

# reviews

## **Ideology and Inscription: “Cultural Studies” after Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin**

Tom Cohen

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*To search for where you already are is the most benighted of quests, and the most fated.* (Bloom: 1973/ 1997: 13)

The title of Tom Cohen's book, published eighteen years ago and so to many trendy culture theory people seemingly lost in the past as part of an archive rumored to exist but rarely accessed, turns upside down our sense of time: Culture Studies surely come *after* Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin. After all, these writers are meant to be the foundation texts of this field of studies. Or are they only so in our lip service? How many students of Culture

Studies have actually grappled with these texts...interpreting them afresh? Or have too many just accepted the common wisdom passed along in the literature concerning these writers? What if the field we are meant to be expert in is based on misreading of texts? If we are such poor or lazy readers, then what kind of academics are we? The Bloomian defense that we are always misreading texts as part of the creative process can't be accepted if we have never even heard of let alone read Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. (This apparently tangential reference is not as out-of-place as it may seem; Bloom was one of the committee members on Cohen's doctoral dissertation, along with J.Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man. Relax. This review is not following that trace or track.)

These are questions that have been haunting me for quite a while. But other questions have also been materializing: How can we address the crises in our present catastrophic condition as we watch the edifice of the University as an idea crumble like Poe's House of Usher around us? Are we willfully complicit in our own decimation? If so, what can be done to change things?

It was questions like these that had been leading me to consider the prospects of entering the field of "culture studies" by writing explicitly on the texts that seem to mesmerize those who label themselves as "Culture Studies people". But the gauche "fanzine" voices I too often encountered in my forays into the area always put me off; academics trying to sound like tabloid journalists, pretending to be creative and to see through the eyes of the consumer that they seem to idolize as the only valid reader or viewer. Such criticism, it seems to me, celebrates the very things it was meant to critique: the more one pretends to study a thing, the more one gives it a sense of an aura of authority...as a valid weighty object to be studied...worthy of analysis...the more one reinforces its power as a cultural "icon" and so ensures its survival in the archive of the present. Had we lost our paths and sold out to the objects we were meant to deconstruct and expose as ideological constructs that perpetuate the oppressive forces of mass culture? Had the consumer been consumed as just another product; only this time, the researchers have been consumed by the market forces they "originally" set out to expose as false gods? Wasn't Barthes now just another of his own *Mythologies*? Did we ever have a clear understanding of the things we said

we were studying and teaching; or were these things playing us, using our voices to spread their own messages (suitably encrypted) that we should accept our lots as consumers, forget our critical languages, and join the party of celebrating the cults of mediocrity and amateurism?

These were my questions when I started to read Tom Cohen's *Ideology and Inscription*. I was also curious as to how he read films. And so, I started reading the first volume of his *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies* (2005) at the same time. After about thirty pages of his Hitchcock studies, I realized that much of the thinking shaping that work was "prefigured" in his earlier *Ideology and Inscription*. At that point, I decided to concentrate on the earlier book that seemed in its subtitle to hint at a way of reading his work that required an understanding of what had been written before...a critical reading that would allow me to identify where in the Hitchcock books he was coming from and perhaps where he was going. This is not to suggest that the move is from "theory" to "practice" in some vulgar one-way move. In fact, Hitchcock figures or looms large in the earlier work. But, the two books seem to work in tandem, much as many of Walter Benjamin's essays do: say, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and the "Theses on the Philosophy of History".

Our thinking is never in one place at one time; to try to think in such a narrow way is to take up residence in the graveyard of ideas. These other texts may be "secret agents", other inscriptions that are intended to attack all that we may hold as holy in our comfortable world of safe, anodyne ideas. The hint is given early in the preface to his *Hitchcock*:

One finds oneself drawn into a prehistory of the afterlife of the present, a

zone of unfinished epistemo-political wars, still-contested histories,

teletechnic events not yet grasped. (Cohen: 2005, xii)

The jumbling sense of time (almost a Rabelaisian *trouvaille*) breaks the monochronic sense of time as a linear thing that leads us to where we are today: we are not finished with the past; it has not passed away except in our own idealized fiction that we are actually fulfilling the promises of a past we

have largely invented (by misinterpreting it). Cohen later spells out one of the ramifications of his own reading of Hitchcock:

The rewriting or rewiring of “Hitchcock” – at the core of the cinematic canon – involves similar repercussions, since it potentially alters and sends tremors through entire critical and cultural histories and their innumerable extensions. (Cohen: 2005, xiv)

Again, a reverberation from his prefigural work on inscriptions and “altered states” (Cohen: 1998, 221-237). He seems to be inviting us to read works from different times together to break the monochronic or linear spell of teleology. In inviting such a way of reading as a new (old and forgotten) way of “seeing” what we have learned not to recognize, Cohen is perhaps activating time-bombs that have lain in the archive waiting to be detonated. Once these secret agents have been exploded along with the idols we have lamely invented to deny their existence, the groundwork of what we now may comfortably think of as a settled area we call “Culture Studies” will start to shift beneath our feet. There is an earthquake coming in Film Studies that may topple the auteur idol along with all the lame language we have built our faux Babel on in recent years. And the name of the fault line along which this is coming is perhaps encrypted in Cohen’s *Hitchcock*. But the subterranean chambers are elsewhere...in his *Inscription* and in his readings of those who have, perhaps against their own intentions, served as the foundation ground of “Culture Studies”. Hence, the worry quotes as a hint that the name is actually a misnomer or a thing of the future past. Or, to reference an article Cohen has published in a previous issue of this journal, there is a prefiguring of his suggestion that “Culture Studies” (Cohen: 2013, 2) may already be dead...a zombie.

To start again: Culture Studies in worry quotes may be a mechanical palace of many rooms built over the tarn of misreading; an ideology in need of demolition through inscriptive strategies learned by “going back” to its foundation texts and learning how to read them in more radical ways than the lame ones that have become clichéd or hack regurgitations of old dogmas foisted on us by the new idols of academe who seem to encourage us to see and accept our commodification as a natural and desirable outcome of our own poor readings that seek to speak the language of our enemies, and so

become our enemies...and hence, complicit in our own destruction. We have been absorbed into the culture machine which we have perhaps always desired to be since our inception as an area of academic life.

Impatient (illiterate) readers don't like theorizing for themselves; they prefer to repeat the theories of others as authorities that sanction their habitual sloth. The idea of returning to the sources to re-examine what they actually said and interpret it for ourselves is time-consuming and difficult. But Culture Studies isn't meant to be difficult...it is meant to be Pop. We like to associate with people who think and talk like us. This reassures us that we are not alone. But a serious theorist can't think like this. Isolation and conflict are seemingly aspects of the thinking process. These are qualities a reader of Cohen's work will need to embrace if that reader is to survive the apparent ordeal of having to think critically when reading the texts. A reader who is comfortably numb with vague notions of what a particular writer means or says, will feel discomfort in Cohen's webs. Cohen doesn't offer sound-bites of thinking that merely echo the writers he is drawing and drawing from. He engages these writers to break them away from the clinging echoists who claim to speak in their voices. For him, old writers are new when read for the first time by any reader; they are also new when seen in a different way. At the core of Cohen's work is this attempt to help us find new ways of seeing what we at present only dimly or darkly see as shadows we carry around in our pre-programmed memories as ideological shibboleths. The Blakean doors of perception are open wide, if only we are willing to walk through them into another world of thought...a lost one where literary thinking still has a role to play in our newly visualized/delusional cults of parroting what others have already authoritatively pronounced. To put back together the literary and the filmic is a major achievement; to conceptualize the literary remains we may disinter as bodies that actually never died and to do this by re-reading them in conjunction with whatever else we are studying: These are skills that are mostly lacking in the writings on film and culture that I have previously read that seem to ventriloquize the words of others and masquerade these "new" words as major events in theory.

If the idea of theory has a bad name, it is probably as a result of this mediocre or lame pseudo-theorizing...a repetition of accepted wisdom. We dumb-down what we accept as thinking by redefining it as “thinking” exactly what others have already thought...as clone-speak. This is a nightmarish travesty of what Benjamin saw as a consequence of mechanical reproduction. No aura is possible except in the deluded minds of those who think they are doing theory when in fact they are being done by it in its ideological shape as the accepted wisdom of the ruling classes. The ideologies foisted on us want to foster this clone-thinking in our universities; they don’t want actual theories being developed outside of the confines of the safe ideas so far inculcated in us by the culture industry we have made our friend instead of foe when we willingly serve to repackage it and rebrand it as eternally new and exciting kitsch to be consumed by our students in easily digestible bites of useless information that we expect them to subscribe to in their own “thinking” and repeat in a catatonic self-referentiality that just repeats what others think. In this, we are digging our own graves again and again. Deaf, dumb and blind parrots have no idea of engaging with the sensorium they may be offered a way into. This is the danger of offering these people new ideas.

But if we can cure our amnesia and remember in new ways, we may re-embodiment what has been buried in a past that seems dead and forgotten. And we can do this by re-inhabiting the dead texts in uninhibited way, possessing them and perhaps letting them possess us. Unread texts are dead until someone comes along, tears apart the shrouds of conventionally sanctioned reading, and shows us that the ideas we thought were passed away have come back to haunt us...even as a bad conscience. This is Tom Cohen’s major achievement.

The ancient Greeks had the Apophrodes, a festive day set aside for the return of the dead to re-inhabit the houses where they had once lived. This was not necessarily a “spooky” experience (to use a word that may come from the lexicon of cultural study kitsch). What Cohen may be holding out to us is the prospect of a return of the critical writing and reading skills we seem to have lost in the age of fallen or “low/lite” theory. Such a return of the past, of the specters of Benjamin, de Man and Bakhtin in the materiality of their

languages that have been debased by their apparent followers in cultural studies could be provoked by us returning to the houses of these writers too; we visit them and invite them to re-visit us as hauntings.

For Cohen, these inhabitations occur in the materiality of language which is to be heard in the prefigural, the before (“the prehistory of the afterlife of the present” referred to above in this review). In his reading of Benjamin’s Thesis XVII where Benjamin spells out his rejection of historicism in favour of what he terms a “materialistic historiography (Benjamin: 1970, 254), Cohen is framing his thinking of what he will later term as teleomorphosis or the switching of signals from the past to the present. He expresses this in relation to what Benjamin calls the “monad”.

Yet this monad can be converted, in a cross-historical switchboard or cultural mnemonics, to produce new possible configurations or futures. It is a term, as we noted allied to an alteration in systems of reference as such. The time of this occasion like the non-present of the so-called *Jetztzeit*, a “state of emergency” or *emergence*, implies a momentary voiding of received contents— as if by the sheer assertion of *formal* or material elements. (Cohen: 1998, 10-11)

Such a state of emergency may be what we are in today regarding cultural studies and the academy. In Benjamin, Cohen senses a way forward by going back into the materiality that comes before the figural or mimetic urge that still characterizes literary, linguistic and culture studies drives:

Such a materiality, drawing on the always exterior domain of prefigural inscription, does not achieve some new meaning or determination by virtue of a messianic revelation (such could, at best, only repeat a past historicist narrative). It passes, or seems to *pass*, through an *aesthetic* formalization of this materiality itself, optioning in a virtual mode that caesura-effect associated in “The Task of the Translator, with something called “pure language,” *reine Sprache*...in this conceptual remapping, notoriously present in *The Birth of Tragedy* (but also from before the “dawn” of the West, as is apparent in counter-canonical readings of texts going back to and preceding Plato), the aesthetic appears rewritten as one “materialistic” conduit and cipher for a more general, pre- and

posthistorical graphematics out of which “experience” is shaped and produced). (Cohen: 1998, II)

These passageways are given here in part to invite the reader of this review to a close reading of Cohen’s language, to see and more importantly to hear (feel) its materiality as it evokes his sensorium of thought. To read him through the eyes of Benjamin:

Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. (Benjamin: 1970, 254)

These arrests in part are re-embodied in Cohen’s dense language; a language that demands the reader stop and think, struggle with the text, perform a close reading of it. To arrest the flow, the constructed ideologies of literature that have led to the era of culture studies amongst other poltergeists, is the task of the reader as translator or as transmitter of a struggle to free the past from the burdens of willful misinterpretations placed on it that disregard any spirit of the text being considered. The language itself provides this “shock”, like a galvanizing jolt that brings the text and its prefigural language to life – prefigural in the sense that the figura, at least as formed by Auerbach to frame his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) where biblical structures of narrative are seen to shape the Western canon with the Old Testament being realized in the figures of the New Testament.

Cohen doesn’t stop here: he rejects the New Historicist approaches that try to read the past in terms of present theories, thus colonizing the past with politically correct ideologies that are consumable products for the present

reader who wants to see the present as the figural realization of the past so as to avoid the boring need to actually read texts from the past. This is where Cohen's ideas started to spark a jolt in me, as I was thinking that most ideologies of literature only seek to impose their own political beliefs on a narrow band of texts that are reader-friendly. Here, I am thinking particularly of Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978) which advocates filling the target text's apparently absent center with the ideology a critic feels has been hidden or concealed. In this particular post-structuralist form, the literary text merely becomes the figura of the ideology espoused by the critic. Such simplistic and heavy-handed "readings" have justified too much low theory in recent decades where the actual language of the text is almost totally ignored, even denied to exist, so that the critic can speak for the artist without bothering to offer an analysis of the language that is said to be ideological rather than literary or aesthetic in any sense. For Cohen, there is more of a "trialogue" (Cohen: 1998, 86) than a dialogue, with the text itself being a part of the process. While he doesn't go so far as to accuse Bakhtin of renegeing on or avoiding close readings of texts, I do see this silence in Bakhtin as a lacuna or silence that makes his ideas vulnerable to charges of being non-specific.

To return to the review: Cohen is admirably able to resurrect or jolt Benjamin's text back to life insofar as his reading of it startles us with its originality and force. We see Benjamin in a new way, and he in turn is able to speak or read us. The revolutionary possibility countenanced by Cohen is that once the past starts reading us, instead of the one-way-street of us reading the past badly, we blast our own era out of the homogenous course of history that seems to have been pre-destined for us by our masters and their minions in the thoroughly reactionary world of academe that has replaced the ideals of the University with the side-show attractions of an academic theme park (Conlon: 2009, 266-294).

Without the encouraging support of voices such as Cohen's, I would not even think of venturing into the abysm of time, backwards or not, that is "culture studies" as it is presently institutionalized as a series of media events. Instead, I would rather echo Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener or copyist who rejects the dull cloddish life of the clerk – unlike too many in

the academy now who seem to thrive on the drone-like existence of mouthing other people's platitudes in a nightmarish twist to Benjamin's angst-ridden heralding of the age of mechanical reproduction as a possible new dawn in bringing art to the proletarians. History may once again be repeating itself, finally in Marx's vision as farce, with the new direction being the reproduction of automata through the deadpan duplication of what passes for acceptable academic prose devoid of any art or life. The perhaps intended heirs to Benjamin's prophetic vision have failed him and as a consequence are being mechanically reproduced en masse in our universities. If this is the case, then I take my cue from *Bartleby* by saying "I would prefer not" grind out commercially focused copies or clones of mimetic representations of the market's vision for all academics and writers. Reading Tom Cohen's work gives me hope that there may be another way in or out of the trap...another way of continuing to write, along with Beckett, by finally finding the strength to write:

...perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (Beckett: 1965, 414)

I hope that others will open the door proffered by Cohen. There is a world enough, but will there be time? That I don't know as I am no John of Patmos.

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