

A Hundred Posters

#14 February 1977

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Ron Silliman:

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORD, APPEARANCE OF THE WORLD

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group."

Sapir, 1929

"The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

Marx, 1859

One anomaly of contemporary existence which has received little critical analysis is the persistence of "typos" in foreign language films from the industrialized nations. A typical example would be the omission of an r in the word "your" in Tanner's recent Jonah who will be 25 in the year 2000. Since a film such as Jonah (or those directed by Truffaut, Bergman or Wertmeuller) is made with at least one eye on distribution to the Anglo-American market, such errata cannot be sufficiently explained away as a consequence of the precarious and somewhat secondary existence of an export print (which, on occasion, is even re-edited for the new market, as was Roeg's The Man Who Fell to Earth). The fact remains that in current bourgeois cinema, attention to the development of all visio-spatial information is total. That the disruptive nature of typographical errors in sub-titles is not noticed and corrected is a sign that it is not felt.

This links it to a broad variety of other social phenomena, such as the method of speed-reading in which individual words recede and are replaced by a Gestalt comprehension of content, or the techniques developed for display advertising and product packaging (including mass market publishing) for the printing of information which, for any number of reasons (e.g., it is considered "inessential" such as the identification of the jacket designer, or possibly counterproductive to sales, such as a listing of chemical additives in canned foods), the producer does not wish the potential customer to read. Linguistically, the most revealing detail of Noam Chomsky's Reflections on Language may well be the ISBN number on its rear cover, printed in a different direction and in a lighter color than the rest of that page's text.

A McLuhanist interpretation, further linking these to even broader social facts such as the rise, and subsequent crisis, of the novel or modernist tendencies in art in general, would not be incorrect as such, but would fail to sufficiently explain the underlying social reasons for the phenomena and thereby fail to suggest an appropriate course for action by art workers generally and specifically by writers.

For several years I have been involved in a series of investigations (Language Games, The Chinese Notebook and aRb) predicated upon Louis Zukofsky's projection of a possible "scientific" definition of poetry (first outlined by him in the preface to the 1948 Origin edition of A 1-12). While the third investigation is still in progress, some fairly specific statements concerning the object of inquiry can be made: (1) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws (or, if you prefer the terminology, the underlying structures) of poetry; (2) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of language; (3) the primary impact on language, and language arts, of the rise of capitalism has been in the area of reference and is directly related to the phenomena known as the commodity fetish. It is this effect of the rise of capitalism, particularly in its later state and monopoly forms, which underlies the effaced r in Jonah.

The essential nature of the social determination of consciousness has largely been misinterpreted by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. Thus Chomsky, feeling social determinism to be in contradiction to his innateness thesis, writes:

Gramsci went so far as to argue that "the fundamental innovation introduced by Marxism into the science of politics and history is the proof that there does not exist an abstract, fixed and immutable 'human nature'... but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations"...--a statement that is surely false, in that there is no such proof, and a questionable reading of Marx.

(Chomsky, 1975, p. 128)

While Gramsci's formulation constitutes an implicit oversimplification (leading, for example, to behaviorist errors and the idea that human nature can be altered in short periods of time), proofs

of the social determination of consciousness do exist. The elaboration of the tool-making capacity of the australopithicene required an expansion of the frontal area of the cerebral cortex and the hominid brain consequently grew from 500 cc. 1,500,000 years ago to 1100 cc. 350,000 years ago and eventually to the modern 1400 cc. (Robert J. Maxwell in Yaker et al, 1971, p. 39) Most of the "innate cognitive capacity" of Chomsky's thesis is indeed the result of a "mode of production of material life." He and Gramsci are equally guilty of the gross application of a complex reality.

The question before us is, however, of a much more specific nature than the social determination of all innate cognitive capacity: the impact of emergence of capitalism on language and the language arts. This question can be restated as Does capitalism have a specific "reality" which is passed through the language and thereby imposed on its speakers? Thus framed, the question can be answered affirmatively.

First we need to note some key differences in the language use of groups which have not as yet been thoroughly totalized into the global class structure of monopoly and state capitalism. Because writing typically occurs in a society which has already undergone significant divisions of labor (i.e., historical development), the best sources of any relatively tribal literature exist in modern ethnological transcriptions, rather than in the early written records of the Judeo-Christian civilization. The following is an English language translation of a Fox tribe sweatbath poem:

A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni agi ya ni  
Sky  
A gi ya ni i a gi ya ni  
A gi ya ni i a gi ya ni  
A gi ya ni

(Rothenberg, 1972, p. 341)

The presence of "nonsense" syllables in tribal literature is unmistakable. Save for attempts at specifically anthropological explanations, there is no room in contemporary literary theory for a poetry of this kind, no existing mechanism for positing it coherently alongside the work of Dante, Li Po or Tzara. The fact that there have been as yet few attempts to incorporate such materials into "comparative literature" curricula by the educational system of the industrial nations is not simply attributable to racism, though racism inevitably plays a role. Rather, it is that in the reality of capitalism (or of any society well down the road toward capitalist modes of production) there is no meaning here.

But capitalism did not spring up overnight amid loose associations of groups at a tribal stage of development. It came into existence through a long succession of stages, each with its own characteristic modes of production and social relations. While the literature of a people about to enter into the stage of capitalism through bourgeois revolution will necessarily be much closer to our