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# Introduction

BENT SØRENSEN

Cultural Text Studies (CTS) is a research project initiated by the Department of Languages, Culture and Aesthetics at Aalborg University. The present introductory volume launches a series of themed monographs which will be edited by researchers at the Dept., occasionally aided by friends and associates from other programmes. The purpose of the series is to be a forum for the publication of results of research in the broadly defined area of cultural text. This particular volume engages with a wide range of Anglophone texts and cultural phenomena which are read in each their particular historical framework (the synchronic dimension to the research), and which, when presented in a suite of essays, provide a chronologically structured primer in cultural text studies (the diachronic dimension to the work).

This interdisciplinary field of research springs from an emergent interest in both studying texts culturally *and* in studying culture as text. Thus it is “*cultural text studies*” in the sense that the object of study consists of all readable cultural phenomena which are regarded as texts in a much more broadly defined sense than in the traditional field of literary studies. Yet it is also “*cultural text studies*”, in the sense that, while the approach is “cultural” as opposed to, say, formalist, the work often entails an intense engagement with texts and close readings thereof<sup>1</sup>, usually combining reading strategies inspired by literature or film studies, in tandem with application of continental cultural theory, such as the German hermeneutic tradition,

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1 I am indebted to Lene Yding Pedersen for first formulating this dialectic relationship clearly in her contribution to the 2003 conference on *Complexity I* co-organized with several of the contributors to the present volume. The proceedings from this event will appear as the CTS 3 monograph later this year.

French deconstruction, or sociological approaches to aesthetic products such as Pierre Bourdieu's contribution.

This methodology by nature yields hybrid readings, and the teaching of cultural text studies in this form is unique to the English programme at Aalborg University, in the sense that while other English departments in Denmark offer cultural studies courses, they do not offer sufficient theory to support these courses, nor do they engage with such a wide array of text types. The whole idea behind the CTS project therefore springs from teaching activities in the programme, such as our long running lecture series in textual history, entitled "Fashioning Self and Identity", which came about as an idea fostered by our long time programme mentor, associate professor Torben Ditlevsen. The idea to collect the lectures in textual history into a volume and to supplement the sequence with extra essays to consolidate our research focus areas also came from him. After several years of preparation we are proud to finally present our collective efforts.

The essays in this volume are thus all authored by present and past members of the English programme's teaching staff in the fields of culture, literature, and media studies. The pieces range widely in terms of the period, genre and medium of the texts investigated. Focus areas include Victorian literature and art; high modernism, especially approached from the point of view of a centre/margin discourse; and finally postmodernist aesthetics and its embedded move from literary into cultural studies, as witnessed by essays on world music, shoes, Hollywood, the post-ironic, the de-territorialized, and the post-human condition as cultural texts.

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The collection commences with Riber Christensen's analysis of the cultural and aesthetic function of The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, at the very beginning of the 19th century. The essay shows how the paintings and prints exhibited and sold by the Gallery remediated the works of Shakespeare, and provided the growing middle class audience of art and culture with access to de-auralized versions or reproductions of high art. The works of Shakespeare therefore were transposed from a dynamic, performance oriented art form such as the theatre, into static tableaux which could be consumed in the newly defined private space of the bourgeois home. The prerequisites for this transformation of art from auratic to non-auratic are theorized via the well-known work of Walter Benjamin, whereas the dis-

inction between private and public spheres draws on the work of Habermas and Bourdieu. The close reading portions of Riber Christensen's essay illuminate the technological developments in engraving techniques that paved the way for cheap mass reproduction and distribution of the images. We are also treated to an analysis of the various genres of painting represented in the Gallery, and the point is offered that the remediation process leads to a destabilization of the traditional hierarchy of genres with history painting at the top. The Boydell images can thus be seen to pave the way towards a new paradigm in art and culture consumption, which, while it has its roots in the post-Glorious Revolution era and the 18th century struggle between an emergent but immature bourgeoisie and a moribund aristocracy, also leads forward into the Victorian era where the hegemony of the bourgeoisie becomes ever more firmly established, including that class's full sway of both private and public spaces within Britain and ultimately the whole British Empire. This analysis of a curious phenomenon of the Georgian age, thus serves as the perfect staging for the two essays to come on the making and breaking of three eminent Victorians.

In the first of these essays Jens Kirk analyzes the relationship between the construction of self and identity and the writing of autobiographies and other books. He takes as his specific object of interest the life and works of John Stuart Mill, an uncommonly well-educated person by the standards of any historical period. Kirk's essay draws on the twin disciplines of book history and the history of reading to situate Mill's efforts of self-fashioning within a social-constructivist paradigm. His reading is inspired by the insights generated by New Historicist approaches to textual studies, as exemplified by the work of Stephen Greenblatt, and the essay shows how the issues of authority/power and authorship are irrevocably intertwined. Kirk further uses Roman Jakobsen's notion of the conative function of language (and by extension books) to discuss the impact of texts and books on readers. Mill's particular construction of self is read closely in the case of his relationship with his father and with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, whose contribution to Mill's book *On Liberty* receives particular attention in Mill's *Autobiography*. Kirk argues that Mill attempted to create a unified self, and to communicate this self image, through the revisions of his life and life's work performed by the writing of and in the *Autobiography*, and that the acknowledgement of his by then deceased wife's contribution functions as a prerequisite for internal unification within Mill's understanding of his identity as author.

Riber Christensen returns with a comparative essay discussing two of the most widely read Victorian authors, Dickens and Kipling. His essay commences with the postulate that the Victorian period in fact should be read as an era of thoroughgoing modernization and innovation, which he documents with a number of graphs and maps showing internal and external, imperial expansion and technological growth. The textual engagement with the two authors picks lesser known texts by the two authors, so that the famous novelist Dickens is represented via a short story, and so that Kipling's best known longer prose works and poems take the back seat to far more obscure short fictions. Dickens is shown to have deep-seated anxieties vis-à-vis technological progress, partly due to personal traumas incurred because of his unfortunate involvement in the train accident known as the "Staplehurst Railway Accident". This event not only jeopardized his life but also his reputation, as he was traveling with his mistress, and a leakage between his private and public personae could have occurred with potentially career damaging consequences. The short narrative "The Signal-Man" is analyzed by Riber Christensen with the use of Todorov's theory of hesitation in the reading of texts within the fantastic paradigm. Dickens uses the hesitation between a fantastic and a pseudo-ghost story reading protocol to establish a critique of the consequences for man's spirit and faith of too rapid and pervasive technological development. In contrast, Kipling is shown – via an analysis of some of his fictions thematizing whites passing for natives in India (particularly the short story "Lispeth") – to not be as uniformly jingoist in his ideology of empire and racial hierarchies as has popularly been assumed by faulty, decontextualized and dehistoricized analyses of poems such as "The White Man's Burden". Rather Kipling must be regarded as in favour of colonialism in the public sphere, but thoroughly against it in the private sphere of love and marital relations. Both authors are thus shown to be good Victorians, yet ultimately they have become undone by their own ideologies for a more contemporary reading public by their attempts to parcel out a waterproof distinction between the two spheres.

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The focus of the collection then shifts to the modernist period, and the next three essays read canonical as well as marginal modernist authors in various contexts that all highlight these authors' questionable belongings to nations, groups and – ultimately – periods.

Jesper Trier frames his essay on T.S. Eliot and Yeats with a discussion of the problematics of period definition, but still offers to synthesize a common poetics for these two very different poets, via an analysis of the use of reader manifestations and inscribed reader positions in some of the best known poems by the two authors. The essay offers a description of the construct of modernism and modernist aesthetics as a cultural text, with a number of poets organizing themselves loosely around the figure of Ezra Pound and his declared aesthetic programme. Through Poggioli and others' ideas of avant-garde versus more integrated artistic expressions and 'schools' Trier conceptualizes both Eliot and Yeats's positions as critical of the alienation associated with life in the modern world, especially post-WWI. Their differences are, however, also emphasized, as Eliot is shown to rapidly develop into a more conservative figure lamenting the fragmentation of life and thinking in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", where he suggests the objective and catalytic role as ideal for the poet. Eliot's own poetic practice is discussed through an analysis of the poem "Sweeney Among the Nightingales", where the reader is inscribed as a drab non-participant figure clad in brown. In contrast Yeats is shown, through an analysis of some of the paratext surrounding *A Vision*, to be an advocate for the poet to exert active influence and work for a change to the better. This desire is seen as more of a moral or religious/philosophical endeavour than an aesthetic one, and this insight is evolved in an analysis of one of Yeats's most apocalyptic texts, the poem "The Second Coming". Ultimately the shared project between Eliot and Yeats is shown to consist in a desire or moral obligation ascribed to the poet to educate his readers in how to navigate modern life with its lack of moral and social guidelines.

Lene Yding Pedersen also reads Yeats, but she engages with him as one of several writers engaged in a project of (re)imagining Ireland in the years leading up to and immediately after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. Her theoretical framework draws on Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, which entails reading the construction of nations and national identity as a mainly textual project. Belonging and non-belonging is in Anderson and Yding's optics a matter of construction of unified selves and groups bound together by shared narratives of origin, development and common *telos*. Yeats's participation in this project as regards the so-called Celtic Renaissance is analyzed through a number of essays and other non-fiction writings by Yeats as well as through a reading of his poem "The Fisherman". While Yding admits that an Andersonian reading of this or any poem is necessarily highly reductive, she still docu-

ments that the relations between history and myth and past and present become particularly poignant when viewed through a social-constructive lens. Yding proceeds to treat the particular case of the role of the Gaelic language in the Irish revival, and here she focuses on some of the oppositional voices ironizing over the elevation of the Gaelic tongue to a key to the Irish Ur-identity. Joyce is mentioned in passing, but the particular, representative voice analyzed in depth is that of Flann O'Brien's novel, *The Poor Mouth*, which contains hilarious passages satirizing among other things the academic *faible* for all things Gaelic, including the squeals of a particular piglet which sound especially authentic to the scholars of Gaelic. Yding concludes with a perspective on the other not so Irish Irish writers, Shaw and Beckett who both spoke out against the (self)censorship practiced by the Irish Free State on key issues related to sexuality, public morals and the Catholic Church. Yding concludes that even these oppositional voices were engaged in an imagining of Ireland as a cultural (free) space in the inter-war years and post-WWII period.

Free spaces are also among the main topics of Bent Sørensen's essay on the Harlem renaissance and one of its lesser known writers, Nella Larsen, whose connection to Denmark is currently being re-mapped and re-interpreted. His essay participates in this unearthing of Larsen as a forgotten literary figure whose life is very illustrative when read as a social and cultural text, exemplifying exclusion form and a quest for sanctuary and belonging in groups, classes and ethnicities. Sørensen's theoretical point of departure is in his attempt to develop a trans-generic tool for the reading of cultural texts, which combines semiotics as a general philosophy of sign and meaning with a historicist credo, leading to the claim that all texts can be read as expressive of a few central difference discourses (of say, gender, race, age, class, nation/region and belief), but these texts cannot be fully understood unless read in a cultural specificity. New Historicism here also serves as a significant source of inspiration, but departing from the generic New Historicist circulation perspective Sørensen also insists upon the necessity of further specificity which calls for close reading techniques to supplement the reception and circulation analysis. Here Bourdieu's notions of the field of cultural production and the Habermasian distinction between private and public life and text play a role as influences on his methodology. To open the case of Nella Larsen as a culturally significant text, Sørensen situates her in three concentric circles of contextualizations: The modernist period in the USA and its specific manifestation in African-American and diasporic literature and art of the 1920s, i.e. The Harlem Renaissance; the



pressures of negotiating double minority differences within that group, e.g. female and black identities, with its attendant numerous victim positions, both as regards the author's life and the life of her literary characters; and finally the individual biography of Larsen and its reflections in her works. Larsen is particularly interesting in the latter respect because many layers of obscurity still persist and competing biographical narratives produced by herself and, belatedly, by academics do little to shed light on the lacunae in our understanding of her life and works. Sørensen's strategy is here to apply the difference discourse theory to all three circles of engagement with Nella Larsen and her texts, her peer group, and the socio-economic reality she had to operate within. This analysis shows her as a victim of discrimination, silencing and character assassination from a variety of agencies, including some of her closest peers. Her own works are read as containing sophisticated oppositional discourses signaling these silencing attempts and offering us as contemporary academics a cultural text that can be read as quite sophisticated in its feminist and interracial critiques.



The final and largest cluster of essays in the volume treats postmodern and even more recent texts. That this is the largest area in terms of contributions also reflects the predominant teaching and research focus of the English department which squarely engages with postmodern poetics, aesthetics and textual practices across media and genres, and the potential labeling of that which is to come, or has come, after postmodernism. The six essays in this latter half of the volume stake out several of the posts in this field of study, starting with English poetry of the 1970s and 80s, 1980s global texts and world music, and Hollywood (historically, as well as in the contemporary period) viewed as a cultural text, before moving into the 1990s and the early 21st century in the choice of object texts, focusing on trends that surpass post-modern concerns and venture into analyses of the new literary sincerity (or the post-ironic), of shoes as cultural texts (or post-constructivist identity issues), and finally of transtextuality in post-cyberpunk literature (or post-human identities).

The first of these essays is Jens Kirk's analysis of the socio-literary production of the so-called 'Martian School' in English poetry in the 1970s and 80s. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production, Kirk meticulously traces the construction by certain critics of a group of poets as both a unified school and a trend representing literary value in the shape

of a neo-Eliotian sensibility. This consecration of, especially, the poets Craig Raine and Christopher Reid is shown to have its specific origin in a one-page article appearing in the *New Statesman* in 1978, wherein critic James Fenton performs a dual operation of appraisal of the above-mentioned poets and desecration of several critics of a previous generation, thereby in effect also auto-consecrating himself as a taste-maker and gate-keeper in the field of cultural production. While it appears that Fenton's actions are motivated by a desire for renewal of the canon of consecrated poetry in England, Kirk further shows that the actual values praised by Fenton and later critics that participate in the production of the Martians are considerably more conventional and all hinge on the reading of emotionality into the works of Raine in particular. Thus the new consecration of Martian poets cannot be said to be subversive in itself, but rather constitutes a struggle for the power to consecrate. Kirk ends by reminding us that we all as cultural analysts are implicated in this struggle and cannot ultimately take a stand outside the field of cultural production.

Ben Dorfman, in his essay on global text reading, takes an intellectual historian's approach to what he wishes to consecrate as a new genre or label for a field of analysis. Commencing with a reminder that we live in an age of globalization, he proposes that we examine what that implies for our engagement with texts that themselves are global in the sense that they embody the dual move of time-space compression and deterritorialization. Dorfman sees globalization itself as a process that first connects and then integrates units into global wholes. He proposes that certain texts can be seen to be ruled by this logic, and proposes the term 'global texts' for this trans-generic body of works. While globalization in itself is not a new phenomenon, as Dorfman's excursus on the Roman Empire illustrates, he nevertheless argues that compression and de-territorialization as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari are more common phenomena in postmodernity than ever before. As an example of a trans-national, indeed global, cultural product, which is both conceived, produced, disseminated and consumed globally, Dorfman selects Paul Simon's album *Graceland*, which features a fusion of several musical influences or roots, a collaboration between musicians across spatial distances, and global consumer appeal. Dorfman illustrates how this text evinces a time-space compression and 'transports' its listeners effortlessly from American blues/country roots to contemporary *mbaqanga* style South African music, and metaphorically allows us to simultaneously be in Tennessee and Soweto, while we are in Simon's land of grace. This imagined suspension of distance in time/space echoes Yding's

analysis of the imagined cultural spaces in Ireland and Sørensen's observations on constructed concentric circles of sanctuary in the case of Nella Larsen. Dorfman concludes his essay with a three-step reading programme for global, cultural text studies, which strongly echoes the engagement with text that New Historicism and social constructivism teach us: global texts must be read in awareness of global history, i.e. they produce meaning fully only when situated historically and globally; texts co-produce the history they partake in, and finally, we become involved in globalization ourselves when performing readings and analyses of such texts. The latter point, of course, echoes Kirk's conclusions in the Martians' article.

The first of Steen Christiansen's essays proposes that the whole of Hollywood's production, dissemination and reception system can be read as a cultural text, or a set of specific global texts, to use Dorfman's terminology. His point of departure is in a critique of film studies agendas that focus narrowly on auteur films (seen as film's version of high art) or on genre studies which either are naively quantitative in scope or else purely formalist and therefore prone to bizarre miscategorizations. Instead Christiansen proposes to read film in general and the Hollywood system in particular from a reception oriented perspective. He claims that films have in them reader positions (to revitalize Trier's point about modernist poetry), and that these reader positions are historically specific and often ideologically expressive of certain expectations on behalf of the filmmakers. The historical situatedness is dealt with in the portion of the essay that discusses the technological innovations within filmmaking from the introduction of sound onwards, where the point is that Hollywood has used innovation and globalization techniques in combination to ensure a continuing role as the dominant force in film, while remaining a national film industry. Hollywood film thus remains steadily American in its view of the world it impacts on and attempts to teach. While Christiansen does not disregard psychoanalytic film theory as important for a reception oriented approach he prefers reader-response ideas that allow the audience more agency in filling out the blanks in the interpretative process of film viewing. Brief analysis of films such as *Deep Blue Sea*, *Boyz N the Hood*, and *Se7en* show that the reader positions are partly engendered within the film, but that reader competence and playfulness as a dialogic (i.e. two-way producer-reader constructed) process cannot be ignored especially in the work of interpreting postmodern meta-films. Christiansen concludes by proposing that we adopt John Fiske's idea of an extension of Roland Barthes's distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts to also encompass the position of 'producerly'

texts. This position affords us a middle ground between hermeneutics and empty formalist categorization where we can speak of a cultural text reading of Hollywood itself and its products.

Tore R. Andersen, in his essay on post-ironic positions within or beyond postmodern literature, focuses in particular on David Foster Wallace's constructions of sincerity in his 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*. Andersen, however, identifies a whole generation of American novelists who both are the inheritors of and rebels against what has become postmodern conformity and hegemony within the American literary establishment. The first generation of ironic postmodernists, spearheaded by John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Don de Lillo have reached levels of consecration that are quite astounding considering the contents of their paranoid quasi-nihilistic works often written in a hard-to-engage-with, alienating style. The new 'wannabe' patricidal generation of Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Rick Moody and others offer a return to teleological narratives and a new sincere belief in the function of story-telling. This is seen by Andersen as a generational move towards the post-ironic, both within the literary texts themselves and in the construction of author personae, which differs considerably from the strategies chosen by the older ironists. While the post-ironists are not always successful in avoiding the trap of repeating old ironies inherent in the writing styles and favourite subject matters of their predecessors, the essay argues that *Infinite Jest* is a fully successful post-ironic text, while still remaining a vibrant social satire of contemporary USA. This novel is seen as an example of 'radical realism' as much in the tradition of Raymond Carver as that of political, dissident postmodernists such as those identified by Paul Maltby in his seminal work of that title from 1991. Andersen in sum offers an update of Maltby's distinction between introverted and extroverted postmodernists, an endeavour complicated by the return of some of the ironical patriarchs (such as de Lillo and Pynchon) to the joys of storytelling. This tentative poetics of the post-ironical includes a renewed focus on the personal and on the family as the quintessential identity unit. It is therefore ironic in itself (!) that this tendency towards the post-ironic can potentially be seen as a return to an avant-garde aesthetics, as Andersen proposes in his concluding perspectives which also comment on Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier as a post-ironist.

The penultimate essay in the volume at hand offers a reading of the various cultural metamorphoses surrounding the career and works of Rebecca Miller. Camelia Elias reads Miller's career as a navigation of the field of cultural production, as theorized in Bourdieu's volume of that title.

Miller is a multi-talented woman whose varied heritage from gifted and consecrated parents (Arthur Miller and Inge Morath) has stood her in good stead in her career—shifts between acting, art, writing and filmmaking. Elias's point is also that Miller in some of her latest works, both entitled *Personal Velocity* (one is a collection of short stories and the other an episodic film), overtly thematizes the position a number of gifted young women find themselves in when attempting to negotiate new careers and new identity positions for themselves. While the stories and film episodes are not autobiographical in a conventional sense, Elias argues that they all thematize the desire for being interesting – a desire Miller herself has ample biographical reasons for being fuelled by. Elias's most controversial point is that the symbol of choice in Miller's work, as in the work of many other authors and purveyors of cultural artifacts throughout the history of cultural text production (from at least Chaucer onwards), is shoes. Elias shows how shoes pervade not only Miller's own texts but also references in the reception of her career. Culturally speaking, shoes are therefore among the most well-worn artifacts, also when academics subject them to analysis when walking through the field of cultural production.

The volume closes with Steen Christiansen's second contribution, which tackles a very recent text by William Gibson, who pioneered the sub-genre of cyberpunk within the field of science fiction. Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* questions what defines us as human, particularly in a fragmented, paranoid, amnesiac or apophenic culture. Christiansen's approach to these issues is again reader and reception oriented, this time utilizing the charting of transtextual phenomena carried out by French theorist Gerard Genette in a number of volumes of textual history and criticism from the 1980s and 90s. Transtextuality is a common term for all that creates links between texts and their readers and between texts and other texts. Christiansen shows how Genette's detailed catalogue of phenomena of intertextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality (and to a lesser degree meta- and paratextuality) can help us read even a text such as Gibson's which endeavours to play games with its readers that go beyond the standard catalogue of postmodern poetics. Christiansen shows first that apparently innocent intertextual games such as quoting and misquoting canonical works can have radically different aesthetic functions according to reader competence and reading protocol applied to such phenomena. *Pattern Recognition* turns out to relate transtextually to other texts as diverse as Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Gibson's own *Neuromancer* and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Different readers will of course recognize these patterns of transtextuality to different

degrees. Christiansen utilizes Umberto Eco's notion of the open and the closed text to conceptualize these reading protocols, and concludes radically that Gibson's version of problematizing the postmodern notion of paranoia over the connectedness of everything is by questioning and leaving open the very notion of any purpose or intentionality behind these trans-textual connections. Interpretation may therefore ultimately be redundant, and Gibson may therefore fall in the trap the post-ironists seek to avoid: that of dying of his own textual exhaustion.

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This collection thus ends on an open question applied to an open text. This spirit of openness to approaches is of course no coincidence. The credo of cultural text studies is that any object text can be situated in an interesting context and be given an interesting reading. The wide range of theoretical approaches from New Historicism and literary sociology, over reception aesthetics to close readings shows the interdisciplinary and eclectic method cultural text studies must embrace to make texts relevant in a contemporary research and teaching environment. Sometimes Shakespeare must be stippled and stroked, Ireland imagined as Gaelic piglets, Martians produced out of thin air, silk shoes donned in muddy fields, and patterns recognized where none exist, all in order to make fresh research done and the communication of its findings to reluctant students possible. Should we succeed, as I am confident we will, that would be no small accomplishment.