An epistemological awakening: Michel de Certeau and the writing of culture

The historian and theorist Michel de Certeau offers a challenge and a promise to all those involved in the practice of ‘writing culture’. Part of the promise that his work contains is for a true interdisciplinarity that is fashioned out of a much more integrated approach to culture, but it is also a promise that suggests an approach to culture that is much more responsive to the particularity and peculiarity of culture (an ‘interdiscipline’ that would refashion itself in its response to its object). The challenge that de Certeau offers is one fundamental to anyone writing culture now: how to write of reality, truth, actuality, in the face of the massive epistemological scepticism generated by poststructuralism.

Key words epistemology, historiography, interdisciplinarity, narrative, novel, scepticism

It is no exaggeration to claim that James Clifford and George Marcus’s edited collection Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography (1986) acted as a significant agent for a ‘linguistic turn’ within certain currents of anthropology. While there had previously been work that addressed the textual and rhetorical aspects of anthropology, here was a collection that seemed to offer a consolidated programme for what could be done when anthropology was addressed via a textualist imagination that was well-versed in French poststructuralism. Twenty years on, what might also strike the attentive reader is the inter-disciplinarity of its production: not just essays from literary critics and theorists, alongside anthropologists, but also endorsements from the pre-eminent theorist of historiography (Hayden White) and the ‘star’ of new historicism (Stephen Greenblatt). It is in this context that one might have opportunely stumbled across the name Michel de Certeau: poststructuralist in orientation, attentive to the textuality of the discursive world (particularly when that world was describing another culture), and supremely interdisciplinary. But if his name is (significantly) missing in the index of that collection – while more familiar names like Foucault and Derrida aren’t – then the reason for commenting on this fact is not to complain about the lack of interest in de Certeau’s poststructuralism. Rather, I want to suggest that de Certeau offers (and would have offered the writers of Writing culture) another view of the possibilities of writing culture after the worm of epistemological doubt has taken hold.

Within the discipline of anthropology it is Clifford Geertz who has consistently offered an escape route from the more disabling aspects of epistemological scepticism that the linguistic turn sometimes provokes. In his Works and lives. The anthropologist as author (1988), Geertz stakes out a position that nimbly seems to avoid the more...
entrenched battle lines of what was an epistemological debate being held across the disciplines. When Geertz bemoans the idea that people associate ‘the fictional with the false’, he is not just bemoaning the beliefs of diehard positivist fact-finders, but also all those epistemological sceptics who might claim that the rhetorical dimensions of social science simply stop anyone knowing anything much at all. Here is Geertz in his stride:

To argue (point out, actually, for, like aerial perspective or the Pythagorean theorem, the thing once seen cannot then be unseen) that the writing of ethnography involves telling stories, making pictures, concocting symbolism, and deploying tropes is commonly resisted, often fiercely, because of a confusion, endemic in the West since Plato at least, of the imagined and the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out with making them up. The strange idea that reality has an idiom in which it prefers to be described, that its very nature demands we talk about it without fuss – a spade is a spade, a rose is a rose – on pain of illusion, trumpery, and self-bewitchment, leads on to the even stranger idea that if literalism is lost, so is fact. (Geertz 1988: 140)

Geertz’s success here is to diffuse some of the polemic of both epistemological sceptics and hard-line positivists. His solution is simple but robust and is of course a main plank for his defence of ‘thick description’; it requires rescuing fantasy as a material element and fact of cultural life: ‘rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other – they are [both] things of this world’ (1973: 10).

In this essay my intention is to suggest that Michel de Certeau’s work offers an intriguing underpinning of such an approach. His work can be read as a metamethodological argument that insists on our obligation to connect to the real in the face of epistemological scepticism. Like Geertz, de Certeau offers a way out of the stymieing effects of a concern with textuality and rhetoric; yet there are also significant differences. Geertz’s epistemological position is a refusal to be driven by ontological categories (a divvying up of facts and fantasy, matter and ideas, etc.). Instead Geertz offers a generous and inclusive account of the real, one that includes rhetorical flourishes as a key element of culture. For de Certeau, in a more deconstructive vein, the route to the real is not simply via a more inclusive itinerary of what counts as material culture; the way to get to the real is (counter-intuitively) through a more engaged connection with epistemological scepticism. For de Certeau, we could say, the route to the real is not by avoiding epistemological scepticism (or sidestepping its more intractable pitfalls) but by immersing yourself in such scepticism and coming out the other side.

There is another reason for deploying de Certeau as a meta-methodology for writing culture. While de Certeau was not picked up in the first waves of Anglophone scholarly interest in poststructuralism, he did circulate quite widely (and still does) in the wake of this initial enthusiasm. Here de Certeau has functioned as either antidote or prophylactic for the more pessimistic accounts of a world saturated by networks of power, accounts that we associate with the work of Michel Foucault (1980, 1982). In the kind of ethnographic work generated by cultural studies (ethnography of the near), de Certeau has offered a rosier picture of everyday practices that escape the eye of power even if they never quite step outside its territorial range (see Fiske 1986, 1992; Jenkins 1992). The most famous theoretical nugget here has been de Certeau’s figuring of ‘tactical’ resistant practices that exist alongside the ‘strategic’ structures of power (de Certeau 1984). So the export of this figuration has been so successful that
at times the name de Certeau simply seems conterminous with the idea of ‘strategies and tactics’. Here I am keen to offer another version of Michel de Certeau: one less immediately useful for interpreting the world, but one that I think offers a much more profound platform for thinking about how we (anthropologists, historians, literary critics, novelists, filmmakers, conversationalists, and so on) might go about ‘writing culture’.

In what follows I want to situate de Certeau within two contexts. The first of these is within a loosely gathered community of ‘science studies’ writers: the second within an approach to literary work that might (again, quite loosely) be termed ethnographic, or more polemically ‘realist’. There is not the space here to work closely with much of de Certeau’s work: instead I’ve tried to supply a platform from which we might be able to get a productive view of his meta-methodological positions, while also getting a sense of the enormous practical resources that he could supply to an experimental, responsive and ethically committed approach to ‘writing culture’. It should be noted that Michel de Certeau was primarily a historian – albeit a cultural historian. Yet his central concern with the problematic of ‘the cultural’ opens his work up to scrutiny by those more concerned with anthropology.

**Michel de Certeau and epistemological doubt**

You can get a flavour of the range of de Certeau’s work in a research application that he made towards the end of his life. Sketching out a project on the ‘new world and narrative’, de Certeau writes that it will continue work that he has already accomplished:

> Work undertaken in history (mentalités and spirituality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; possession in the seventeenth century; religious thought and practices in the seventeenth century; Leibniz; linguistic policies and theories at the end of the eighteenth century) and in anthropology (possession; sorcery and mysticism; the concept of “popular culture”; investigations conducted in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina since 1966; the regular teaching of historical and cultural anthropology at the University of Paris VII since 1972; the foundation of DIAL, a centre for information on Latin America). (de Certeau 1991: 221)

This, though, is a far from exhaustive list of the areas in which de Certeau has contributed through research and publications. We would also need to include his contributions to (and interventions in) French and European cultural policy and his commentaries on and analysis of contemporary culture, society and politics, as well as his involvement in Lacanian psychoanalysis. But even leaving those aspects of his work aside, the above list still seems to be unswerving in its dedication to interdisciplinary work, and unnervingly diverse in its scope. Moving across forms of social activism and scholarly esoterica, the work seems too diverse to hold a connecting thread. At this general level, then, the question of the work’s integrity, its wholeness can arise: is there something holding all this work together? Is there a central project, an idea behind the various ideas on offer? Or should the work be thought of in discrete sections: religious history; a theory of historiography; political analysis; the ethnography of the near; social activism, and so on?
I think that there is coherence in this work, but it is not to be found at the level of objects of study or of theory – at least not at the level of theory as it is most often figured. It is at the level of method that de Certeau’s work coheres (which is not to say that method is not theoretical). There is, then, a ‘way of operating’ that connects the scholarly writing on mystic and demonic possessions with work on the contemporary everyday; the work on the theory of historiography with his cultural policy writing. The central ingredients of this method (which might be better described as ‘metamethodology’) centre on a critical epistemology and an ethical demand to respond to epistemological scepticism. So while de Certeau’s work does seem unnervingly diverse there is, I think, a consistency to be found at the level of methodology – a metamethodology which is dedicated to encouraging heterogeneity and allowing alterity to proliferate (this is what de Certeau calls heterology). My main argument is that de Certeau’s work mounts a critique of the science claims to be found in classical versions of anthropology and history (like others who mount similar critiques it is partly done by recognising the necessary literary condition of cultural writing [ethnography, historiography, and so on]), and which also subsist today. Yet rather than the literary condition of knowledge posing a limit on cultural sciences’ ability to know the world, it is precisely through its literary condition that it can edge towards the real. This uncannily simple formula is one of the underlying features of de Certeau’s work and it is both a form of liberation for scholarly work and an ethical obligation. It is a permission slip, if one were needed, for all sorts of scholarly experimentation, one where permission is granted, not because ‘anything goes’, but because there is an obligation to find better ways of telling ‘the cultural’.

Central to de Certeau’s work, then, is an epistemological rupture that might constitute the ‘family resemblance’ for most positions that are termed poststructuralist. Much of this work can seem aimed at stymieing the business of ‘telling it like it is’ – it is, if nothing else, a fulsome critique of representational naturalism in its various guises. In historiographic work the bare bones of this critique can be demonstrated with ease – after all we have no existential access to or contact with the past – we have to make do with shifting through texts, old film reels, people’s reminiscences – all materials that exist in the present, under present-day conditions, etc. Such an insistence on the refusal to let historical studies imagine that it provides access to the past (rather than to constructions that go by the name of ‘the past’), might well stymie those involved in it: after all, if there is no ultimate truth to be told of the past, then what would be the point of just offering a version of it? One of the reasons that it doesn’t stymie de Certeau is that, as far as this goes, historical work is no different from contemporary ethnographic work – there simply is no privileged access to the real. There is no choice but to work in a world of partial views. Not only is this one response to epistemological critique, it may (ironically) turn out to supply the kind of forms that are most adequate to registering our actuality. So rather than seeing this as a compromise in the face of the defeat of a ‘pure’ objectivity, it might, more fulsomely, set up some of the conditions for a more profound contact with the real.

In this, de Certeau’s work looks quite similar to what Donna Haraway calls ‘situated knowledge’ (1991). Haraway, as a leading scholar within critical science studies, knows that the stakes of according ‘truth’ to knowledge are particularly high. But not only is the critique of scientific objectivity a powerful weapon against the interests that science can serve; the ability to critique the epistemological basis of science can prove to be a ‘double edged sword’, a liability, in that being able to simply discredit knowledge
out of hand (all knowledge is similarly ‘untrue’ – the sort of blanket epistemological claim that has gone by the name of ‘relativism’) is also useful to those who would rather global warming, for instance, wasn’t a political issue. For Bruno Latour (2004) the kind of epistemological scepticism that had been used by him and others to question the ‘natural facts’ of science are now routinely used by powerful business interests to question the knowledge of ‘global warming’, so as to protect those business interests whose profits have been underwritten by environmental damage.

Donna Haraway recognises the essential difficulty facing critical science studies: how to maintain a robust epistemological critique without falling into a general indifference, where everything is equally untrue, unfounded and unnatural:

So, I think my problem and ‘our’ problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (Haraway 1991: 187)

While de Certeau wouldn’t have described his project in quite this way, he is similarly navigating between two unacceptable positions: representational naturalism (a naïve belief in the transparency of ‘facts’, ‘images’ and the like); and the ‘total’ critiques of representation (all is constructed, nothing has any epistemological foundation). As we will see, the way out of indifference, for de Certeau, is not in spite of epistemological doubt: rather it is through epistemological doubt (by being responsive and responsible to epistemological doubt) that an antidote to indifference is found. Yet though de Certeau, I think, offers a different route out of indifference, his epistemology still looks similar to Haraway’s:

The alternative to relativism is not totalizing and single vision, which is always finally the unmarked category whose power depends on systematic narrowing and obscuring. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The ‘equality’ of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well. (Haraway 1991: 191)

I need to inflect this term ‘relativism’ in a more nuanced way and suggest that it might be useful to distinguish between forms of ‘absolute relativism’ (the indifference of everything being equally untrue, for instance) and a ‘relative relativism’ which finds a method for making value judgements by relating one account to another. In this, the values underpinning judgement are not absolutes (for instance, the value of complexity, or the proliferation of difference, etc.) and can only be encountered in relative terms (x’s account allows for more complexity than y’s). Haraway is rightly attacking a form of absolute relativism and we might want to suggest that her ‘situated knowledges’ ends up promoting a form of critically relative relativism.
Re-booting epistemology and transforming interdisciplinarity

At the start of The mystic fable, de Certeau describes an orientation composed of four trajectories:

Here are the areas of inquiry on the basis of which the advancing line of four approaches, like four sides of a frame, will gradually appear: the link between this ‘modern’ mystics and a new eroticism, a psychoanalytic theory, historiography itself, and the ‘fable’ (which relates simultaneously to orality and fiction). These four discursive practices establish a framework. The organization of a space, though necessary, will be seen to be unable to ‘stop’ the subject matter. (de Certeau 1992: 3)

This four-cornered or four-starred cosmology might seem to function as a general sign of Michel de Certeau’s interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture – it is composed of known and identifiable disciplines or arenas of knowing: epistemology (positioned in relation to desire and sexuality); psychoanalysis; historiography; and literary studies (where the emphasis is oral culture and fables). De Certeau’s approach to the analysis of culture wanders across disciplinary boundaries, and in doing so reveals something of the contingency of those boundaries. Is he, then, to be thought of as offering an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of culture? Is he simply a prime example of erudition navigating, with consummate ease, across the various borderlands of discourse? Something more, I think, is at stake here. Interdisciplinarity follows the logic of accumulation and application: apply a little bit of this (semiotics, say), and then a little of that (political economy, say), followed by a liberal helping of this (cultural history, for instance) and then, hey presto, you have a complete picture. What this notion of interdisciplinarity leaves intact are the disciplinary fields themselves.

I am keen to argue that the best approach to the work of Michel de Certeau is to understand it as a methodologically driven project – one that is driven, through epistemological critique, to search out better ways of making contact with the actual, the real. There is, I think, coherence to this method, but it isn’t to be found by looking for a consistent set of tools. The coherence lies in the consistency by which epistemological and ethical challenges root and uproot the analysis of culture: the result is work that is at once intensely critical (and fundamentally self-critical) at the same time as being socially and culturally directed to the production of more hospitable, more liberating, more inclusive circumstances. At the centre of this (and as a model for more extensive change) is the transformation of the very means most readily available to de Certeau – the academic disciplines and their cognate methodologies. In transforming the means of cultural analysis, de Certeau privileges the unmanageability of the cultural material under scrutiny. This means that the object (the cultural world ‘under investigation’) exceeds or escapes the grip of analysis – but not before it has marked and altered the form of attention that attempts to grasp it. A contradiction opens up a space whereby the object and the form of analysis are altered as part of the process of analysing. A contradiction exists because this ‘object’ is both a product of the investigation (to a degree the performativity of analysis calls it forth) and an obdurate object that resists this performative productivity. What emerges as the productivity of analysis is neither the ‘object’, nor the application of a tool-kit; the analysis is the performance of a form.
of attention that has been fashioned as the result of meeting the concrete social and ultimately ungraspable cultural world. Cultural analysis, for de Certeau, is both partial and dynamic – it is analysis bitten by the cultural world.

I am going to focus on aspects of narrative and literature to show more precisely how de Certeau’s ethical and epistemological challenge can result in writing practices that are attuned to the heterogeneity of the daily and how this can produce very fruitful forms of analytic cultural writing. Here, novels become a rich resource for such heterogeneity, and in what follows I show how the work of Mikhail Bakhtin compares to de Certeau in this regard. But first I need to show how ‘literature’, in de Certeau’s hands, is transformed into something like a scientific inquiry into culture.

My argument is that de Certeau transforms the very ground of cultural analysis and that he does this by refusing a logic-of-application (for the study of culture), replacing it with a logic-of-alteration. What this means in practice is that there is no application of psychoanalysis, for instance (no new objects to be thrown in psychoanalysis’ way, to be devoured by it); instead psychoanalysis and cultural objects meet when each bend towards the other, when each alters in response, and in so doing become fundamentally transformed. Under these circumstances it would seem unlikely that ‘interdisciplinarity’ is going to be the best description of de Certeau’s ‘logics-of-alteration’; interdisciplinarity won’t be an adequate descriptor for the reformatting of cultural analysis.

Across de Certeau’s oeuvre, historiography, literary studies, epistemology and psychoanalysis congregate (always in response to the cultural world), and as they congregate each one of them undergoes an alteration that reveals fundamentally shared elements: but these are secret similarities that set these discourses off in new directions, under ‘new management’, so to speak. Thus, for de Certeau, to recognise psychoanalysis you first need to recognise it as a form of literature:

My first thesis is: Lacan is first of all an exercise of literature (a literature which would know what it is). Maybe it is a scandal within the discipline, but why will literature always be labeled ‘not serious’? If we follow Lacan where he leads, toward a ‘speaking’ [dire] whose nature is revealed by its analytical experience, he points toward the ‘truth’ of literary practice. (de Certeau 1986: 51)

Recognising the literariness of psychoanalysis requires both intra-disciplinary and extra-disciplinary work: it means looking to see what is essential to the discipline as a cultural operation; and it means looking outside it to see its relation to culture at large (in this sense literature is the name of the extra-disciplinary field). By bending psychoanalysis into a form of literature, two operations are performed: literature is given a theoretical and analytic status – a serious, ‘scientific’ position, one from where it can conduct analyses; psychoanalysis is resituated (and resuscitated), not as a form of interpretation or explanation, but as a vocalising practice – a production of speech. In this way the literary text is not an object that desires interpretation, nor is psychoanalysis something designed to perform this operation. Both coalesce (to some degree) through the transformation of the terms of their meeting. In this ‘literature’ isn’t the needle that would puncture the epistemological dreams used to secure the science of psychoanalysis: rather, literature is used to liberate the essential element in psychoanalysis, which turns out to be its literary (therefore ‘scientific’) characteristic – its ability to deal in fables, to produce speech, etc. In this process the dominant epistemological currency (science
versus literature) is converted to a general economy based on the imbrication of the terms (literary science and scientific literariness) which also results in the transformation of these terms.

But if psychoanalysis is a form of literature – ““literary” is that language which makes something else heard than that which it says; conversely, psychoanalysis is a literary practice of language’ (de Certeau 1986: 53) – literature, crucially, turns out to be a form of historiography:

I will state my argument without delay: literature is the theoretical discourse of the historical process. It creates the non-topos where the effective operations of a society attain a formalization. Far from envisioning literature as the expression of a referential, it would be necessary to recognize here the analogue of that which for a long time mathematics has been for the exact sciences: a “logical” discourse of history, the “fiction” which allows it to be thought. (de Certeau 1986: 18)

Rather than the meeting of literature and history being used to reveal the rhetorical foundation of historiography (history or anthropology, the argument might go, is a form of literature if only it could admit it and shrug off its pretensions towards objective truth), here literature becomes a form of meta-history. It is literature where commentaries on historicity are produced, where a grammar of historical action is revealed, and where remembering and forgetting are figured as essential social and cultural elements. There are few novels, for instance, that don’t deal in the past (try and imagine one!): seen in this way the arena that most insistently deals in the relationships between the past, the present and the future is actually literature rather than historiography.

In as much as there will be a ‘literary’ aspect to all discourse (the moments when a discourse ‘catches itself in the mirror’, for instance), then the job of altering disciplines, for de Certeau, is partly going to be realised when that literary element is brought into the foreground. But, as I have been insisting on, this does not result in an epistemological pessimism (that all that can be known are ‘fictions’, for instance). We need to remember that what is being privileged is literature’s involvement with the world, its refusal of disciplinary specialism: in this way literature is the name of what is possible (and what has been achieved) when disciplinarity specialisms are overcome (it is the extra-disciplinary). This, then, should leave little comfort for the literary analyst who might imagine that a traditional form of ‘literary criticism’ is thereby epistemologically or ethically more justified than other disciplinary approaches:

It is a function of the historian to flush the literary analysts out of their alleged position as pure spectators by showing them that social mechanisms of selections, critique, and repression are everywhere present, by reminding them that it is violence that invariably founds a system of knowledge. (de Certeau 1986: 136)

History interrupts the business of literary analysis, just as literature (the literary) derails and re-rails the business of historiography and psychoanalysis. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written, and in a way that chimes with de Certeau’s position: ‘the performance of these tasks, of the historian and the teacher of literature, must critically “interrupt” each other, bring each other to crisis, in order to serve their constituencies; especially when each seems to claim all for its own’ (Spivak 1988: 241).
We could, without too much of an ill-fit, situate de Certeau within a broad tradition of ‘criticism-becoming-literary’; a form of ‘literary theory’ or ‘literary analysis’ that Jane Gallop qualifies by insisting that ‘by this phrase we understand not a theory of literature, but a theory that was itself truly literary’ (Gallop 2002: 2). This is also what Tom Conley points to when he titles his introduction to de Certeau’s *The writing of history*; ‘For a Literary Historiography’ – italicising something that is not an object of study but a form of study (Conley in de Certeau 1988: vii). In the early 1980s the art critic Rosalind Krauss described the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida as ‘paraliterary’, and the term might also be extended to include de Certeau. Referring to the late work of Barthes, she writes that it ‘simply cannot be called criticism, but it cannot for that matter, be called non-criticism either. Rather, criticism finds itself caught in a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides, divagations. And what is created, as in the case of so much of Derrida, is a kind of paraliterature’ (Krauss 1985: 292). This sense of writing, moving by digression and drift as much as by seamless argument, fits well with de Certeau; but more important for understanding de Certeau is this sense of a ‘dramatic web of many voices’ that writing is thrown into. And it is here where it is useful to point to some parallels between the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel de Certeau.

For Bakhtin, as for de Certeau, the historical emergence of the novel opens up a space for the figuring of social and cultural forces in ways that allow the novel to be, potentially, a ‘realist utopia’ (it shows the full range of life – including the social management of life) as well as a critical counter-discourse at odds with the dominant social discourses (the discourses of governance, the scriptural economy). Writing about the pre-history of the novel, and the range of literary genres that were available in Roman times, Bakhtin offers a utopian image of what the novel could be:

I imagine this whole [the variety of Roman genres] to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch. In this huge novel – in this mirror of constantly evolving heteroglossia – any direct word and especially that of the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal. (Bakhtin 1981a: 60)

The bringing together of competing and contrasting genres allows something of the messy social world to come through: and it also points out that the conditions for change are inscribed in the foundations of culture – in its messy actuality, in the constant contestation that is aimed at any single account of social and cultural life.

One fundamental aspect of their work links Bakhtin and de Certeau and might best be summed up in de Certeau’s words: ‘I shall assume that plurality is originary’ (de Certeau 1984: 133). For Bakhtin, social life in its actuality is always the messy hodgepodge of competing, conflicting voices. As the above quote shows the word he uses to describe this basic situation is heteroglossia – the multitude of voices that represents the dynamic and constantly changing social world, voices that spiral out, undercutting attempts to unify culture. Heteroglossia is the centrifugal force that exists as a basic fact of social life and means that any attempt to organise social life ‘monologically’ (culture ordered in a unified direction) is faced with the task of countering heteroglossia with a centripetal force capable of subduing its immense, disruptive influence. Gary Saul
Morson and Caryl Emerson, in their book *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a prosaics*, give the following account of heteroglossia:

Centrifugal forces register and respond to the most diverse events of daily life, to the prosaic facts that never quite fit any official or unofficial definition. They are an essential part of our moment-to-moment lives, and our responses to them record their effect on all our cultural institutions, on language, and on ourselves. Heteroglossia – Bakhtin’s term for linguistic centrifugal forces and their products – continually translates the minute alterations and re-evaluations of everyday life into new meanings and tones, which, in sum and over time, always threatens the wholeness of any language. (Morson and Emerson 1990: 30)

Emerson and Morson explain that heteroglossia doesn’t describe a situation where the subversive centrifugal forces of the multitude are pitted against the ruthless will-to-order of official discourse as a head-to-head conflict. In Bakhtin’s understanding of the world, centrifugal forces are *by definition* disparate, conflicting and disorganised: they are not a unified or even ‘collective’ response to social governance. The various elements of heteroglossia are as resolutely antagonistic to one another as they are towards a central organising and dominating discourse. In this sense the chorus of the multitude is fundamentally discordant. But these voices are not endlessly individuated voices – they are social voices, or, as Bakhtin will go on to say, ‘speech genres’ (Bakhtin 1986).

There is much here that the world of de Certeau connects to, but also much that is different. While Bakhtin emphasises the always unfinished and partial unity of culture, which is always facing (and being partly undone by) the ineradicable presence of heteroglossia, de Certeau’s epistemologically more sceptical understanding posits something akin to heteroglossia as an invisible but insistent substrate of a culture that seems on the face of it more regulated. This is a heteroglossia that you occasionally get a glimpse of within the much more successful orderings of what de Certeau calls the ‘scriptural economy’ (those official institutions of writing culture). De Certeau recognises the same rich, creative, polyphonic world of heteroglossia that Bakhtin describes, but it is not an easily accessible realm for de Certeau. While it constitutes everyday life for de Certeau, there is always the problem that when this aspect of everyday life becomes the topic for disciplinary scrutiny, it is cut, managed – its radical and unsettling plurality is controlled. Yet what Bakhtin and de Certeau would both agree on would be the importance of speech for describing a world where polyphony is the unbound aspect of a scriptural economy. And they would also agree that the novel offers one of the most compelling accounts of this: its form is the most plastic and accommodating to the descant of heteroglossia.

For Bakhtin the historical emergence of the novel creates a cultural form that is peculiarly suited to orchestrating the competing language forms that circulate in the world at large:

The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a
The novel, for Bakhtin, offers a condensed slice of heteroglossia, a synecdoche of heteroglossia, because it always contains a multiplicity of voices or speech genres. Bakhtin itemises the various genres (speech and written) that are usually found in novels, as follows: ‘direct authorial literary artistic narration’; ‘various forms of oral everyday narration’; ‘semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)’; ‘various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth)’; and ‘stylistically individualized speech of characters’ (Bakhtin 1981b: 261). The cavalcade of voices that Bakhtin finds in the novel is partly due to the authors that interest him – François Rabelais and Fydor Dostoevsky, for instance – but also relates to the novel in its early and classic form (Bakhtin 1984a, 1984b).

This attention to literature, and its evaluation as a form of extra-disciplinary description of the social world, is very similar to de Certeau’s assessment of the novel in its classic, nineteenth-century version:

As indexes of particulars – the poetic or tragic murmurings of the everyday – ways of operating enter massively into the novel or the short story, most notably into the nineteenth-century realistic novel. They find there a new representational space, that of fiction, populated by everyday virtuosities that science doesn’t know what to do with and which become the signatures, easily recognized by readers, of everyone’s micro-stories. Literature is transformed into a repertory of these practices that have no technological copyright. They soon occupy a privileged place in the stories that patients tell in the wards of psychiatric institutions or in psychoanalysts’ offices. (de Certeau 1984: 70)

For de Certeau the classic realist novel comes to pre-eminence at a peculiarly precipitative moment: as scholarly disciplines harden and take on the mantle of professionalism, dividing up the world into discrete units of attention, it is the world ‘at large’, in its everyday sense that falls between the borders of disciplinary knowledge. As such it is the extra-disciplinary tendencies of the novel that are available to sweep up the undisciplined scraps of everyday life and make them into a vivid archive of the day-to-day.

What becomes crucial here, though, is to recognise that the novel doesn’t emerge as an object requiring a discipline to unbind the significance of heteroglossia or the everyday within it. It is, rather, the extra-disciplinary form of the novel that makes it a discursive form adequate for attending to the unbinding effects of heteroglossia and the daily.

There is then, in de Certeau’s understanding of literature, a seismic shift away from the professionalism of ‘lit crit’. It is precisely by moving in the opposite direction to the stress that has been placed on the irreducible representationality of the text (and all the intricacies that this entails) that de Certeau’s work is pitched. It is as ‘counter-archive’, as living resource for actions, as extra-disciplinarity, and as meta-critical theory, that novels and stories are privileged in de Certeau’s work:

The folktale provides scientific discourse with a model, and not merely with textual objects to be dealt with. It no longer has the status of a document that
does not know what it says, cited (summoned and quoted) before and by the analysis that knows it. On the contrary, it is a know-how-to-say (‘savoir-dire’) exactly adjusted to its object, and, as such, no longer the Other of knowledge; rather it is a variant of the discourse that knows and an authority in what concerns theory. One can then understand the alterations and complicities, the procedural homologies and social imbrications that link the ‘arts of speaking’ to the ‘arts of operating’: the same practices appear now in a verbal field, now in a field of non-linguistic actions; they move from one field to the other, being equally tactical and subtle in both; they keep the ball moving between them – from the workday to evening, from cooking to legends and gossip, from the devices of lived history to those of history retold. (de Certeau 1984: 78)

The ‘science of literature’ is not going to be found in the technical accounts of narrative (narratology), for instance. If literature is a science, and one that can be useful for anthropology, it is a ‘life science’ – an intricate and theoretical account of the actualities and possibilities of life. In many respects this returns us to an earlier phase of literary criticism associated with people like F. R. Leavis, who want to value a novel because of the way it recognises and addresses ‘experience’ (Leavis 1976; see also Pickering 1997 for an account of Leavis in this regard). Yet, and here’s the rub, we now turn to the novel (or the animated cartoon for that matter) as a vast repertoire for acting in the world, and as a synecdoche for an epistemologically ‘lost’ world of the ordinary.

For narrative to be of value for the practice of writing culture, it has to be an open form that invites experimentation. Such experiments are not conducted in the name of some vacuous relativism, but in the name of an ethical striving to produce accounts more adequate to the pulsing heteroglossia of daily life. The reordering of narrative forms in response to epistemological critique and ethical challenge is not something bounded by scholarly interests. In this way narratives – in their capacity to stage complexity, multiplicity and embodied experiences – offer a valuable resource for the cultural scientist. In light of de Certeau we could say that anthropology has nothing to fear from those experimenting with narrative forms as a way of writing culture. Indeed, rather than seeing such experiments as a flight from the scientific project of anthropology, the inverse might be true: it is only through such experimentation – through the becoming-literary of anthropology – that anthropology can maintain its contact with actuality and its claim to be a science.

Ben Highmore
Media and Film Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer,
Brighton BN1 9RG
B.Highmore@sussex.ac.uk

References

© 2007 European Association of Social Anthropologists.

**Abstracts**

Un éveil épistémologique: Michel de Certeau et l’écriture de la culture

L’historien et théoricien Michel de Certeau offre un défi et une promesse à tous ceux qui s’attachent à (écrire la culture). La promesse que son œuvre contient est en partie celle d’une véritable interdisciplinarité qui est façonnée à partir d’une approche très intégrée de la culture. Mais c’est aussi une espérance qui suggère une approche de la
culture qui est beaucoup plus attentive aux particularités et singularités de la culture (une (interdiscipline) qui se façonne en adéquation à son objet). Le défi posé par de Certeau est fondamental pour tous ceux qui écrivent la culture aujourd'hui: comment écrire sur le réel, la vérité, l’actuel au vue d’un scepticisme épistémologique massif engendré par le post-structuralisme

Ein epistemologisches Erwachen: Michel de Certeau und das Kulturschreiben

Der Historiker und Theoretiker Michel de Certeau stellt eine Herausforderung und birgt ein Versprechen für all diejenigen, welche in die Praxis des ‘Kulturschreibens’ eingebunden sind. Das Werk de Certeaus verspricht unter anderem eine wahrhaftige Interdisziplinarität, die aus einer viel integraleren Annäherung an Kultur hervorgeht. Aber die Texte verheißen auch eine Herangehensweise an Kultur, welche viel mehr auf die Besonderheiten und Eigenheiten dieser eingeht (eine ‘Interdisziplin’, die sich als jeweilige Reaktion auf ihr Studienobjekt neu strukturiert). Die von de Certeau gestellte Herausforderung ist fundamental für all diejenigen, welche derzeit Kultur (be)schreiben: wie soll man angesichts des massiven epistemologischen Skeptizismus, welcher vom Poststrukturalismus hervorgerufen wurde, über Realität, Wahrheit, und Aktualität schreiben

Un despertar epistemológico: Michel de Certeau y la escritura sobre la cultura

El historiador y teórico Michel de Certeau plantea un reto y una promesa a todos aquellos involucrados en la práctica de ‘escribir cultura’. Parte de la promesa que su trabajo contiene es una verdadera interdisciplinariedad, que se cristaliza en una perspectiva mucho más integrada sobre la cultura; esta promesa tiene que ver con la sugerencia de un acercamiento más receptivo a la cultura, que distinga la particularidad y peculiaridad de la cultura (una ‘interdisciplina’ que se reinvente al responder a su propio objeto). El reto fundamental que de Certeau plantea para la escritura de la cultura sostiene: cómo escribir sobre realidad, verdad, o la actualidad de frente al amplio escepticismo epistemológico generado luego del postestructuralismo.

© 2007 European Association of Social Anthropologists.