

## **PANEL PROPOSAL**

**Second annual CSA conference at Northeastern University in  
Boston May 5 to 9, 2004**

CSAconference@hotmail.com

### **1. Panel title**

Discourse Theory and Cultural Analysis.  
Media, Arts and Literature

### **2. Panel organizers**

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### ***Note:***

***An extended abstract is available upon request.***

### 3. Panel abstract

Though at first sight focused on reopening (and redirecting) the discussion on Marxist theory, 'Hegemony and socialist strategy' (HSS - 1985) also contains the basic elaboration of the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Next to Foucault's theoretical elaborations on discourse, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory remains one of the key works in domains of discourse theory. In the meantime, HSS has generated a considerable amount of secondary literature (e.g. Howarth, 2000; Smith, 1999; Torfing 1999) and a number of political scientists have made good use of the discourse theoretical toolbox, as is for instance evidenced by the reader '*discourse theory and political analysis*' (Howarth et al., 2000).

Inspired by the successful use of HSS and discourse theory in the field of political sciences, we want to organize a panel called "Discourse Theory and Cultural Analysis. Media, Arts and Literature". We strongly feel that Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory can provide a valuable contribution to research outside the domain of political sciences. In line with our own research interests, we would like to focus on a number of specific discursive machines and mechanisms related to the media, arts and literature.

An early example in media studies is James Curran's (1997) attempt to articulate a radical democratic (normative) theory of the media, but others have made use of discourse theory as well, as for instance Carpentier et al.'s (2003) analysis of the democratic community media discourse. Research inspired by the writings of Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek is currently also underway at Belgian universities (Liège, Ghent), especially in the field of literary studies. By bringing together a number of panel presenters applying discourse theory in the study of media, literature and other artistic disciplines, we hope to offer an important contribution to scholarly debates in a wide range of disciplines.

### 4. Panel abstract reference list

- Carpentier, Nico, Lie, Rico, Servaes, Jan (2003) 'Community Media - Muting the Democratic Media Discourse?', *Continuum*, 17(1): 51-68.
- Curran, James (1997) 'Rethinking the Media as Public Sphere', in Peter Dahlgren, Sparks, Colin (eds.) *Communication and Citizenship*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Howarth, David (2000) *Discourse*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Howarth, David, Norval, Aletta, Stavrakakis, Yannis (eds.) (2000) *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis. Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Laclau, Ernesto, Mouffe, Chantal (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London/New York: Verso.
- Smith, Anna Marie (1999) *Laclau and Mouffe. The Radical Democratic Imaginary*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Torfing, Jacob (1999) *New Theories of Discourse. Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek*. Oxford: Blackwell.

## 5. Panel paper abstracts (session call deadline 1/2/2004)

- ?? Representations of 11th September 1973 in Chile: The Mural Painting 'Memoria Visual de una Nación' - Hernan Cuevas Valenzuela
- ?? Discourse Theory and Literature in the era of Interculturality - Byron P. Pissalidis
- ?? Discourse theory, war and the media - Nico Carpentier
- ?? Agonism & Literary History – Stuart Sim

### **A. Representations of 11th September 1973 in Chile: The Mural Painting 'Memoria Visual de una Nación'**

**Hernan Cuevas Valenzuela**  
**University of Essex**

The paper *Representations of 11<sup>th</sup> September 1973 in Chile: The Mural Painting 'Memoria Visual de una Nación'* examines the meaning of the coup of September 11<sup>th</sup> 1973 in Chile as represented in the mural *Memoria Visual de una Nación* by Mario Toral.

Working on discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), the author deploys an empirically oriented non-essentialist discourse/visual analysis that emphasizes the import of the social narratives, collective memories and ideological discourses that attempt to fix the meaning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 1973 coup in Chile. The author states that Laclauian theory of hegemony provides a way of understanding how meaning is fixed/constructed/given within a field of discursivity criss-crossed by antagonism. Nevertheless, to fully grasp the work of concrete political discourses, one has to consider the 'circuit of culture' and the 'encoding/decoding' process (Hall, 1996). For this, the paper analyses the readings of the mural done by 3 viewers in order to know what they take from the available discourses, and to what extent the 'discursive event' is open to individual's rhetorical re-definitions.

The author interprets the work considering its political and cultural context, focusing on: a) Chilean recent political history, b) iconic images of the coup, c) images of the history of art, and d) a constellation of political discourses (on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 1973 coup, its legacies and further transition towards democracy). All these contexts, the author states, influenced the artist's work, participant's readings and his own interpretation as researcher.

The conclusions suggest that despite the desire of the elite to create a consensual cultural politics and implement a discursive closure in the wake of past conflicts and collective trauma, the event is still controversial, contested views remain vivid and individuals deploy active readings of the 11<sup>th</sup> September 1973 coup.

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**B. Discourse Theory and Literature in the era of Interculturality.**  
**Dr. Byron P. Pissalidis**  
**Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece**

This paper seeks to propose that discourse theory has always been part of a humanistic view of intellectual culture such as literature, which can as easily serve in the era of Interculturality. Discourse theory and Literature in a multilingual or better interlingual society “universalize” and stabilize both discourse and literality by representing both the local, ethnic aspect and the international, cosmopolitan one. My point is that we shouldn't let to the euphoria of allured thinking, assuming that the Intercultural approaches to discourse and literary texts into our curricula make real changes, when we are already, in various forms and in huge period of time, have been broadly established and used their entire disciplinary structures.

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**C. Discourse theory, war and the media**  
**Dr. Nico Carpentier**  
**Catholic University of Brussels (KUB) and Free University of Brussels (VUB)**

When a nation goes to war, powerful mechanisms come into play, in order to turn an adversary into the enemy. Where the existence of an adversary is considered legitimate and the right to defend their - distinct - ideas is not questioned, an enemy is excluded from the political community and has to be destroyed (Mouffe 1997: 4).

In this paper Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (1985) is put to work to theorize this transformation of an adversary into an enemy, the role the media system plays and more specifically the representations that these discursive machineries distribute and produce.

The starting point of this paper is that these representations are structured by a set of discourses, articulating the identities of all parties involved. These discourses on the enemy are based on a series of binary oppositions, such as good/evil, just/unjust, guilty/innocent, rational/irrational and civilised/uncivilised, which can be defined as floating (or empty) signifiers (Laclau 1985: 112-113; Žižek 1989: 97). These floating signifiers have no fixed meaning, but they are (re)articulated before, during and after the conflict. Moreover, the construction of the enemy is accompanied by the construction of the identity of the self, clearly in an antagonistic relationship to the enemy's identity. In this process not only the radical otherness of the enemy is emphasised, but the enemy is also considered to be a threat to 'our own' identity. In this fashion the enemy's identity becomes a constitutive outside (Laclau 1990: 17), supporting the identity construction of the self.

Given their importance, media become the 'target' of the countries at war in order to legitimise their actions. For this reason Kellner (1992: 57-58) calls the

media '*crucial sites of hegemony*'. States have access to two major tools to achieve their aims: censorship and propaganda (Taylor, 1995: 10). Propaganda, and to a lesser degree censorship, is from a discourse theoretical perspective aimed at hegemonising a specific military-political project.

At the same time propaganda needs to be embedded in a broader ideological framework. The main argument here is that journalists and media organisations are not situated outside discourse, and will influence and be influenced by the discourses which circulate at a given time and space in society. Secondly, media organisations have developed specific modi operandi in order to construct objectivity and protect their position of '*authorised truth-teller*' or '*licensed relay of facts*' (McNair 1998:65). These journalistic practices often lead to specific articulations of specific privileged discourses, in combination to the exclusion of other articulations and discourses. This does not turn media organisations into helpless victims of propaganda and structural bias: counter-hegemonic discourses do manage to find their way into the mainstream media, although their position remains highly problematic.

After brief and fragmented genealogies of the constructions of the enemy and the self in the Vietnam War, the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the Kosovo/a War, the attention in this paper is focussed on the 2003 Persian Gulf War and the representations created by the North-Belgian media. More specifically, an analysis of the public television's broadcasts during the second (or third – depending on the position) Persian Gulf War, based on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory will exemplify the dichotomous representation of the identities of the Iraqi enemy and the American-British self, the process of the hegemonisation of Western ideological model and the hard struggle of counter-hegemonic voices of the peace movement to replace the prevalent war discourse by a discourse of peace, in a country where the majority of the population contested the war.

#### **References**

- Kellner, D. (1992). *The Persian Gulf TV war*. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview press.
- Laclau, E., Mouffe, Chantal (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics*. London, Verso.
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- McNair, B. (1998). *The sociology of journalism*. London, New York, Sydney, Auckland, Arnold.
- Mouffe, C. (1997). *The return of the political*. London, Verso.
- Taylor, P. M. (1998). *War and the media*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Zizek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. London, Verso.

Nico Carpentier is a media sociologist working at the Communication Studies Departments of the Catholic University of Brussels (KUB) and the Free University of Brussels (VUB). He is co-director of the KUB research centre CSC and member of the VUB research centre CEMESO.

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**D. Agonism & Literary History**  
**Dr. Stuart Sim**  
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Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism represents a critical stage in the development of postmodern thought and its critique of both authority and authoritarianism. They call for a much more dynamic relationship between the critic and the object of criticism, in which old cultural certainties are systematically challenged. There are implications here for the arts in general, which this paper will explore with regard to literary history and a case study of the work of the author John Bunyan. Mouffe's demand for an 'agonistic pluralism' in the political arena suggests a new approach to assessing authors within their particular historical discourses. Mouffe has argued that 'the specificity of modern democracy lies in the recognition and the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it through the imposition of an authoritarian order' (*The Democratic Paradox*, p. 113). Her objective is to promote agonism, where debates are kept open, at the expense of antagonism, where closure is sought by the competing parties. The further back we go in the past the less we are dealing with anything resembling modern democracy, but we can still find authors testing the authoritarian order of their times through fictional texts, and exploring the scope for ideological critique. It becomes the critic's task to analyse the dialectic of agonism and antagonism in authors who do challenge the dominant ideology of their time, to assess whether they are keeping debates open or merely reinforcing the status quo (which generally tends towards the eradication of dissent). John Bunyan's work, particularly *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a work at once anti-authoritarian and potentially authoritarian in its own right, will be analysed in terms of its internal dialectic of agonism and antagonism. Through this brief case study, the aim will be to show that literary history can be very receptive to a critical approach based on agonistic principles.

Stuart Sim is Professor of Critical Theory, specialising in seventeenth and eighteenth-century prose fiction and modern critical theory. He has published widely in these areas, particularly on the work of Bunyan, Defoe and Sterne, and on poststructuralism, postmodernism and post-Marxism. His most recent books are *Liotard and the Inhuman* (Icon Press, 2001); *Introducing Critical Theory* (Icon Press, 2001); *Irony & Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture* (Icon Press, 2002) and *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma* (Icon Press, 2004). He is currently editing the second edition of *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*.  
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