

Literary Theory and Criticism

Cultural Materialism, Othello and the Politics of Plausibility by Alan Sinfield

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What is Cultural Materialism?

- ▶ A materialist analysis of culture.
- ▶ An exploration of influence of material things on cultural phenomena.
- ▶ Materialist analysis is inspired by Marx, who insisted on the importance of material means of production and rejected idealist aesthetics.
- ▶ As Raymond Williams put it in "Culture is Ordinary" (1958), "A culture must finally be interpreted in relation to its underlying system of production."
- ▶ Williams and other cultural materialists have also challenged many commonplaces of Marxist criticism, particularly Marx's notion of a material base and a cultural superstructure.
- ▶ Williams, for instance, argues that Marxism makes culture secondary to material processes, when in fact it should recognize that culture is itself material.

Essay is divided into six sections. They are as follows.

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ The production of ideology
- ▶ Structure and individuals
- ▶ Entrapment and faultlines
- ▶ Desdemona's defiance
- ▶ Reading dissidence

Introduction

- ▶ The argument is stated: Iago's story (discourse) works, not because he is cunning, but because his lies perfectly mirror the presumptions, assumptions, and prejudices of a Venetian culture that sees blacks as exotic, inferior to whites, ignorant, barbaric, and prone to revert to type.
- ▶ "As Ania Loomba puts it, 'Othello moves from being a colonized subject existing on the terms of white Venetian society and trying to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way until he occupies his...position as its other'"
- ▶ Even Othello resigns himself to this perception of himself because he is engulfed by the overpowering ideology of Venice's political, economic, and cultural elite---a society that uses him for his prowess as a general, yet is unwilling to include him as a member in good standing of its "in-crowd."

- ▶ As Althusser would put it, Othello is interpolated by the state as a savage, and he eventually answers its powerful call.
- ▶ Iago's stratagems work, not because of his ingenuity, but because his lies are "plausible" and "sensible" to the Venetians and even (tragically) to Othello himself.
- ▶ Sinfield refers to the underlying cultural material that Iago exploits (and of which Othello is victim) as "the politics of plausibility."

THE PRODUCTION OF IDEOLOGY

- ▶ Sinfield notes that societies must produce ideologies that will maintain production of a great many things.
- ▶ Not only do societies need to produce food, energy, and goods to trade; they also need to produce "understandings" of "a system of social relationships" that keep the whole process producing everything from pork bellies to political systems.
- ▶ Ideological potency arises from its ability to make what is happening around us seem like a plausible account (story/discourse).
- ▶ Potent ideology is that which produces the greatest degree of plausibility.
- ▶ Although ideology is produced at all points of the cultural spectrum, nowhere is it more powerful than in the stories (discourses) of the powerful elite.
- ▶ The discourses of the elite sound more plausible than explanations (stories) of those who have been marginalized.

STRUCTURE AND INDIVIDUALS

- ▶ This section begins with a crucial quote by Marx and Engels from *The German Ideology*: "The class which has the means of material production...has control...over the means of mental production"
- ▶ Groups with material power will control institutions that traffic in ideas.
- ▶ Sinfield asks, "If we come to consciousness with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?."
- ▶ "The essentialist-humanist approach to literature [feminism, for example] and sexual politics" [politics in general?] presumes that the individual is the locus of "truth and meaning," but the source of the consciousness of individuals who produce ideas is in fact the power structure that produces still more structures that define and entrap individuals.

ENTRAPMENT AND FAULTLINES

- ▶ The "*entrapment model* of ideology and power" is that which occurs when "maneuvers that seem designed to challenge the system help to maintain it".
- ▶ Sinfield considers the "faultlines" that continually erupt between weakening ideologies and fresh power waiting (sometimes literally!) in the wings.
- ▶ Three examples of these faultlines are: 1.) Essex's rebellion in 1601 against the aging and weak Queen Elizabeth; 2.) Gen. Douglas MacArthur's attempt to supercede President Truman's constitutional authority during the Korean War; and 3.) Macbeth's assassination of King Duncan.
- ▶ Sinfield also refers to *Henry V* as a "magical resolution of this faultline by presenting the legitimate king as the triumphant war leader".
- ▶ In this way, the faultline between long-in-the-tooth political structures and the inevitable, dissident forces bent on their usurpation is remedied by a figure that is old yet young and ensconced yet emergent.

DESDEMONA'S DEFIANCE

- ▶ Sinfield again considers the entrapment model as Desdemona answers her father when he attempts to exert hegemony as a dominating parent and an intimidating member of the city's power elite.
- ▶ He asks her, "Do you perceive in all this noble company [intimidation], / Where most you owe your obedience [domination]?"
- ▶ She cleverly uses the inevitably embedded conflict and dissidence that are hidden within the social orders that control her.
- ▶ By doing so, Desdemona wrests some control from her father and from the political structure of Venice.
- ▶ She answers that she owes her allegiance to her husband (Othello), just as her own mother owes *her* allegiance to *her* husband (Brabantio), Desdemona's father
- ▶ The subtle defiance works because she expertly exploits the potential for dissidence within the ideology produced by and for the social structures in which she was born, lives, and will die.

READING DISSIDENCE

- ▶ Sinfield holds that textual analysis (a favorite critical tool of cultural materialists) readily demonstrates "dissidence being incorporated" into existing structures because it operates in direct reference "to dominate structures".
- ▶ He notes, as Giddens observes, that the correlation "of resistance and control are systemic".
- ▶ He invokes Foucault to stress that resistance is plural and "spread over time and space at varying densities" instead of a "great Refusal".
- ▶ Sinfield uses *dissident* instead of *subversive* because, although *dissident* appears at first glance to be the weaker of the two terms, it is actually stronger because it is more likely to avoid the entrapment model as noted above.
- ▶ Sinfield concludes his essay by stating, "A cultural materialist practice will review the institutions that retell the Shakespeare stories, and will attempt also self-consciousness about its own situation within those institutions."