to know who you’re addressing because the idea of a stable, immediate audience has been broken down. Fitting theory into circumstances is no longer possible.
- Ardener: anthropologist who has worked on language with particular focus on West Africa and Celtic areas in Britain. Raises idea of positionality: he takes “remoteness” as a means of thinking about the traditional anthropological focus on difference by looking at “remote” areas in Britain

What happens to ideas when they move and travel? Is Clifford right?
- For Ardener, connection does not imply a relationship or understanding. He avoids centre-periphery binary. Is positioning stable or relative?
  Said at the forefront of developing these ideas – though claims he owes a debt to Gramsci. Later revisits his idea of travelling theory with different examples.
  Moretti’s Atlas of the European Novel is another way of thinking about this topic.

Discussion

- Lukács’s theory is easy to track because it’s very politically “tainted”. Are any travelling theories not politicised? E.g. Kristeva moving to France and picking up intertextuality from Bakhtin…
- Theory attains an aura – sometimes inappropriate or undeserved – when the identity of the theory or the ambience of the times draws attention rather than the theory itself. E.g. here: Lukács as revolutionary, to which Goldmann responds; also the appeal/importance of this for Williams generation
- Is that a problem? Isn’t that also valid?
- There are latent points in theory: certain ideas will come to prominence at different moments…
  …but is it at different moments or in different places?…
  …but aren’t moments and places indivisible?…
  …or should we speak instead and above all of contexts?
- Where you are matters
• But… aren’t there ideas that context hasn’t affected? Leibniz, for example. Can we speak or universal ideas, or maybe shared fields?
• But how many shared elements are required for something to become “universal”? Interest lies in showing where ideas have been shared.
• What about Popper and the black swans/falsifiability? But isn’t that a false distinction anyway, because Popper knew black swans existed…?
• Structuralism/formalism: problems with categories. E.g. Northrop Frye, Propp. Interesting exercises but they are always going to be limited by the range of data. And isn’t there a so what factor? Structuralist categories can be so reduced, so atomised. It’s not simply a question of explain difference between things, but how they fit together.
• But still – the element of positionality can’t be eliminated.
• The relationship map in Ardener is very structuralist: it still implies a coherent worldview.
• Ardener indicates that attempts to locate real time and real space are not what’s at issue: there are other autonomies; other factors at play.
• We might link to histories of maps and mapping: e.g. linear maps to spatial maps. Cf. the Periplus genre in ancient writing – in which writer records journey around the coast telling people how many days’ journey is between each point.
• Some maps don’t try to represent experience. But does Google Maps represent a return to that kind of experiential mapping?
• Clifford v interesting on the etymology of “theory”: implicit that the theorist as well as the theory travels.
• NB importance of distance in coming up with theories of/in the foreign; and theory as a product of translation.
• Distance important to anthropology because you have to deal with greater lack of fit. Cf Malinowski (observer/participant anthropology).
• Cf Joseph Conrad: always blank spaces on the map. *Heart of Darkness* as reversal of centre-periphery movement – he’s going in to the centre, looking for one; BUT at the same time he’s looking within himself. But the novel also starts with a centre—Brussels…
• Anxiety about anthropology (and structuralism) is that search for something “primitive” – but it’s a different approach which seeks things that are as different as possible.
• How far can we go with anthropology; with the search for what’s “inside”, without it being structured? Cf Raymond Williams’s structure of feeling: i.e. something that is usually not fully expressed.
• Problems of communicating experience: is seeking a structure false? Williams attempts to marry/make reciprocal structures.
• If you’re trying to make a point about remoteness you’re only looking at things that are shared.
• Cf. Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, on how the perceiving self constructs space in which it exists.
• The amount of specific detail in Ardener asserts the specific character of the experience he’s describing
• What do you do when you’re in the position of having to take a theory from one context to another? We might cf postcolonialism in eastern Europe; or indeed in the Netherlands (as in Elleke Boehmer’s recent presentation). How far can theory be translated? Postcolonialism tends not to think very much about its positionality… Cf Simon Gaunt, “Can the Middle Ages be Postcolonial?”