

the author-function

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Jeremy Crampton — 17 Dec 1999, 00:52

Jonathan said:

terms that could actually refer to just about anything. If we stick with referring to material objects like books then we can keep ourselves grounded in actual discussion of the work at hand. Of course it helps if your research (like mine) actually concentrates on the differing authorities presented by physical features in books by Laurence Sterne (black pages, footnotes, marbling etc)

Then you must like that sequence where Ultan is describing his first years as Master of the library, and his memory of sitting in a window seat on the 49th floor--above, where was it Cyby--oh yes the upholsterer's garden, and that he hadn't been taking in what the book was saying, but was regarding it as an object.

It appears unlikely that Foucault was, in the above passage, calling for a 'death' of the author, when so much of his work is concerned with the construction of authors and authority. Rather, he appears to be establishing that alongside the originating (and elusive) figure of the author, there is a feature of texts which is also the author: the author function.

This seems right and goes beyond what Jim was saying I think (the dom-sub thing) and that we choose to be subs, in that for F. there is this _predisursive_ level of determinations of discourse (and remember that discourse is that set of things spoken and written, that is, knowledge, not books per se). What might interest us is how certain discourses are excluded on the one hand, and on the other, how they might be transgressed (another of his early essays).

Interlude:

While I'm looking at Jim, I have to disagree with this wretched label "postmodernity" again and always, I think certainly Fouc. would have a problem with that label, as do I. According to Perry Anderson (the Thunderbirds guy, no not really) the first idea of a postmodernism arose in the 1930s in Hispanic America (Federico de Onis; Borges was an "ultramodernismo"), and has had many incarnations since then, none of which have ever circulated around F. I can handle poststructuralist since that's at least historically accurate. (Bit tetchy about this as just came from weekend meeting in downtown DC where all sorts of critical theory was tarred and dismissed as bugaboo pomo.)

Anyway, in support of Jonathan's point, I see that F. says elsewhere:

"Of course, it would be ridiculous to deny the existence of individuals who write, and invent. But I think that, for some time, at least, the individual who sits down to write a text, at the edge of which lurks a possible oeuvre, resumes the functions of the author. What he writes and does not write, what he sketches out, even preliminary sketches for the work, and what he drops as simply mundane remarks, all this interplay of differences is prescribed by the author-function." _Discourse on language_ (1970).

So what F. challenges is not the author as individual who writes, but author as unified idea. We should be looking at the system of dispersion of discourse, its discontinuities, how it ebbs and flows together. You already provided a good summary of the author-function (must cut and paste into my own notes!).

Would appreciate any suggestions on the above, as its part of my work that, er, *doesn't* work correctly. Quite hard to squeeze it into my arguments that the materiality of the physical book is important.

Well the only thing I can think of is how certain texts might be seen to be valorised by receiving expensive bindings and illustration plates. On the other hand, there is a more underground literature (not, after F., the Victorian again!) which might "mask" its interior (anyone read the Sixteen Pleasures?). This was Clute's idea in that Salon piece I guess. You have to know the "code" to access the material, and there is a certain jargon, look, illustration type, etc that signals to the cognoscenti. So there is a "discourse" to the appearance of the book which can exclude or filter access. Well, maybe not! You'll have to tell us more about your work...

best,

Jeremy W. Crampton <http://geog.gmu.edu> jcrampton at gmu.edu Dept. of Geography & Earth Science [MS 1E2] 'Tis true; there's magic in the web of it. George Mason University --Othello (III.iv.69) Fairfax, Va 22030