TOWARDS AN EXISTENTIALIST CONCEPT OF “AMERICAN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY: ON DEATH, TRICKSTER AND SOCRATES”

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Literary Theory in Current Anthropology

Since the eighties a new theoretical and methodical trend has become dominant in American cultural anthropology. In an influential paper, Clifford Geertz observed: “Analogies drawn from the humanities are coming to play the kind of role in sociological understanding that analogies drawn from the crafts and technology have long played in physical understanding.”¹ The implication here is not so much anthropology’s older reception of linguistics and symbolic interactionism (which Geertz presented earlier) but rather the integration of literary hermeneutics. “Literary criticism and interpretation . . . replaced linguistics as an influential source of new ideas about theory and method in anthropology,”² according to a critical history of American anthropology by G. E. Marcus and M. J. Fischer, which can be seen as a platform for the new research trend.

Thus, “literary” writing or “artistic textuality” (in contrast to “scientific prose”) and “aesthetic reason” (instead of, or at least alongside, “transcendental reason”) are stressed in the renewal of cultural anthropology. This concept of literary cognition is modern, subjectivistic and negativistic; irony is among its preferred stylistic means. “Literary texts (are) deemed to be . . . allegorical, composed of inventions rather than observed facts: they allow a wide latitude to the emotions, speculations . . . of their authors . . . (they) play on the stratification of meaning; (they) narrate one thing in order to tell something else. . . . This discourse, repeatedly banished from science . . . is incurably . . . polysemous,”³ explains James Clifford.

who, as a historian of literature, is currently an influential interpreter of anthropological texts.

In keeping with this leading idea, current social anthropology explores by hermeneutical means the semantical (historical) contexts of cultural interaction as well as of analytical, scientific predicaments. "There is a need for a new philologist—specialist in contextual relations—in all areas of knowledge in which text-building ... is a central activity: literature, history, law, music, politics ..." In well-known social "texts" readings like these show unique, context-related meanings, and also, which is very important, all kinds of ambiguity and contradicting loyalties. This goes for unique actions (which are subject to ethnographical description), but also for "identical" scientific concepts (which are concerned as elements of more complex texts—two different cultures, for example). The intention of the new anthropology is—in a word—recollection: recollections of passed, namely context-related, significance of analytically isolated structures and statements: recollection of transitoriness as a parameter of scientifically ascertained truth; recollection of the historical complexity of human experience which is denied in the scientific idea of knowledge; recollection of the ambiguity of every decision. In other words: recollection of the "mythical" law that all gestures of human activity and cognition are in vain; in the last resort, recollection of everything outlawed, lost or perished through modernity, of the dead as such.

These intentions of recollection point to a certain field of research, which is discussed in the new anthropological literature. I mean the historical and political reinterpretation of America's anthropological science. In his relatively recent publication, Geertz "blurred the boundary separating art from science," aiming at the reinvestigation of social anthropology's knowledge: Geertz looks at "The Anthropologist as Author," in order to disclose and understand the biographical, political, etc., contexts that co-determine scientific production, which are reflected by it and upon which it reacts. These contexts can be clearly traced in anthropological texts, but are suppressed in a conventional reading, since such reading searches for "lasting," "objective" insights, that