

Advanced Methods of Interpretation

Lecture IV

Structural Hermeneutics I

Dr. Werner Binder

Masaryk University, Brno
Faculty of Social Studies
Department of Sociology

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Summary of Lecture III

Hermeneutics:

- “Humanistic” art of understanding and interpretation
- From the author’s intention to the meaning of the text
- Historicity of understanding and interpretation

Structuralism:

- “Scientific” analysis of semiotic systems and meaning structures → universality and objectivity
- Subjective meanings (intentions) and symbolic meanings (signs) are produced by a deep structure



Structural Hermeneutics

- Hermeneutic interpretation and structural analysis
- Points of convergence between poststructuralism and Gadamer's hermeneutics (e.g. historicity)

Strands in structural hermeneutics:

- Interpretative anthropology (Geertz, Turner, Douglas)
- “structural hermeneutics” as method of the “strong program in cultural sociology” (Alexander et al.)
- “Documentary interpretation” (Mannheim, Bohnsack)
- “Objective” or “structural hermeneutics” (Oevermann)



Geertz: The Balinese Cockfight

- Thick description of the cockfight and related practices
- The cock as ambivalent symbol in the Balinese cultural system (sacred masculinity vs. polluted animality)
- Structural interpretation: The cockfights stages the symbolic binaries of the Balinese society
- “Deep” cultural interpretation: The cockfight expresses the “collective repressed” of Balinese society
- Social interpretation: The cockfight reflects the social matrix of a Balinese village



Interpretative Anthropology and Cultural Sociology

- Clifford Geertz's overall approach and vocabulary is more hermeneutic, the works of Mary Douglas are more structural and Durkheimian (e.g. purity/danger)
- Victor Turner's writings on liminality and liminoidity, ritual and performance, narrative and social drama found widespread reception in cultural sociology
- For the strong program in cultural sociology, Geertz's work and particularly his "method" of "thick description" was particularly influential



Origins of the Strong Program

In the sociology of knowledge: constructivist approach in the science and technology studies (cf. Bloor 1976):

- Symmetry between sciences (“nature”) and humanities (“society”) → e.g. not only the humanities, but also scientific research is shaped by culture and ideology
- Symmetry between “truth” and “error” → culture and ideology are not only distortive, but also enabling
- Constructivism: “decoupling of cognitive content and natural determination” (Alexander & Smith 2003: 13)



The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology

Emerged at the end of the 80s at the UCLA (Alexander & Smith 1993, 2003, 2010):

- Theorizing culture in sociology → “culture as internal environment of action” (Alexander 1988)
- Based on a “strong” interpretation of Durkheim’s *Elementary Form of Religious Life*
- Constructivist epistemology (against “naturalist fallacy”)
- Interpretative methodology: structural hermeneutics

“[S]tructuralism and hermeneutics can be made into fine bedfellows. The former offers possibilities for general theory construction, prediction and assertions of the autonomy of culture. The latter allows analysis to capture the texture and temper of social life”.

(Alexander & Smith 2003: 26)



Culture in Sociology – The Fault Line

Cultural sociology (strong) vs. sociology of culture (weak)

	Cultural Sociology	Sociology of Culture
Agenda	A cultural approach to all social phenomena	Deals “sociologically” with “cultural” phenomena
Concept	“Culture” as meaning structure	“Culture” as social sphere
Causality	Culture as independent variable	Culture as dependent variable
Label	“Strong program”	“Weak” programs
Authors	Alexander, Smith et al.	Foucault, Bourdieu et al.



Principles of Cultural Sociology

One theoretical commitment: Autonomy of culture

- Uncoupling of culture and social structure

Two methodological commitments:

- Structural hermeneutics: “Thick description” (Geertz) of codes, narrative, symbols
- Causal clarity: “ who says what, why, and to what effect” (Alexander & Smith 2003: 14)



Cultural Autonomy

Analytic vs. concrete autonomy of culture (Kane 1992):

- Culture as “text”, analytically “bracketed in” and separated from social structure
- Culture as concrete independent causal variable

Autonomy from social structure vs. material structures:

- Anti-reductionism: Uncoupling of meaning and culture from social structure (e.g. “class structure”)
- Constructivism: Uncoupling of meaning and culture from material structures (“arbitrariness of the sign”)



Constructivist Epistemology

- Contingency of interpretations (different possibilities)
- Culture as a “naturalizing” force (“myth”, cf. Barthes)

Example: Cultural trauma and the critique of lay theories of trauma (Alexander 2004)

- Cultural traumas like the Holocaust do not have to correspond to “real” traumatic experiences
- Problem: Can every event be turned into a cultural trauma? What are the social and material conditions of such constructions? Are there limits of interpretation?



Methodology in the Strong Program of Cultural Sociology

- There is no explicitly formulated methodology of the strong program in cultural sociology
- There is an implicit methodology in the empirical studies that changed significantly over the years and differs from author to author
- The strong program does not offer a methodology, but a methodological tool box
- Main method so far is discourse analysis



Discourse Analysis in the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology

- Public discourse as “collective consciousness”
- Normative agenda: Public sphere and civic solidarity (cf. Alexander 1988, 2006)
- Discourse analysis as linguistic and textual analysis → primacy of a linguistic model of meaning
- Interpretation of interpretations → usually no direct interpretation of actions and artifacts
- Later also narrative, performance and iconic analysis



Theory and Method: Diminishing Abstraction in Cultural Sociology

	Key Concepts		
Abstract code	Master binary: sacred/profane		
Concretization	Concrete binaries: e.g. code of the American civil discourse		
Application	Narration	Performance	Iconicity
Concrete reality	Events, Actions, Materiality		



The Master Binary: Sacred/Profane

Durkheim's sociology of religion:

- Sacred (pure vs. impure) vs. profane
- Social correspondence: collective vs. individual

Strong program:

- Sacred vs. profane (vs. mundane)
 - Social correspondence: "us" vs. "them"
- Problems of translation: "profane" means something different in French (and German) than in English!!!



Concrete Codes of the Civil Sphere

	Civil (sacred)	Anticivil (profane)
Motives	Active	Passive
	Autonomous	Dependent
	Rational	Irrational
Relations	Open	Secretive
	Altruistic	Greedy
	Truthful	Deceitful
Institutions	Law	Power
	Equality	Hierarchy
	Office	Personality

Alexander (2006: 57-59; 2012: 101)



Methodological Tools

The methodological tools of cultural sociology are used to explain how codes are “made” to fit “reality”

- Narrative and Genres (code ↔ event)
- Performance (code ↔ action)
- Iconicity (code ↔ materiality and visuality)

Comment: It is all about the social, semiotic meaning, never about the subjective, intentional meaning of actors!



Narration and Genre Theory

Problem: How can the application of certain codes to events can be rendered plausible?

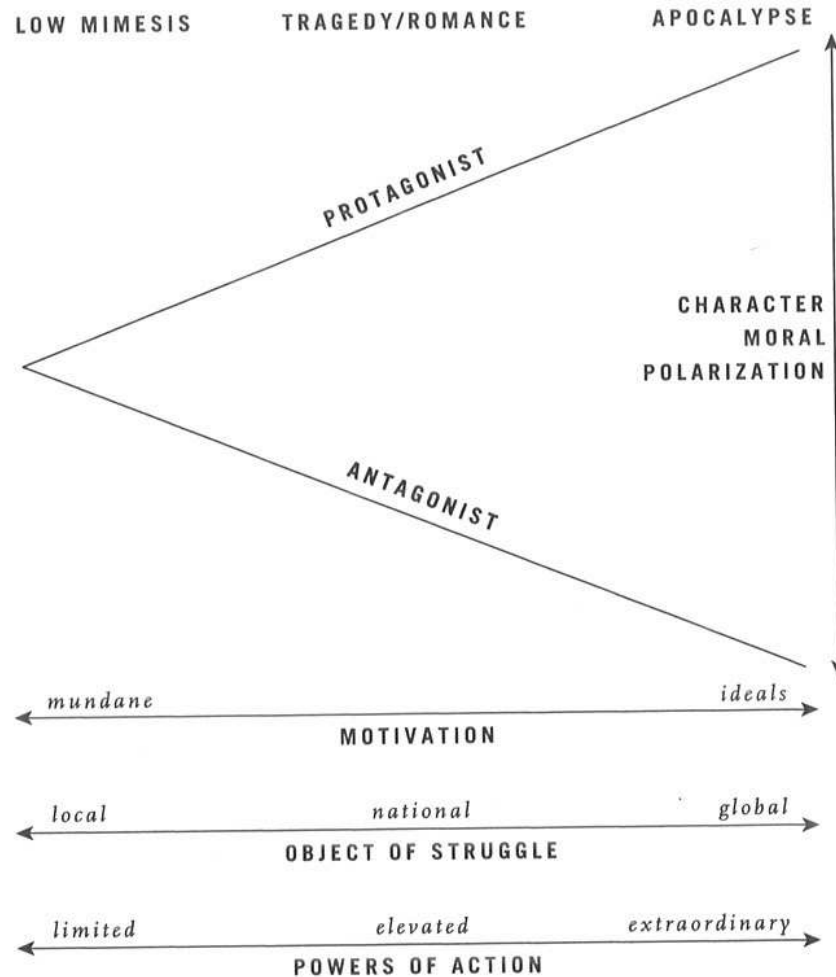
Solution: Narrative and narrative genres

Genres are general types of narratives, for example:

- Romance
- Tragedy
- Comedy
- Satire



A Model of Genre



Smith 2005: 24



Case Study: Smith's "The Balinese Cockfight Decoded"

- Geertz's "thick description" as critique of structuralism
- Structural analysis of Geertz's "Balinese Cockfight": introduction of the cockfight as an "ambiguous object", puzzle, defamiliarization (Shklovsky)
- Anthropology and sociology as academic storytelling: "a) solve a puzzle, b) connect to a big theme, c) enlist emotional support" (Smith 2008: 176)



Performance and Cultural Pragmatics

Problem: How to put cultural codes into action?

Solution: Performances convey social meanings as “natural” and “authentic” → not about the subjectively intended meaning but about how other actors interpret the action

Diminishing abstraction of cultural elements:

- Background representations
- Scripts
- Text (of the performance)



Cultural Pragmatics

A CULTURAL THEORY OF SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

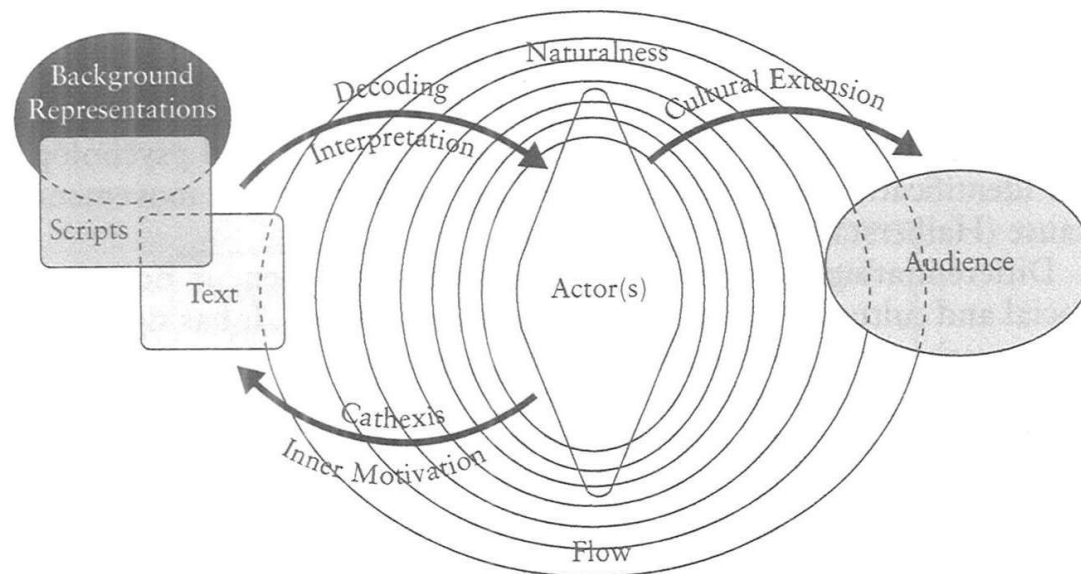


Figure 2.7. Double fusion: text-actor-audience.

Alexander 2006: 70



Elements of Performance

- Actors
- Collective representations (scripts and background representation)
- Means of symbolic production
- Mise-en-scène
- Social power (control over the publicity of a performance and the power to project interpretations)
- Audiences



Politics as Performance

- Electoral campaigns as drama and performance (Alexander 2010, Alexander & Jaworsky 2014)
- Candidates try to become collective representations
- Binary: civil vs. uncivil, democratic vs. repressive etc.
- Means of symbolic production: e.g. campaign money
- Social power: control over media and interpretations
- Audiences: demographically fragmented or culturally unified?



Iconicity and Materiality

Problem: How can certain cultural codes be attached to material artifacts and visual surfaces?

Solution: Iconicity; materiality and visibility as carriers of social meanings

- Compensation for the linguistic one-sidedness of structuralism and hermeneutics
- Limits of constructivism



Case Study: Vinyl

- Binary code: analog/digital
- The meaning of vinyl depends on its contrast to digital media
- Non-arbitrary meanings, connected to practices, sound and other material qualities
- Homologue structures to other fields: „Cultures of the Slow“

Bartmanski & Woodward 2015





Criticism and Problems

- Lack of causal explanation of a successful reception: e.g. contingency and indeterminacy of performances → cultural resonance
- Lack of cultural explanation of action: Very little about how culture motivates action → implicit assumption of strategic and instrumental use of symbolic codes
- Limited arbitrariness of the signifier: Not every interpretation seems to be possible → problems of constructivist epistemology



For further questions
and comments please

werner.binder@mail.muni.cz