

**New Historicism:** “The historicity of the text and the textuality of history.”

The phrase was coined by Stephen Greenblatt around 1980.

Other practitioners are J.W. Lever. Jonathan Dollimore.

Simple Definition: a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same time period. It refuses to privilege literary text.

\* It is no longer a matter of literature maintaining the foreground and history the background, instead it is a matter of literature and history occupying the same area and given the same weight. Reading all of the textual traces of the past, fiction or non.

\* Places the literary text within the frame of a non-literary text.

\* A historical anecdote is given, relating the text to the time.

\* Context is replaced by “co-text”, that is an interrelated non-literary text from the same time period. Greenblatt: “Will of the World.”

Differences between old and new historicism:

\* Old: hierarchical, with literature being the “jewel,” and history the background

\* New: Parallel readings, no more hierarchy.

\* Old: A historical movement: creates a historical framework in which to place the text

\* New: a historicist movement. Interested in history as represented and recorded in written documents—history as text.

\* “The word of the past replaces the world of the past.”

\* “The aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re- situating it.”

Foucault and New Historicism:

\* New Historicism is always anti-establishment, on the side of liberal ideas and personal freedoms.

\* Believe in Michel Foucault’s idea of an all-seeing—panoptic—surveillance State.

\* The panoptic state exerts power through discursive practices, circulating ideology through the body-politic.

\* The State is seen as a monolithic structure and change is nearly impossible.  
Advantages.

\* Written in a far more accessible way than post-structuralist theory.

\* It presents its data and draws its conclusions in a less dense way

- \* Material is often fascinating and distinctive.
- \* New territory.
- \* Political edge is always sharp, avoids problems of straight Marxist criticism.

Barry's example, Montrose's essay on Fantasies, reinforces the idea that literature plays off reality and reality plays off literature.

"New Historicism focuses on the way literature expresses-and sometimes disguises-power relations at work in the social context in which the literature was produced, often this involves making connections between a literary work and other kinds of texts. Literature is often shown to "negotiate" conflicting power interests. New historicism has made its biggest mark on literary studies of the Renaissance and Romantic periods and has revised notions of literature as privileged, apolitical writing. Much new historicism focuses on the marginalization of subjects such as those identified as witches, the insane, heretics, vagabonds, and political prisoners."

### **Cultural Materialism**

Cultural materialism is "a politicized form of historiography."

-Graham Holderness

Raymond Williams coined the term Cultural Materialism. Jonathan Dollimore and Allen Sinfield made current and defined Cultural materialism as "designating a critical method which has four characteristics:

**Historical Context:** what was happening at the time the text was written.

**Theoretical Method:** Incorporating older methods of theory—Structuralism, Post-structuralism etc.

**Political Commitment:** Incorporating non-conservative and non-Christian frameworks—such as Feminist and Marxist theory.

**Textual Analysis:** building on theoretical analysis of mainly canonical texts that have become "prominent cultural icons."

**Culture:** What does this term mean in the context of Cultural Materialism?

Culture in this sense does not limit itself to "high culture" but includes all forms of culture like TV and pop music.

**Materialism:** What does this term mean in the context of Cultural Materialism?

Materialism is at odds with idealism. Idealists believe in the transcendent ability of ideas while materialist believe that culture cannot transcend its material trappings.

**In this way, Cultural Materialism is an offshoot of Marxist criticism.**

History, to a cultural materialist, is what has happened *and* what is happening now. In other words, Cultural Materialists not only create criticism of a text by contextualizing it with its own time period, but with successive generations including our own. Cultural Materialism bridges the gap between Marxism and Post-Modernism.

Some things that Cultural Materialist might look at when analyzing Shakespeare: Elizabethan Drama during its own time period

The publishing history of Shakespeare through the ages

That weird movie version of Romeo and Juliet with Leonardo D. in it

The tourism and kitsch surrounding Shakespeare today

**Raymond Williams** Raymond Williams added to the outlook of Cultural Materialism by employing “structures of feeling.” These are values that are changing and being formed as we live and react to the material world around us. They challenge dominant forms of ideology and imply that values are organic and non-stagnant.

**Cultural Materialism embraces change and gives us different (changing) perspectives based on what we chose to suppress or reveal in readings from the past.**

Shakespeare is one example of how Cultural Materialism can change our point of view, and even our values, in regard to past texts. Many Cultural Materialist have challenged the fetishistic relationship conservative Britain has with Shakespeare.

"Raymond William's term for the theory of culture he develops in the course of a long dialogue with Marxism, and which ascribes a central importance to the role of structures of feeling. Williams is critical of the base/structure model so often used by Marxists to analyze cultural phenomena on the grounds that it makes, for example, the literature dependent, secondary and superstructural, or subsumes it into the wider category of ideology. Cultural Materialism stresses that culture is a constitutive social process which actively creates different ways of life. Similarly, signification or the creation of meaning is viewed as a practical material activity which cannot be consigned to a secondary lever or explained in terms of a primary level of economic activity. Consciousness itself is not a reflection of a basic or more material level of existence, but an active mode of social being. Williams is also critical of the technological determinism of theorists such as McLuhan who argues that communications media have independent properties that impose themselves automatically ('the medium is the message'). He does not deny that the function of the media is determined, but insists that its determination is social and always bound up with sociocultural practices."

--David Macey

"Britain's reply to new historicism was the rather different creed of cultural materialism, which-appropriately for a society with more vigorous socialist traditions-displayed a political cutting edge largely lacking in its transatlantic counterpart. The phrase “cultural materialism,” had been coined in the 1980s by Britain's premier socialist critic, Raymond Williams, to describe a form of analysis which examined culture less as a set of isolated artistic monuments than as a material formation, complete with its own modes of production, power-effects, social relation, identifiable audiences, historically conditioned thought forms. It was a way of bringing an unashamedly materialist analysis to bear on that realm of social existence-'culture'-which was thought by conventional criticism to be the very antithesis of the material; and its ambition was less to relate 'culture' to 'society,' in William's own earlier style, than to examine culture as always-already social and material in its roots. It could be seen either as an enrichment or a dilution of classical Marxism: enrichment, because it carried materialism boldly through to the 'spiritual' itself; dilution, because in doing so it blurred the distinction, vital to orthodox Marxism, between the economic and the cultural. The method was, so Williams himself announced, 'compactible' with Marxism, but it took issue with the kind of Marxism which had relegated culture to secondary, 'superstructural' status, and resembled the new historicist in its refusal to enforce such hierarchies. It also paralleled the new historicism on taking on board a whole range of topics-notably, sexuality, feminism, ethnic and post-colonial questions-to which Marxist criticism had traditionally given short

shrift. To this extent, cultural materialism formed a kind of bridge between Marxism and postmodernism, radically revising the former while wary of the more modish, uncritical, unhistorical aspects of the latter. This, indeed, might be said to be roughly the stand to which most British left cultural critics nowadays take up."

--Terry Eagleton

### **Differences**

#### **Differences Between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism**

As we have seen and read in Barry, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have a significant overlap. In fact the main difference is politics. There are three main differences:

1. Cultural Materialists concentrate on the the interventions whereby men and women make their own history, where New Historicists focus on the the power of social and ideological structures which restrain them. A contrast between political optimism and political pessimism.
2. Cultural Materialists view New Historicists as cutting themselves off from effective political positions by their acceptance of a particular version of post-structuralism.
3. New Historicists will situate the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while the Cultural Materialists situate it within that of our own.