ON CULTURAL IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE: CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

Ramona HOSU

Abstract

Culture - as the world of customs, values, institutions, language, in which the work of art is created, published and read, society in its broadest definition - is generally made up of a number of different *discourses*, out of which one or more 'serve' a dominant *ideology*. Therefore, a certain context constructs and is constructed by some ideology that is the 'material' of most of the discourses that (co)exist in the back/foreground. Literary works or texts have always mediated relations between their writers and readers and therefore, they challenge the uneven distribution of power within societies. The present paper attempts to offer a more or less subjective overview of some concepts and their interferences, focusing on such terms like culture, society, discourse, ideology and identity, in the view of some contemporary literary theories that have explored and used them in literary analysis.

Keywords: culture, discourse, ideology, identity

Culture remains a very pretentious term that has been inhospitable to definition, especially in up-to-date circumstances, when almost all discussions about contemporary issues make use of the much broader interdisciplinary study of the relations among a variety of cultural discourses. *Culture/Cultural* appears in such terms like *Cultural Studies, Cultural Criticism, Cultural Politics* or *the Politics of Culture, Cultural Poetics* or the *Poetics of Culture*, *Cultural Materialism* etc. The present paper is not to insist on any of these associations but rather it is to study *culture* in relation to *ideology* and *discourse*.

In "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation", John Fiske sees *Culture*, in the phrase 'cultural studies', as neither aesthetic nor humanist, but *political*. Culture is not conceived as "the aesthetic ideals of form and beauty" or as the "voice of the human spirit that transcends the boundaries of time and nation"; it is not "the aesthetic products of the human spirit" but a "way of living within an industrial society that encompasses all the meanings of that social experience (Fiske 1992: 305). Culture circulates meanings in industrial societies, and meanings and the making of meanings are connected to the social structure; such meanings result from social experience and also belong to the self, i.e. "constructions of social identity that enable people living in industrial capitalist societies to make sense of themselves and their social relations. Meanings of experience and meanings of the subject (or self) who has that experience are finally part of the same cultural process" (Fiske 1992: 305).

From this point of view, certain texts (as vehicles of meanings) invite certain interpretations, due to the transgression of ideologies *in*, *as*, *of*, and *about* the text. Thus, starting with the 1980s, with Terry Eagleton and neo-Marxist literary criticism, what is to analyze in the literary text is *not* the structure and the value of individual works but the *'thesis' and 'tendency' of some groups of works* and their homogeneous/heterogeneous relations with the economic and social environment that produces them (Marino 1994: 177). These

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

texts are to be seen as discourses and/or ideologies that circulate meanings in a cultural environment.

In *Discourse*, Sara Mills (1997: 29-47) explains that whether to draw on work based on the notion of *ideology* or on the one of *discourse* is an issue related to political orientation. In the political climate of the 1990s, many critics replaced the Marxist *ideology* with *discourse*. Therefore, an intellectual practice was developed in analyzing determinants of thinking and behaviour, these understood as discourses. It was Michael Foucault who found the term ideology difficult to explain: "ideology is in a secondary position in relation to something which must function as the infra-structure or economic or material determinant for it" (Foucault 1976: 398-399). There are many critics that do not separate the terms and many use the term ideology or 'ideological' when situating within discourse. The perspective brought here is that of discourse as a larger concept within which there might be one or several types of ideologies. Terry Eagleton explains that what happens to this term is an indicator that we are living in full postmodernity. The term has a "thousand of different meanings" (Irimia 1999: 130). It is similar to the word *politics*, and, furthermore, it is understandable why *ideology often superposes with "political criticism"*. It means that there are only a few things that are irrelevant for the concept 'political'; and it also means that it involves the concept of *power* as process, action, consequence.

The term *Ideology* has undergone significant change in meaning since Marx first used the word as 'the ruling ideas of the ruling class'. For *Karl Marx*, ideology is "the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas" (Marx 253); ideology is associated with the power/dominance of a certain social class. Ideology is linked with the concept of hegemony, in Antonio Gramsci's meaning; to him, there are two major superstructural "levels": the "civil society", the set of organisms called private, and the "political society", or the State (Gramsci 277). These two levels correspond to the function of hegemony exercised by the dominant group throughout society and to the direct domination of the State.

In *"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"*, Louis Althusser concentrates on the structure and functioning of ideology. To him, ideology is "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Such ideology exists "in an apparatus" and its practices and this is 'material existence', through the practices of this State apparatuses: religion, ethics, law, politics, art etc. There is something 'magic' in Ideology, and this has to do with the fact that one always learns to do 'well' in accordance with the social system in which the person lives; ideology, therefore, is meant "to makes us do things that may be against our interests and to do them as if they were entirely self-willed" (Rivkin and Ryan 1998: 238). This is the Marxist *"false consciousness"*, translated as "they do not know it, but they are doing it" (Zizek 318). Today, the concept of *Culture* has been blurred and *Ideology* seems to have undergone the same process; *ideology* is linked with 'cultural meaning' and 'personal/group identity construction' in issues of class, race and gender; "When Althusser wrote that ideology represents 'not the system of the relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

those individuals to the real relations in which they live' and which govern their existence, he was also describing, to my mind exactly, the functioning of gender…" says Teresa De Lauretis in *The Technology of Gender* (717). The same theorem applies not only to class and gender but also to race, ethnicity, religion etc.

The term *Discourse* "has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literary and cultural theory, and yet it is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined" (Mills 1997: 1).

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms (Murfin and Ray 1997: 89) sees *discourse* as: used specifically, (1) the thoughts, statements, or *dialogue* of individuals, especially of *characters* in a literary work; (2) the words in, or text of, a *narrative* as opposed to its story line; or (3) a "strand" within a given narrative that argues a certain point or defends a given value system. More generally, *discourse* refers to the language in which a subject or area of knowledge is discussed or a certain kind of business is transacted. Human knowledge is collected and structured in discourses. Contemporary literary critics have maintained that society is generally made up of a number of different discourses or *discourse communities*, one or more of which may be dominant or serve the dominant *ideology*.

Just like any other term that is variously and interchangeably used, *discourse* is defined by what it is not; for Guy Cook, in *Discourse and Literature* (1995: 23-25), the *'text'* is "the linguistic forms in a stretch of language, and those interpretations of them which do not vary with context. I use the general term 'text' to mean language regarded in this way"; the *'context'* is "a form of knowledge of the world"; it is *co-text*, paralinguistic features, other texts (intertext), the physical situation, the social and cultural situation and interlocutors and their schemata (knowledge about other people's knowledge); 'Discourse' as "opposed to text, is a stretch of language in use, taking on meaning in context for its users, and perceived by them as purposeful, meaningful, and connected", it is "a coherent stretch of language"; furthermore, 'discourse analysis' is "both a study of the formal linguistic qualities of stretches of language (texts), and a study of the variable perception of these stretches of language by individuals and groups" (25).

Discourses are part of different linguistic inquiries, all understanding language in the context of communication: the theory of speech act, the ethnography of speaking, conversational analysis, functional linguistics, eventually discourse analysis.

Literary discourses *cannot* be reduced to a simple order/stretch of words/texts/language and "those who think of literature purely as language or 'discourse' face a dilemma" (Fowler 1987: 5). They either exclude novels from literature or deny its existence as an entity: "Considered merely as discourse [language], without any reference to any integrated work, literature is not always distinguishable from other writing. Understandably, then, those loyal to modern fiction have preferred to resolve the dilemma by the bold course of assassinating literature."

From a very different perspective, Michael Foucault uses *discourse* as a key concept in his works:

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

> […] I would like to show that "discourses", in the form in which they can be heard or read, are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and words: an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words; I would like to show that discourse is not a slender surface of contact, of confrontation, between a reality and language (*langue*), the intrication of a lexicon and an experience […] "Words and things" is the entirely serious title of a problem, it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to, contents and representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to language (langue) and to speech. It is this "more" that we must reveal and describe (Foucault 1972: 427-428).

Sara Mills explains (1997: 17-22) when quoting Foucault's understanding of the term *discourse*: the "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" means that "a discourse is something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect)". There are ideas, opinions, ways of thinking and behaving that can be detected in discursive structures. In detecting discourses of femininity and masculinity, one can demarcate the boundaries of what it means to be gendered (17). When stating that discourses have certain effects, "it is important to consider the factors of truth, power and knowledge" (18). Discourses are in constant conflict with other discourses and social practices that inform them in terms of truth and authority. *Discourses are not meant to represent the 'real' accurately, but are concerned with the mechanics* that contributed to the production of a discourse as the dominant one; consequently, the next term to call for is *Power*. With his understanding of the term, Foucault rethought the earlier models of *power* as possession, or power as violation of one's rights, or, in Marxist terms, power relations as determined by economic relations. To him, power is dispersed throughout social relations and it produces or restricts forms of behaviour. Consequently, the *knowledge that we possess is the result of the power struggles:*

> Power consists essentially in relations, that is it is something that makes characters, humans relate to each other, not only in order to communicate a meaning, or for desire, but, equally, in a way that allows them to act upon each other, and, if you admit, offering larger sense to this term, to "govern" each other. The parents govern their children, the woman governs her beloved, the teacher governs the pupils etc. We govern each other in a conversation through a series of tactics. I believe that this field of relations is very important and this is what I wanted to state. How does this happen, with what instruments and, because in a way I am a historian of knowledge and sciences, what effects do these power relations have on knowledge? This is our problem (Foucault 1981: 453-454).

According to Foucault's understanding of the term, discourses may result in analysis of similarities "across a range of texts as the products of a particular set of power/knowledge relations" (Mills 1997: 23). In Foucault's view, the structure or constituencies of discourses are less important than the practices that support some types of discourse and exclude some others on grounds of authority. Furthermore, a discourse

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

could give sense to culture but it could also be a means by which to contest the shared culture. Such contestation results in the growth of some new studies that exploit the very source of contestation, such as the feminist discourse and the Post-Colonial discourse theory and criticism.

The term *discourse* is both a theoretical notion and a concept that rather refers to the practices within it (Fiske 1994: 3). As a theoretical term, discourse or language, in the structuralist sense, is an abstract structural system that organizes meaning in certain social, political and cultural conditions.

From this point of view, it is language that is marked by the social conditions of those who use it. Besides "tracing the regularities and conventions of discourse as a signifying system", in the linguistic sense, an analysis of 'discourse' as a term or concept also mentions the most significant relations of any piece of discourse with the social conditions of its use, "not to the signifying system in general […] but its function in deploying power within those conditions (3):

> At this level, then, discourse is the means by which those conditions are made to make sense within the social relations that structure them […] Here discourse has three dimensions: a topic area of social experience to which its sense making is applied; a social position from which sense is made and whose interests it promotes; and a repertoire of words, images, and practices by which meanings are circulated and power applied. To make sense of the world is to exert power over it, and to circulate that sense socially is to exert power over those who use that sense as a way of coping with their daily lives (Fiske 1994: 3).

Since it conveys a history of domination, subordination and resistance (Fiske 1994: 3), the term *discourse* is politicized as it is a carrier of power, in defending or supporting the interests of its discursive community. The *multidiscursivity of the American society* relies in its multicultural aspect; whenever analyzing cultural patters, one has to focus on discursive relations and discursive practices. This inflects the idea of discourses that work to repress, *marginalize* and invalidate *others* (4).

Discourses usually turn into sites of struggle, because they are social products, politically loaded, in a multicultural society of inequalities. "Discourse does not represent the world; it acts in and upon the world" (5). Societies that distribute power and resources unevenly are marked by *discursive struggles*, and John Fiske catalogues them in *Media Matters. Everyday Culture and Political Change* (1994: 5-6) as follows:

- (1) the struggle to "accent" a word/sign so as to be used to particular social interests;

- (2) the struggle over the choice of a word/image and discursive repertoire;

- (3) the struggle to recover the repressed or to centre the marginalized;

- (4) the struggle to dis- or re-articulate, that is to put words into images and to link them with other events;

- (5) the struggle to gain access to public discourse, to make one's voice heard.

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

Consequently, a discourse makes sense and circulates sense socially and it "continues to work silently inside our heads as we make our own sense of our everyday lives".

Discourses are used individually but they are undoubtedly social especially when 'discourses' are shared to form social or political alliances.

> We use discourse, then, both to form our sense of the social world and to form the relations by which we engage in it […] Discourse is socially rooted. It provides a social formation, or alliance or formations, with ways of thinking and talking about areas of social experience that are central in its life. The struggle over whose discourse events should be put into is part of the reality of the politics of everyday life. The discursive patterns of domination, subordination, and contestation are where the weaving of the social fabric is politicized (Fiske 1994: 6-7).

Culture, to the same critic, is in a metaphoric view, a *"river of discourses"* whose flow is calm at times, but it erupts into turbulences at others because of the "currents" or "undercurrents" that disturb the depths. These currents are *carriers of meanings of class, race and gender*, as discursive topics. "Discursive visibility" is translated as the point of maximum turbulence when this invites intervention of people in order to redirect 'currents' to serve their interests. These currents are called, in Raymond Williams' terms *"structures of feeling"* that characterize the dominant ideological culture. Discourses that make culture, or the "structures of feeling" encompass a whole range of other concepts and institutions, from its workplaces, schools, churches, health system, the family and the social relations, the arts, and cultural industries, ways of talking, behaving, believing (Fiske 1994: 7).

> For the recognition of a separate body of moral and intellectual activities, and the offering of a court of human appeal, which comprise the early meanings of the word, are joined, and in themselves changed, by the growing assertion of a whole way of life, not only as a scale of integrity, but as a mode of interpreting all our common experience, and, in this new interpretation, changing it. Where *culture* meant a state of habit of the mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities, it means now, also, a whole way of life (Williams 1982: xviii).

The social circulation of discourses, or of the "structures of feelings", contributes to social and political change. In issues of dominance, of bringing *margins to centre* and of marginalizing the centre, these discourses permanently *inflect the problem or the politics of identity*. Consequently, they cover both the area of subjectivity and of *social relations* when including the *politics of alterity* – central to the politics of contemporary quotidian life.

Cultural studies today assimilate culture to ideology, as Fredric Jameson suggested (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London: Methuen, 1981). Such assimilation is complete and even the distinction between culture and ideology seems a strategic rather than a substantive one (Turner 1996: 182). Cultural studies couple the notions *class* and *culture,* committing itself to the analysis of the dominant/dominated 'class-culture'. From the terms of power/domination, one gets to the duality central/marginal and this, in the view of today's new politics of identity can "no longer be

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

mapped solely through the discourses of class" (219), but also through the discourses of the "Other", of alterity. While for sociologists, ideology has an instrumental function, to misrepresent the real and to mask political struggle, for 'culturalists', *ideology* is the site of the struggle that includes locations and re-locations of *power*, implicitly of identity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Althusser, Louis "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Cook, Guy (1994) *Discourse and Literature: The Interplay of Form and Mind*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press

De Lauretis, Teresa "The Technology of Gender" in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Fiske, John (1992) "Culture, Ideology and Interpellation" in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Fiske, John (1994) *Media Matters. Everyday Culture and Political Change*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press

Foucault, Michael (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge*, in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Foucault, Michael (1976) "Genealogia puterii şi funcţia intelectualului în societatea actuală" in Foucault, Michel (2001) *Theatrum philosophicum. Studii, eseuri, interviuri (1963 – 1984)* trad. de Bogdan Ghiu, Ciprian Mihali, Emilian Cioc şi Sebastian Blaga, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărţii de Stiinţă

Foucault, Michael (1981) „Intelectualul şi puterile" in Foucault, Michel (2001) *Theatrum philosophicum. Studii, eseuri, interviuri (1963 – 1984)* trad. de Bogdan Ghiu, Ciprian Mihali, Emilian Cioc şi Sebastian Blaga, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărţii de Stiinţă

Fowler, Alastair (1987) *Kinds of Literature. An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford: Claredon Press

Gramsci, Antonio, "Hegemony" (from "The Formations of the Intellectuals") in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Irimia, Mihaela Anghelescu (1999) *Dialoguri postmoderne*, Bucureşti: Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române

Marino, Adrian (1994) *Biografia ideii de literatură*, vol. III, Secolul 20 (Partea 1), Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)

Marx, Karl, *The German Ideology* in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Mills, Sara (1997) *Discourse*, London and New York: Routledge

Murfin, Ross, Suprya M. Ray (1997) *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Boston, New York: Bedford Books

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds.) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc

Turner, Graeme (1996) *British Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge

Williams, Raymond (1982) *Culture and Society*, London: The Hogarth Press

Zizek, Slavoj *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan (eds) (1998) *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc

BDD-A2790 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:42 UTC)