

Open for Business: Literary Theory in the Age of 'Knowledge Mobilization'

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Among the questions that the *Frame* editors proposed to this issue's contributors was whether the wide range of what we might call 'non-literary' theoretical discourses that are today taught at literature departments are indeed beneficial to the study of literature. Given that I have often found literary studies to be most helpful when considered as a jumping-off point for inquiries that may seem far removed from the discipline, in this contribution I turn this question on its head. *How useful is literary theory for the study of everything else?* In what follows, I explore some of the complexities related to this question by reading it in two different but connected ways, and in doing so reflect on some of the existential struggles that the production of literary and cultural theory is currently facing in academic communities across the globe. Both approaches to my introductory question revolve around what we might call the productiveness of the creation of literary and cultural theory. 'Productiveness,' of course, can assume very different meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. The first meaning that I will highlight is that of theoretical discourse that is perceived as productive because of its contributions to academia's critical agendas; the second meaning is that of theoretical discourse that is perceived as productive because it is effective in furthering universities' non-critical agendas, which could be described as professional, corporate, economic, or commercial in nature. Humanities scholars are today more and more often required to tread a middle ground between these different ideals of

productiveness, a required that carries with, as I will argue, a variety of problematic implications.

In the first approach to the question I posed above, let me interpret the concern with literary theory's usefulness as a concern with the critical stakes of literary studies. For many, myself included, the study of literary, and, more broadly, cultural texts has an ineluctable political edge. Ideally, my introductory question thus becomes a way of asking for the degree to which the critical insights of literary and cultural theorists lend themselves to the pursuit of positive social and political transformations. Over time, a great range of theoretical approaches and schools of thought have struggled with the ambitions that are embodied in this concern. A good many intellectual battles have been fought over its necessity and legitimacy, and what above I called the 'critical stakes' of literary studies continues to be held in high regard by many – as one might assume either because of true political / activist grit or also because this helps to rationalize and legitimize the places of privilege from which humanities scholarship still tends to be carried out.

Overall, the first approach to answering the central question with which I opened this paper thus conveys the ethos and idealism that most scholars will associate, on some level, with the critical productiveness of literary and cultural theory. It understands the production of such theory as a project designed to yield effective critical commentary concerning the politics of our interactions with various kinds of cultural texts, of the interactions of these texts with each other, and of their interaction with the world. In reflecting on the validity of such a definition, it may be instructive to ask on which side of what Andreas Huyssen has called the "Great Divide" literary theory is positioned: Does it build primarily on the literariness of literature, and has it therefore, perhaps, like the avant-garde art of which Huyssen wrote, been "ossified into an elite enterprise beyond politics and beyond everyday life" (Huyssen, 4)? Or has literary theory been able to maintain – even to amplify – a critical connection to the practice of everyday life that allows it to directly tie in with the creative expression of critical opinions, whether political, social, aesthetic, or otherwise, and to support and embolden such expressions? Whatever the response may be, both of these questions imply the acknowledgement that there are, indeed, critical stakes in the production of literary and cultural theory, and that the scholarly discourse we produce will always either live up to these stakes or fail to do so.

It is hard to define literary and cultural theory's critical stakes with any measure of concreteness; inevitably they vary between one project and the next. To use examples from my own work: research on

radical alternatives to traditional copyright law that are emerging within underground sampling music communities is very different from research on the appropriation of surveillance footage in contemporary video art – but there are critical stakes involved in both projects. The abstract nature of the definition of literary theory offered above is therefore simply a way of stating that all humanities scholars have their own takes on determining the critical stakes of theory, and on answering the question of how useful literary theory may be for the study of everything else. The reason I raised this tricky issue here is because in what follows I will argue, firstly, that humanities research is today framed by contexts that make it exceedingly difficult to keep a grasp on whatever we may define the critical stakes of our work to be; and secondly, that embracing literary studies as a critical, political project can be useful in counteracting some of the existential threats that the discipline, and the humanities in general, are currently facing.

We must keep in mind (as if we were not already reminded of it all the time) that my introductory question concerning the usefulness of literary theory is today never only linked just to the critical stakes of theoretical inquiries. There is now a whole range of economic considerations that are also of key importance. And it is with this problem that there emerges the second approach to interpreting the question with which I began this paper. This second approach, in a nutshell, is contingent on the fact that the corporatization of research institutions and of higher education in general today often lends a strong economic taint to all concerns with the ‘usefulness’ of cultural and literary theory. ‘Productiveness’ and ‘usefulness’ in this context takes on a sense of efficiency, even profitability, that an entrepreneur might be more comfortable with than a scholar. But this second approach also creates an important link back to my brief discussion of the critical stakes of literary studies – it is here that we may see emerging a renewed importance of the political valence of literary and cultural theory as a means to challenge the rather depressing effects I will discuss in what follows.

The economic taint that this second approach to the ‘usefulness’ of critical thought brings with it can easily supersede the more political meaning that the term carries in the first reading of my introductory question. One of the ways in which this happens is in the emergent rhetoric of ‘knowledge mobilization’ and similar strategies that have as their aims the more efficient production and dissemination of research. Such strategies, which are being rapidly implemented at research institutions across the globe, usually detail ambitions to move “knowledge into active service for the broadest possible common good” (“Knowledge

Practice”). It is easy to see how this rather vaguely outlined goal can be read in line with both of the two approaches to the ‘usefulness’ of theory that I am outlining in this paper. But what is particularly concerning is that in academic strategy papers designed to get humanities scholars to adopt knowledge mobilization strategies, the *economic* production of knowledge plays such a central role that it can become difficult to seriously pursue the output of knowledge that is productive, or useful, in the *critical* sense discussed above. This is especially true when the introduction of such knowledge mobilization models coincides with existential dilemmas of downsizing, amalgamation, and closure that research and teaching units in the humanities are currently facing at universities everywhere.

Hardly a week goes by that does not witness the circulation of urgent calls for support by endangered departments, programs and research institutes in the humanities. Just a few months ago, the Centre for Comparative Literature at my *alma mater*, the University of Toronto, has itself successfully, if barely, warded off imminent closure (the official term was ‘disestablishment’). The reasons and reasoning that effect this kind of endangerment can be manifold. In the case of U of T’s Centre for Comparative Literature, the rhetoric of those who wanted to see the centre disbanded conveyed the official view that over the decades, the aims and ambitions of Comparative Literature had been so successful that they have now been adopted by the humanities at large – with the result, presumably, that the discipline has effectively worked itself into obsolescence. The critical agendas and methodologies of Comparative Literature were argued to have spilt over into other disciplines and to have been sponged up so eagerly and entirely that the work of Comparative Literature can now be continued more effectively in other research units. In this sense we were perhaps meant to accept disestablishment as the well-deserved Elysium of particularly ‘successful’ critical disciplines. But while the future of the centre was officially discussed in terms of the discipline’s usefulness in critical terms, the cipher that really loomed over all negotiations was of course that of the university’s stretched budget, and the perceived need to find ways of producing knowledge that are more effective and useful in the economic sense of the term – in this case the disbandment of the Centre and its integration with other research units.

The Centre’s closure was prevented, ultimately, by a vehement international scholarly outcry that drew considerable attention (for a collection of the support letters, see the protest website referenced in the bibliography). Coordinated through the valiant efforts of the Centre’s graduate student body, the protests decried the legitimacy of

the university administration's claim regarding the obsolescence of Comparative Literature. They argued that the discipline has by no means exhausted its relevance through the success of its critical endeavors, and that it continues to depend – precisely because it connects to so many issues beyond straightforward literary criticism – on the integrity of a distinct, non-amalgamated home. It is important to note, however, that another key aspect of the Centre's negotiations with the university administration was the offer to self-impose the implementation of knowledge mobilization strategies that would allow the Centre to run more effectively.

What became clear in the fight against the Centre's closure was that a smart rhetorical trick was at play here, which may be best understood through the critical lens of literary theory itself, and which can also be observed in similar struggles on other campuses: budgeteers attempt to appease research communities by continuing to honor the 'need' for a theory or a discipline as being of a purely critical, political nature, while at the same time trying to reduce its 'usefulness' to an economic factor. It appears that when these two issues are successfully disengaged – in other words, once the two approaches to my central question regarding the usefulness of literary theory are properly separated – it becomes difficult to argue against the disestablishment of any research unit.

A similar example is the discourse around what in German academic jargon are called *Orchideenfächer*, 'esoteric' and 'obscure' "orchid disciplines" that are, supposedly, so specialized and specific that they can be easily, if wrongly, characterized as not 'needed,' not 'useful,' or not 'productive.' The simple implication of the analogy is that like orchids, certain scholarly disciplines are interesting and curious to have around, but very hard (read: expensive) to keep alive. Not infrequently, the official understanding is that such disciplines are, beyond a certain point, served best by disestablishment and amalgamation: once swallowed by larger departments, they may continue to produce all the critical knowledge they want, but without harming the university budget. One such incident affected Oriental Studies (*Orientalistik*) at the University of Vienna, which was described, about ten years ago, as an *Orchideenfach* by the then-finance minister of Austria, who simultaneously suggested that its disestablishment was desirable, if not inevitable. His statement was released in mid-2001, however, and soon thereafter, official opinion regarding the critical need for the discipline (that it should be disestablished) was put in question so thoroughly, if problematically, by the 9/11 suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in New York that concerns regarding the discipline's productiveness and usefulness were no longer

relevant. Perhaps more effectively than the case of Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, this example shows, again, how powerful economic considerations of the viability of academic disciplines can be.

Both of the examples I just provided tell success stories of academic survival. Unfortunately, they could today be supplemented by many similar, much less successful stories reported from campuses around the world. What all such examples suggest, regardless of whether they relate successful or failed attempts at keeping going, is that the ‘usefulness’ of cultural and literary theory in the sense of a critical need for it today tends to be separated from and ranked behind concerns with its economic use. A good strategy for preventing disbandment, amalgamation, etc., must therefore disable attempts at disengaging concerns with the critical ‘need’ for any theoretical discourse from concerns regarding its ‘usefulness’ in economic terms.

Whether we like it or not, the existential crises outlined above impact what cultural and literary theory looks like today; they are reflected in curriculum changes, current hiring practices, institutional strategy papers, in the way in which we communicate the relevance and importance of our discipline to students and the public at large, and, last but not least, in shifts concerning the kinds of theoretical inquiries that strike us as legitimate or necessary today. Insofar as these developments come in the wake of economic reform rather than in the wake of critical scholarly pursuits, they are unfortunate, and deserve the critical attention of the disciplines they concern. Perhaps, then, we have arrived at a point where the investigative tools of literary scholarship themselves can be drawn upon in exposing and challenging the economic agendas that frame the practical circumstances which currently often dictate the production, dissemination, and reception of critical thought in the humanities. As a starting point, this project might take the shape of a critique of the knowledge mobilization models and related strategies by which many research units in the humanities are today required to operate.

The simple differentiation between critical need and economic usefulness that I established above comes down to issues of the perceived ‘value’ of various scholarly disciplines, and plays with different meanings of this concept. One obvious area in which literary scholarship is facing off with tensions between different ideas of value is the history of copyright. Even without reiterating this history in much detail, it is easy to see that the copyright regimes which regulate the production and circulation of literary expressions and critical thought were always – and still are – caught up in the task of negotiating, rhetorically and practically, a balance between what above I have differentiated as critical need and economic

usefulness. For example, the first major copyright statute, Great Britain's Statute of Anne (1709), carried the subtitle "An Act for the Encouragement of Learning," an indication that open access to copyrighted material was one of the statute's major concerns. But as we know, the very idea of copyright always also contains the desire to fence off creative expressions as property. Concerns with the above-indicated double nature of value that can take both a critical and an economic form are therefore at the centre of all copyright discourse. Similar developments can be observed with the implementation of new, more 'efficient' models of producing and circulating knowledge.

The example of the assimilation of ideas into property-based exchange systems that characterizes copyright doctrines is highly instructive for understanding the impact which ideals of knowledge mobilization can have on the production of critical thought in academic contexts. For example, Canada's largest funding body of humanities research, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), conceptualizes knowledge mobilization (often abbreviated KMb), as already noted, as serving the task of "moving knowledge into active service for the broadest possible common good" ("Knowledge Practice"). Many other national funding bodies use very similar definitions. Common to most is the assumption that "[a] social sciences and humanities voice on knowledge mobilization opens the door to non-linear, dialogical, discursive and multi-directional approaches" to the formulation and dissemination of knowledge ("KMb Strategy"). These KMb goals are, of course, very laudable, with their stated intention of producing knowledge for the great benefit of both research institutions and the public. We must keep in mind, however, that this is not the only aspect of KMb philosophy.

In tandem with the goals just listed, definitions of knowledge mobilization generally also highlight the "need for prompt action to implement measures designed to strengthen the practice of knowledge mobilization leading to intellectual, social and economic impact" (*ibid.*). Thus, different ideals of 'value' are here again conflated. Incorporated into a strategic research agenda, a definition such as the one just provided would inevitably dictate the imposition of an economic rhetoric onto the production of literary theory. As a consequence, the conference papers and research seminars we produce become 'deliverables.' The very ideas that underpin our book manuscripts become 'products.' Graduate student bodies take on the nature of 'clients,' and our responsibility toward them now includes the task of ensuring the 'marketability' of what we teach.

The strategy that knowledge mobilization initiatives propose for the work of literary theorists can thus be understood in line with both of my approaches to the question of literary theory's 'usefulness' – it acknowledges the critical need for it, while also foregrounding the importance of amplifying its economic 'usefulness.' It therefore makes perfect sense when a consulting firm offering KMb services defines knowledge mobilization as a process that "focuses on making what we know ready for action to produce value" ("What Is KMb"), since this definition is today firmly embedded in a culture in which value is characterized by efficient, profitable exchange – the rest we can read in Pierre Bourdieu's ever-instructive "The Forms of Capital." Through the implementation of KMb strategies, the production of critical thought is thus inevitably made to assume "a more entrepreneurial perspective than is often seen in disciplinary academic research," and to include "awareness of opportunities, key partnerships, market conditions, technological supports, and concepts of innovation" (ibid.). A explanatory note posted on the website of another large funding body explains that, while "[r]esearch in the social sciences and humanities does have the potential to create cultural, social and economic benefits," this knowledge, along with the various profits it can embody, is rarely mobilized; to remedy this, it is recommended to use the services of a so-called "knowledge broker" who will advise on how to best reap the benefits and research and accumulated knowledge ("Knowledge Broker Model"). Bourdieu hails again.

It would be injudicious, of course, to ignore the importance of cost-efficient research and teaching activities. However, in knowledge mobilization strategies, saving money is always only one side of the coin. The ambition, for example, to produce a body of graduates who will be better able to "work at high level decision making positions in the public, private or voluntary sectors" (ibid.) indicates that we are, today, more and more often required to capitalize on our knowledge. As noted, it now seems that the intellectual impact alone is rarely ever what is at stake in the production of critical thought. This realization entails the suspicion that by adopting knowledge mobilization strategies and related models, the communities that produce contemporary literary and cultural theory may be at danger of maneuvering themselves into a position where it becomes more and more difficult to take a strong, meaningful stand against the crises described throughout this paper. If critical scholars fully subscribe to the concepts embedded in the various knowledge mobilization strategies that circulate on campuses today, then they may have to agree that much of the research they would like to conduct is

indeed not 'productive' enough. On the other hand, if we were to push this thought experiment to its logical limits, we may have to conclude that among the inevitable results of demands for the heightened 'efficiency' of the production of critical thought is very likely also a lessening of the true critical, political potential of literary theory. In other words, the economic and the critical perspective on literary theory's usefulness and productiveness may be seen to undermine each other.

As I noted above through brief reference to early copyright law, literary expression has never only been about edification, aesthetics, and literature. Instead, the modern literary sphere has always been structured like a market, complete with monopolies that, from the beginning, tried to pass themselves off as authors' (and printers') rights. The current academic climate appears to push the production of literary theory in a similar direction, as evidenced by the rhetoric displayed in KMb strategy papers and other models designed to raise the 'value' of critical thought.

So-called *Orchideenfächer* may fail to generate enough external funding; they may fail to attract enough students (and, by extension, tuition); they may award degrees that push graduates into a disappearing, dissolving job market. But in adopting research strategies that raise the overall 'value' of what we do, it is important to keep in mind the rhetorical split between different types of 'productivity,' between what above I have called 'critical need' and 'economic usefulness' that knowledge mobilization invokes. On one level, knowledge mobilization may appear as the academic equivalent to blogging – a model of open access and the efficient exchange of ideas and knowledge, where everybody can benefit equally. But, like early copyright doctrine, KMb also regulates and fences off the production and exchange of knowledge, and introduces new, economic imperatives to it.

In closing, let me return to my first approach to the question of how useful literary theory is for the study of everything else – to the concern with its critical stakes. Perhaps, a sustained critical investigation of the rhetoric and ideologies underlying the research strategies that many humanities scholars are today required to embrace might be a worthwhile project to undertake; indeed, this may be at least as beneficial to the future of various humanities disciplines as the adoption of more efficient models of knowledge production and exchange. If this is the case, then the tools and techniques of critical inquiry that the disciplines in questions themselves have honed over the decades and, indeed, centuries, are surely the most suitable for such a task – and therefore most ideally poised to demonstrate the critical need which remains for literary and cultural theory in this age of knowledge mobilization.

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SUMMARY

As a variation on the *Frame* editors' question of how useful 'non-literary' discourses are for the study of literature today, in this essay I explore the following question: How useful is literary theory for the study of everything else? In doing so, I elaborate on two ways in which this question is today commonly understood and distinguish between the critical usefulness or productiveness of literary and cultural theory, on the one hand, and its economic usefulness, on the other. This allows me to comment on systems of 'knowledge mobilization' and related models that today's corporatized universities often impose on humanities scholars in order to raise the efficiency with which they produce critical thought.

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