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*Literary Criticism and the 'Cultural Turn' in Hungarian Studies.
Underlying Assumptions and Unforeseen Consequences*

My paper is intended as a brief survey of current trends in Hungarian Studies, with special emphasis on the shift from traditional literary scholarship toward Cultural Studies and media theory. Although the institutional shift seems inevitable, the rationale for replacing literary criticism with Cultural Studies is not always clear. It is often felt that institutional pressure plays a greater part than the thorough consideration of theoretical and practical consequences. The fact that this transformation is taking place simultaneously with the reform of Hungarian higher education in general strengthens the impression that what is at stake here is a full-scale reevaluation of the social function of the humanities, as opposed to a local problem of literary scholars.

I would like to take issue with two assumptions apparently underlying the transformation of literary scholarship into Cultural Studies. First, there appears to be a conviction that the increasing importance of popular culture within Cultural Studies may contribute to social change and the emancipation of the culturally disenfranchised classes. To counter this belief, I will briefly refer to John Guillory's well-known (although in Hungary, rarely cited) argument that the revision of the traditional literary canon serves the needs of the newly emergent middle class. The conviction that 'high-brow literature' is the cultural form of the higher classes whereas popular culture somehow expresses the innocence of 'the little people' may have had some truth in it before the emergence of the global entertainment industry but is no longer tenable. I would like to argue that, even from an oppositional point of view, traditional methods of literary analysis may continue to prove useful as critical tools for the unmasking of ideological constructions. The focus on the opposition between 'high' and 'low' should not completely blur the distinction between subtlety and superficiality. Proponents of Cultural Studies who pose as defenders of the culturally oppressed may suddenly find themselves the most loyal supporters of the new cultural elite.

Second, the undisputed fact that cultural production is inseparable from social and ideological issues is often taken to mean that the connection between society and culture can be represented and analyzed in a positive manner. Consequently, a rather crude 'base-and-superstructure' view of cultural production is adopted, and so the interpretation of works of art is regarded as merely supplemental to 'positive' research into either the social aspects of culture or the technological means of cultural transmission. Although the inclusion of both these aspects in cultural studies is commendable, the exclusive reliance on these positive aspects of cultural production creates the impression of a new foundationalism. My contention is that the rhetorical analysis of works of art is still an extremely useful way to counter this foundationalism. To prove this, I will use arguments borrowed from Kenneth Burke, an American critic who is often seen as a forerunner of Cultural Studies, and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Both argue that language contains an irreducibly negative moment as its foundation, and therefore, linguistic products can never completely reveal themselves to a positivistic approach.

The interaction between traditional (rhetorical) literary criticism and Cultural Studies holds extremely interesting possibilities for research and analysis. In institutional terms, there is clearly a power struggle but it may be unwise to see the relationship between the two approaches as one paradigm simply and completely replacing the other.