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BRIGITTE GEORGI-FINDLAY
HEINZ ICKSTADT

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Prof. Dr. Winfried Fluck (Universität Konstanz)

EXCHANGES. CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND NETWORKS OF RELATION

In its attempt to fashion an approach to the understanding of American culture and society, American Studies insisted on two requirements from its very beginning: first, aesthetic objects were to be studied in their cultural and social context, and secondly, this study was not to remain restricted to selected works of high culture, but was, in principle, to encompass American culture as a whole - for only by dealing with the full scope, heterogeneity, and diversity of cultural expression could one hope to capture the specific profile of a society that was not, at least not to the same extent, controlled by cultural hierarchies as in Europe. By linking intellectual history and literary studies and bringing them together under the new umbrella concept of cultural studies, the subject matter of the new discipline was broadened to a potentially unlimited number of cultural phenomena. This, in turn, raises the question of how these various phenomena are connected. Or, to put it differently: It is exactly this programmatic widening of the field of investigation which raises the problem of relation and provides it with new urgency. Each approach to the study of American culture, including any attempt to offer a theory of American Studies, will thus inevitably be based on, and shaped by, an underlying model of relation.[1]

The crucial role that models of relation have played in shaping the discipline is illustrated by the initial definition of American Studies as the study of American civilization - a term, which, in the words of a noted Americanist in the intellectual history tradition of the field, is designed to include "all social and cultural developments of a given

society, its political culture, technical progress, educational institutions as well as its scientific and intellectual achievements" - for only on the basis of such a comprehensive view can we hope to arrive at a valid evaluation of a culture and its current state of development.[2] By focusing on the crucial role of the idea of civilization for American Studies in its formative years, the quotation draws attention to the fact that the field, at least in its initial stage, was decisively influenced by a concept whose model of relation is essentially organicist. Society as a whole is perceived as an organism and the central metaphor for historical analysis is thus one of growth and decline, of evolutionary progress or its obstruction. Such an underlying model of organic relation can help to explain the basic methodological assumptions and typical procedures of American Studies in the 1950s and 1960s: The major intellectual achievement, the work of art, or its distinguishing feature, the image, are regarded as a kind of condensed essence of American culture. In this case, it makes sense to assign to a single object or image, as the smallest unit of a culture or text, a representative function for the understanding of the whole. Hence the dominance of the myth and symbol school.

Interestingly enough, however, the theoretical perspective from which consensus history and its American Studies equivalents, the history of ideas approach and the myth and symbol school, have been criticized most severely - that of Marxism and its diverse versions of ideological analysis and social history - usually maintains an organicist model of relation itself, although in a gesture of emphatic inversion. For, as a rule, it is still claimed that the system as a whole can best, in fact only be understood by focusing on one of its components. However, in contrast to the history of ideas approach, it is no longer the work of art or a special intellectual achievement, but an aspect of economic, political or social structure (such as, for example, class relations or market relations) which is now privileged as a model of relation and is then - in following the claim that social structures are replicated in cultural manifestations - reaffirmed as the essential organizing principle of the cultural text. Both of these approaches, the history of ideas paradigm as well as the social history paradigm, thus work on the assumption that a part condenses and provides the key to the whole.

It is an important part of my argument that both of these approaches inevitably show special affinities to certain types of text. To give but one example, one of the privileged genres for a history of ideas approach is undoubtedly the historical novel which, emerging parallel to early Romanticism, suggests redefining civilization as nationhood. On the other hand, texts based on claims of social representation (like the so-called Verständigungstext) continue to dominate cultural studies in which neglected cultural perspectives are to be recovered and revived.

This brings me to an important point. Obviously, privileging a certain model of relation also means privileging a certain type of literary or cultural text in which a similar principle of organization is at work. It may therefore be helpful to reverse that order and to shift over to the work of an author which is significant as one of the first consistent attempts in American culture to subvert organicist models of relation. I am referring to Theodore Dreiser. The reading of his work by Philip Fisher is particularly helpful here for it reveals the radical interactionist dimension of Dreiser's novels.[3] As Fisher convincingly shows, the formation of self and of social relations is now staged as a never-ending interactionist continuum, generated and maintained by a self-perpetuating circle in which desire, the recreation of the self in the image

undermine. In consequence, the question of relation receives a new twist. For, if events are no longer determined by the logic of an endless interactionist sequence, a different principle is needed to link the elements taken from the novel. This principle of organization, interestingly enough, differs in the two films under consideration and, in doing so, illustrates two possibilities of filmic representation that were still hotly contested in the period between 1930 and 1950 when our two films were released. In his 1931 film version of An American Tragedy, Josef von Sternberg neutralizes Dreiser's interactionism through a mode of narration which is strongly influenced by documentary conventions. George Stevens, on the other hand, in his version released in 1951 under the title A Place in the Sun uses all the possibilities of aestheticization and visual idealization provided by the medium's technology. In both cases, these different approaches are linked with an instructive transformation of genre, which refers us back to the remarkable openness and modernity of Dreiser's text. Sternberg focuses on what may be called the novel's social discourse, which is taken as a point of departure for an unemotional, realistic movie somewhat in the tradition of the American gangster film of the 1930s. Stevens reminds us that the novel, in its sequence of seduction, deception, desertion, and moral retribution, is also shaped by narrative conventions of the sentimental novel; in obvious analogy to the emotionally charged melodramas of a Douglas Sirk, he turns Dreiser's novel into the story of a doomed love relationship.

This difference in interpretation can explain basic differences in narrative realization which have to be briefly summarized here. In accordance with his documentary bias, Sternberg is mainly interested in the biography of a man who has gone off the rails.[4] In Dreiser's novel, Clyde Griffiths is driven by diffuse longing; in Sternberg's movie he is a character who is turned into a criminal by circumstances. Sternberg must be interested in Clyde's youth and years of apprenticeship, that is, in the first part of the novel which Stevens omits in order

to intensify the later drama. This approach, however, creates an obvious problem of narrative economy. Sternberg solves the challenge by presenting the scenes with documentary brevity. The single event is thereby marked as a significant stage in a life story which is held together by an ironic inversion of the success-story and its model of evolutionary growth. Correspondingly, the authorial perspective establishes a continuous distance to the main character and the film is clearly designed to work against the possibility of emotional engagement. This makes sense in view of Sternberg's interpretation: If the story of Clyde Griffiths is that of a criminal, then it is important to avoid processes of identification by emphasizing a documentary approach - at least in the initial phase of the gangster genre which Sternberg helped to establish with two films in the 1920s. In doing this, the film's mode of representation resembles that of the newspaper and the newsreel with which it shares narrative devices such as headlines highlighting following events and a style of 'hard,' undisguised cutting that separates the episodes from each other. The role the film assigns to its viewer thus is that of a curious, but basically uninvolved onlooker who may be momentarily attracted by the usual events he witnesses, but who is not interested in bridging the emotional distance to the protagonists.

Quite obviously, Stevens' approach must be different, since emotional distance would work against his purpose.[5] If Clyde Griffiths is considered a basically sympathetic, although weak character (but because of his weakness maybe even more sympathetic), whose only crime consists in his longing for love, then the film must work hard to strengthen our emotional relationship to him instead of weakening it. In consequence, Stevens' version skillfully invites identification and emotional attachment. There are essentially two ways in which this is

of desire, and the restitution of desire on a new level are essential components: As soon as one wish is fulfilled, another one takes its place. If the formation of self and society is dependent on the existence of an imagined other, however, then it can, by definition, never arrive at a point of growth which would signal maturity and successful integration. As the example of Hurstwood shows, the process of self-creation can only come to an end when the desire to project the self unto an imagined other is exhausted.

One possible way of distinguishing Dreiser's two major novels is to say that Sister Carrie is characterized by a transformation of the act of looking from an instrument of Victorian guardianship to a source of constant redefinition of the self through the image. In An American Tragedy, on the other hand, the interactionist circle of desire, self-creation, and renewed desire is accelerated to such a degree that the hero of the novel, Clyde Griffiths, falls victim to the uncontrollable dynamic and frequency of his own desire. What characterizes Clyde throughout the novel, is his inability to cope with the explosive force of his own constantly changing wishes and impulses. This impulse inflation, however, also endangers communication. As the long-drawn-out climax of the novel, its trial, demonstrates, Clyde is no longer able to grasp and explain the interactionist complexity of his own motivation.

If this is valid, however, then the new constituents of self, knowledge, and perception that the novel unearths from beneath the Victorian concept of civilization must also shape and endanger the reading and reception of literary texts, including Dreiser's own novel. Dreiser faces the problem that those characters who represent the mechanism of self-fashioning by means of desire might serve as a mise en abyme of the text's aesthetic effect, that is, might function as just another object of desire and thus of self-fashioning. On the one hand,

this fits in perfectly with the novel's theory of perception. On the other hand, however, it puts literature in danger of becoming a mere stimulus for narcissist self-fashioning, just like any other consumer object. This in turn leads to the interesting paradox that the literary text, in the very process of revealing new constituents of self, society, and meaning hastens its own loss of function. To avoid this, Dreiser, it seems, tries to retain control over the interactionist logic which he has revealed. This explains the most prominent of the novel's narrative strategies, although certainly not its most attractive one, the constant authorial intrusions, lengthy comments, and continuous clarifications which accompany almost every single step, sometimes every look within the novel and give the text its unusual and often tormenting length. For if self and society are constantly redefined and refashioned in processes of immensely complex interaction, then the narrator has to accompany the constant shifts in situational context in order to point out what the characters themselves cannot possibly comprehend. The change in perception to which Dreiser's work draws attention - the replacement of a model of communicative interaction (typical of American realism) by one of narcissist self-fashioning - is thus, in Dreiser's work, still channelled and controlled by the constant authorial interpretation of this very tendency.

What happens, however, if the act of looking, as the primary means of creating relations and thus meaning, is liberated even further? It is at this point that two filmic adaptions have to reduce the novel's interactionist complexity in order to make the story presentable as commercial film. As a consequence, what inflated the novel to such unusual proportions - the almost indistinguishable interactionist complexity of the impulses by which Clyde is constantly overwhelmed - is reduced in both films to the straightforward linearity of an emotionally gripping plot, so that events and characters regain the consistency and logic of motivation which Dreiser strove to

achieved: (1) On the level of plot the material is reinterpreted as the story of a painful separation from an object of affection; (2) on the level of the mise-en-scène, that is, of filmic realization, this sentimental redefinition of Dreiser's novel is supported by a style of visual presentation dominated by connection and fusion. While Sternberg's episodic narrative, filmed by a camera playing the role of neutral observer, distances by constant narrative fragmentation, Stevens' version, filmed in long uninterrupted sequences and using wide-angle perspectives so that social encounters remain visually related, tries to establish ever new promises of connection which cause every threat of instability to be experienced as especially painful. This strategy is supported by continual visual idealization, and part of this approach obviously is that Stevens does not hesitate to indulge in the visual attractiveness of his leading actors Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift.

It takes some time to realize that Stevens is exploiting with these strategies a theory of perception and of the formation of identity that, surprisingly enough, comes closer to that of Dreiser than Sternberg's version, which remains bogged down by conventional naturalism. The central source for establishing relations which Dreiser revealed but still tried to control by authorial processing is now, with the help of the new technological possibilities of film, set free without apparent inhibition. I am referring specifically to the significance of the act of seeing for constituting meaning and aesthetic experience.

In Sternberg's version, the view is that of the eye-witness. Its primary function is to register unusual, but symptomatic events. Stevens, on the other hand, dramatizes the emotional power of images by presenting them as Clyde's main source of

motivation. It is Clyde's gaze at the beautiful Angela Vickers, played by a young Liz Taylor, which sets the drama in motion and leads to the plan of murdering Roberta and it is his memory of Angela's face which provides a last image of consolation before he enters the gas chamber. In between, whenever he is hesitant to act, close-up images of her warm, soft face get him going again. There is a theory of effect implied in these scenes which draws on what Dreiser had already diagnosed the tendency to attach one's desires to an unattainable other by looking and the corresponding power of the image to focus and fuel our desire. And yet, the function of this process has changed in Stevens' version and become more crucial because only it holds the promise of overcoming a condition of separation, of which, ironically enough, the act of looking itself has made us painfully aware. The film's indebtedness to the sentimental tradition thus finds its explanation. It should not be simply taken as evidence for the film's conventionality, but can, quite to the contrary, be seen as a reading of Dreiser's text in which an attempt is made to respond to the fundamental problem which the novel exposes and bequeathes to all subsequent adaptations. For one of the consequences of Dreiser's radical interactionism is that its dissolution of an organically conceived world must result in a new fragility and transience of relations: They are no longer, as is, for example, the figure of the union in American realism, metonymic representations of organic integration, but are constantly exposed to, and threatened, by interactionist unpredictability and eventfulness. The film, on the other hand, responds to this threat to social relations by a renewed promise of the possibility of relation which it takes from the sentimental tradition and - despite the obliqueness of the convention - manages to revive successfully by its skillful use of specifically filmic means. In the course of doing so, however, the source of that which promises

to provide relation is redefined, even within the sentimental tradition. Instead of a morally refined sensibility, as in the sentimental novel, it is now the image, constantly re-charged by the act of seeing, through which relation can be regained.

In Dreiser's novel, a potentially endless supplementarity in the formation of the self is generated by the impossibility of ever overcoming the separation which constitutes desire. For Stevens, film holds the promise of successfully bridging this gap by the skillful manipulation of image and imaginary process. In the final scene, one of the most interesting and effective of the movie, Stevens illustrates his theory of effect through specifically filmic means: At the moment of most painful separation - when the camera accompanies Clyde on his walk to the gas chamber - Clyde evokes the image of Angela Vickers/Liz Taylor which the film fuses with his own by double exposure. Separation is thus visually replaced by union, a situation of seemingly insurmountable distance turned into one of imaginary fusion. Against the pain and fear of separation we have, it seems, a remedy after all: Our own fantasies, our own power to attach desire to images.

This, it seems to me, is one of the central promises of contemporary media culture, but also its main problem. For inevitably, the moment of imaginary union is followed by another experience of separation which, against the background of the initial promise, may be experienced as even more painful. It is thus in the attempt at a sentimental redefinition that A Place in the Sun affirms Dreiser's analysis. As is often the case in cultural history, a strange dialectic seems to be at work here: The very elements which have helped to make the film medium one of the most popular and effective in cultural history - its ability to combine several sign systems,

its acceleration of the sequence of signs, and the ensuing flooding of the viewer's imagination - add up to a striking intensification of sense experience, but, at the same time, they also transform aesthetic experience into a process of ever shorter imaginary projection - a transformation that already points forward in the direction of a postmodern media culture and its promise that the ever shorter evocation of an image could defeat consumerism. The important point for the purpose of our discussion, however, lies in the fact that the seriality of commercial film production produces not only a seriality of ever renewed promises, but also a seriality of an ever renewed experience of separation, which can, in turn, only increase our hunger for images.

How is all of this related to a discussion of models of relation? In our analysis of the two film versions of Dreiser's American Tragedy, we seem to have drifted away from our initial question. However, it may be helpful at this point to recall that each cultural object of interpretation, each text, can be read as an attempt to establish relations between single elements and signs and is thus inevitably grounded in a model of relation. In fact, it may be entirely possible that we derive our models of cultural analysis from such cultural (pre)texts. The use of fictional material in cultural studies, as exemplified in my own transition from theoretical considerations to the example of Dreiser, would then be justified by the fact that fiction, in its potential to experiment with new possibilities of relation, can be considered a priviledged realm for suggesting new models and modes of linkage. In this sense, fiction is always an exploration of the possibility for new ways of linking signs that have not been connected in that way before.

Our own examples contain such models of (cultural) relation; they, too, have to find an organizing principle and a cultural premise about how such phenomena as, for example, social ambition, seduction, and murder trial can be seen as belonging together. As Philip Fisher has shown, Dreiser's novels dissolve the idea of causal links by suggesting a potentially endless interactionist sequence and supplementarity. In contrast, the two film versions, each in its own way, attempt to reorganize the text by "reorganicizing" it. On the level of content, Sternberg's version may present itself as an inversion of the Bildungsgeschichte and as a critique of the success-ideology with its underlying assumption of the possibility of (evolutionary) growth, and yet, as far as the text's own principle of organization is concerned, such assumptions still provide the model of relation through which each and every one of the episodes obtain an exemplary function in a story of flawed development.

Stevens, on the other hand, skillfully combines sentimental tradition and the new technological possibilities of the film to provide intense experiences of fusion; his model of linkage is derived from the promise and potential of the image to connect the viewer with his or her object of desire. It is part of an unforeseen dialectic of the situation, however, that the very means by which separation is to be overcome also create renewed experiences of separation by cutting off the link between imagination and image. The promise on which the film bases its theory of effect is constantly undermined by the institutional realities of the medium. Instead of securing relations, the text only increases the need for ever new acts of imaginary linkage.

This tension, however, between the promise of restituting relation and a technologically induced and enhanced supplementarity points towards another important pattern of cultural relation: that of a dehierarchized seriality which stands at the center of postmodern cultural theory. In fact, the current lively discussion of postmodernism as a cultural theory can be seen as an attempt to clarify to what extent the model of relation offered by postmodern and poststructuralist theory, that of a potentially endless sequence of dehierarchized material, including quasi-anarchic modes of linkage, may also offer a way of coming to terms with an increasingly heterogeneous mass of cultural material. There is, it seems to me, an interesting irony at work here: On the one hand, the suggestion that the postmodern text can serve as a model of cultural analysis is rejected because the disseminating and dehierarchizing play of the postmodern text may have its purpose and function in the de-pragmatized realm of fiction but less so in our everyday existence and certainly not in our scholarly work. Where it becomes a model of cultural or literary analysis, such an attempt will therefore soon be doomed to a monotonous allegorization of the idea of unreadability or disseminary play. But on the other hand, the ever increasing specialization and extension of a field such as American Studies leads to a diffusion and fragmentation of knowledge, which, in an unexpected way, begins to resemble the typically postmodern configuration of an unstoppable and self-perpetuating proliferation of signs. The current state of cultural studies seems to be characterized by the fact that each new extension of knowledge, however justified and justifiable it may be as a necessary revision or exploration of neglected areas of knowledge, contributes its own share to a situation which can be characterized as postmodern. In this situation, the profession of literary and cultural studies is coming to the point where it mirrors or, better: mimics the field it claims to analyze. What current attempts to revise

and reconstruct the field have to face, therefore, is the problem of organizing the knowledge that revisionism brings about. Obviously, one cannot read and study everything. There have to be criteria for selection which can only be derived from a systematic argument on how the single text is related to the rest of the culture. Otherwise, what remains is voluntarism.

Quite obviously, we have to face the problem that the current proliferation of knowledge can no longer be arrested by renewed recentering. Or, to put it differently: We cannot simply ignore the postmodern and poststructuralist critique of organicist models of relation and its insight into the potential arbitrariness of each possible center of meaning. This, to be sure, is one of the lasting effects of the differentiation which American Studies has undergone for good reason. One possible way out of this dilemma may be to acknowledge postmodern theories about the arbitrary dimension of all models of relation by a deliberate interactionism. What I mean by this is an argument and type of analysis which insists on the necessity and inevitability of patterns of relation (and thus of centering), yet keeps in mind the fact that knowledge in cultural studies is always produced by a process of analogizing, that is, by generalizing the model of relation of a prior text, and that this fact limits the scope and authority of any given interpretation in significant and decisive ways. This process of analogizing, or, in other words, this voluntary or involuntary privileging of a model of relation, should therefore become part of the analysis itself. I hope that my own oscillation between theoretical considerations and a variety of cultural texts will now make better sense as an example for the interactionism I have in mind.

In such a movement between theoretical model and cultural text different texts and thus different realms of knowledge constitute one another as objects of cultural analysis and illuminate each other in turn: For cultural theory, Dreiser's novel offers an alternative to organicism and can provide one possible model of interactionist relations of which cultural theory itself has offered few convincing versions so far. The two filmic adaptions, on the other hand, gain significance as cultural material because they do in fact reveal consequences of Dreiser's vision which he himself still tried to discipline by authorial intervention. My own suggestion and priority then is to refer cultural analysis back to the respective model of relation by which it is itself constituted and on which it depends for the production of knowledge. The concept of culture itself that has anchored American Studies for so many years now is only a word for the assumption of a network of relations; if this is true, however, then cultural studies should consider what models of relation are at its disposal, where these models originate, and in what way can they claim plausibility.

This may already sound like the final sentence, but allow me - in a last twist of my argument and in adherence to my own interactionist claims - to return for a moment to my textual examples. In drawing on them I have discussed possibilities so far of linking and structuring heterogeneous cultural material. This raises a last question: In what way does this structuring of material contribute to a better understanding of American cultural history? One could try to find an easy way out by claiming that my textual choices can provide useful material for a historical sketch of changing models of relation in American culture (and possibly cultural analysis) from organicism to interactionism and from there to an anticipation of postmodern seriality. This would not answer the question yet, however, as to what specific insights into American

culture these texts can provide. In asking this question we seem to run into a fundamental problem which each exploration of new material has to face: that the underlying claim in the search for a better understanding of American culture is really one of cultural representativeness.

Dreiser does not seem to pose a problem in this respect, since his novels, even though they subvert organicist assumptions, are still, even if we try to redefine them, aimed at a representation and clarification of a social totality, that is, they are still based on the assumption that a model of relation can be found to help us understand how it works as a whole. This, in fact, justifies reading his novels, as we have tried to do, as representative statements for a moment of transition in American cultural history. The case is different, however, as far as our two commercial films are concerned, for even an afficionado of Hollywood movies will not be able to assign to them any special significance or function in the history of the American cinema.

In American Studies, two responses can be found to this problem: Approaches influenced by the history of ideas paradigm deny that there is a problem, because they do not consider this type of cultural material as representative anyway. On the contrary, it is defined as serialized production which disqualifies it from expressing essential elements of a culture. In reaction, revisionist approaches have turned the cultural hierarchy upside down. Films and other neglected forms of cultural expression are now considered to provide rich and relevant material for cultural history through which special insights can be gained. This approach has, as far as the analysis of American movies is concerned, produced some interesting results, and yet it remains an unacknowledged

problem of such media studies that they claim a cultural representativeness for their object of interpretation which the single film can hardly ever support (as is demonstrated by ever new cultural readings of American movies in which such vogues, as, for example, the disaster film, are used as a point of departure for far-reaching conclusions about American society - conclusions which, in their rapid succession and predictable annual change, have begun to undermine each other and exhaust themselves in an absurd inflation of generalizations).

It may be, then, that the scepticism of traditional intellectual history may be helpful at least in foregrounding a problem: In their forced restitution of organic models of relation, commercial films, like other texts in a realistic mode of representation, may maintain a claim of cultural representativeness. But the institutional and technological dynamic of cultural development, above all, its acceleration of a sequence of fusion and separation and a subsequent desemanticization of the image as a source of meaning, constantly work against this claim. Instead of trying to reassert an assumed representativeness by means of a social or psychological subtext, it may be much more fitting to acknowledge the very weakening of the cultural text as an expression of its culture and regard this weakening as the most important cultural meaning provided by the material.

The interest which our two films may have for cultural studies would then primarily lie in their usefulness for illustrating a new stage of cultural production and aesthetic experience. This development, however, is no longer limited to visual material, but has come to affect all cultural material including the supposedly "classic" texts of our cultural tradition. Ironically enough, this is most clearly revealed

at the moment in which a professionalized cultural analysis has become institutionalized. For inevitably, the cultural dialectic which we have traced throughout this paper - a constant intensification and maximizing of aesthetic effect and a corresponding loss of function; an increasing aesthetic ization of cultural experience and a corresponding desemanticization of all cultural objects; a far-reaching subversion of cultural hierarchies, and a corresponding proliferation of cultural material - also affects those texts for which a claim of cultural representativeness was made in the past. The problem cannot be solved, it seems to me, by merely taking back the claim of representativeness to a privileged subculture or to one's favorite dissenting voice. With the technological transformation of aesthetic experience, cultural objects and cultural expression change their function and thus their usefulness in providing access to the meanings of a culture. The more this holds true, however, the less we can privilege special cultural texts or areas, as cultural studies have traditionally done, as sources of cultural insight and knowledge. Cultural objects, and this may seem like a sad and maybe painful truth for the cultural studies movement at the moment of its final breakthrough, no longer represent a culture as they used to do. The increasing weakness of the single text as a source of cultural knowledge, however, can only be offset by an increasingly interactionist mode of argumentation and analysis. Let me, in conclusion, sketch out the series of exchanges that make up this interactionism:

A consideration of relations is necessary because any interpretation of cultural objects is constituted by an act of substitution and exchange. This does not invalidate the claim that theoretical premises underlie and govern all interpretative activities. However, a theoretical position cannot serve as sufficient justification for an interpretation, because it is in itself constituted by means of an analogy. As an attempt to order a heterogeneity, that is,

as a model of relation, theory can be seen as a systematic version of a pre-text which it clarifies, but also reduces in replication. Every theory thus finds its limitation in those pre-texts through which it has come into existence and to which it therefore shows a special affinity. Without thematizing this origin, theory only tells half of the story, or, to put it somewhat less colloquially, reveals only half of its own truth. As a rule, theory has an in-built propensity to do so, because it is always tempted - and quite obviously gains in status and authority by doing so - to offer itself as explanation of the whole, although it can only do this by turning a part into a metaphor for the whole.

The text, however, on which the theoretical model draws and by which it is generated, needs to be placed, in turn, in relation in order to develop a perspective toward it, instead of simply elevating it to the level of a cultural master narrative and thereby generalizing one functional model of fiction or cultural material. In any argument, I have tried to create such a network of perspectives by taking into account the fact that our own perception of the past, including our own interpretations of those classic texts which people have privileged or are still privileging as exemplary texts of cultural traditions, are inevitably shaped by contemporary modes and models of relation. The radical transformation of aesthetic experience and the function of fiction brought about by a postmodern media culture (but also by a new stage in the professionalization of literary and cultural studies) must affect our view of past texts. More importantly, it hollows out those texts as representative and suggests that the exemplary pre-text of our own cultural moment is the heterogeneous network of signs and subculture which characterizes our contemporary cultural systems. If the representative cultural text is transformed, however, from an exemplary work to one textual item among many, it must also lose its force as a pre-text and can no longer serve as a model of relation. This weakening of cultural meaning,

it seems to me, can only be compensated for by drawing on the idea of a network of relations constituted by a chain of substitutions and exchanges, created in the act and through the act of cultural analysis and limited by it accordingly.

1 In his invitation to this conference, Heinz Ickstadt succinctly summarized the problem which American Studies face at present: "The increasingly centrifugal tendencies within American Studies are clearly connected with its willingness or need to perceive American culture as a multiverse of cultures. Without wanting to call this perception into question, we believe that it calls for, now more than ever, a reflection on remaining common ground. On what theoretical and practical basis is it possible to accept the concept of American cultural diversity and yet maintain American Studies as a coherent field?" In trying to provide an answer, I am making two basic assumptions: 1. Any interpretation of a single text or cultural object must, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly assume a relation to the rest of the culture; 2. such a model of relation is not only logically inevitable, but also indispensable for attributing meaning and significance to the interpretative object. If the interpretetion of a single text is to be meaningful, there has to be an explicit or implicit claim of representativeness and this claim must be grounded in an underlying model of relation.

2 Ursula Brumm, "Fortschrittsglaube und Zivilisationsfeindschaft im amerikanischen Geistesleben des 19. Jahrhunderts", Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien, 6 (1961), 79. (My translation)

3 Cf. Philip Fisher, "Looking Around To See Who I Am: Dreiser's Territory of the Self," Journal of English Literery History, 44 (1977), 728-748 and Hard Facts. Form and Setting in the American Novel (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 128-178.

4 An American Tragedy. Direction: Josef von Sternberg. Scenario: Josef von Sternberg and Samuel Hoffenstein. Photography: Lee Garmes. Players: Phillips Holmes (Clyde Griffiths), Sylvia Sidney (Roberta Alden), Frances Dee (Sondra Finchley). Paramount Pictures. Première: August 22, 1931.

5 A Place in the Sun. Producer and Director: George Stevens. Screenplay: Michael Wilson and Henry Brown (after the Patrick Kearney play based on Dreiser's novel). Photography: William C. Mellor. Players: Montgomery Clift (Clyde Griffiths/George Eastman); Elizabeth Taylor (Sondra Finchley/Angela Vickers); Shelley Winters (Roberta Alden/Alice Tripp). Paramount Pictures. Première: Sept. 1951.