Luminol Theory

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Published by Punctum Books

E. Joyce, Laura.
Luminol Theory.

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3. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic excavation is a form of depth reading, an analytical process that seeks to uncover subtextual, or otherwise buried, meaning below the surface of the text. It is aligned with Paul Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” and with Michel Foucault’s interrelated concepts of archaeology and genealogy. Luminol theory can be understood as a version of depth reading that has many points of congruence with existing methods. The forensic aspect of luminol theory aligns it with Ricœur’s use of suspicion from the lexicon of the police detective; the excavatory function aligns it with Foucault’s archaeological theory.

Foucault developed his related concepts of archaeology and genealogy in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” and his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* In the latter, Foucault outlines his archaeological metaphor as it pertains to the reading of historical and cultural artifacts:

> The tools that enable historians to carry out this work of analysis are partly inherited and partly of their own making: models of economic growth, quantitative analysis of market movements, accounts of demographic expansion and contraction, the study of climate and its long-term changes, the fixing of sociological constants, the description of technological adjustments and of their spread and continuity. These tools have enabled workers in the historical field to distinguish various sedimentary strata; linear successions, which for so long had been the object of research, have given way to discoveries in depth. From the political mobility at the surface down to the slow movements of “material civilisation,” ever more levels of analysis have been established: each has

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Foucault here articulates a complex set of ideas: that the tools a historian uses are always in flux; that these tools can be both pre-existing and improvised, both macro and micro; that history is unstable and deep, with ‘sediments’ and ‘strata,’ rather than linear, chronological, and progressive. Perhaps most pertinent to this book, is the idea that the deeper the archaeologist excavates, the more chaotic and unstable the notion of history becomes and the more subject it is to “peculiar discontinuities and patterns.” Further, Foucault elaborates the unit in which history is measured out: the document. According to him, “history is the work expanded on material documentation (books, texts accounts, registers, acts, buildings, institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc.).”

He claims that in “its traditional form” history “undertook to ‘memorise’ the monuments of the past,” that is, to reify historical experience in a specific, memorializing way. But the archaeological thought, he argues, allows history to be understood as functioning in the opposite manner, “transform[ing] documents into monuments.” Once Foucault has outlined the field on which the archaeologist works, he goes on to define his concept more precisely as a tool to cut to the bone of the artefacts it reads, defining “discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules” rather than seeking “another better-hidden discourse”; as “quite alien” to the “principle of unity” of the oeuvre; and “not a return to the innermost secret of the origin” but the “systematic description of the discourse-object.”

For Foucault, genealogy is closely related to the archaeological method. He describes genealogy as “grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and

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41 Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 3.
42 Foucault also describes history as turning away from “vast unities like ‘periods’ or ‘centuries’ to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity.” Ibid., 6.
43 Ibid., 155–56.
confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.” This describes a palimpsestic text, a text that can be excavated or “scratched” through for meaning. Yet these palimpsestic texts are tangled; it is impossible to find out which one is the ur-text. Rather than pursuing the essentialist mode of attempting to “capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities,” if the genealogist “listens to history” they may find “that there is “something altogether different” below the surface: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. This way of understanding history is deeply disturbing, as it shifts the bedrock of history from a linear, chronological narrative to one that is arbitrary and senseless.

44 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 139.
45 Ibid., 141.
46 In fact, Foucault acknowledges this, saying of those who oppose his methods: “At all costs, they must preserve that tiny fragment of discourse—whether written or spoken—whose fragile, uncertain existence must perpetuate their lives. They cannot bear (and one cannot but sympathise) to hear someone saying: ‘Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of all that you have said; but don’t imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he.'” Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 211. His unsettled approach to history was highly influential to Ruth Leys in her work Trauma: A Genealogy. Leys argues that she takes a “genealogical approach to the study of trauma, in an effort to understand what Michel Foucault has called ‘the singularity of events outside any monotonous finality’ and in order to register their recurrence, as he has put it, not for the purpose of tracing ‘the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles.’” Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 8. Murray M. Schwartz, reviewing Trauma: A Genealogy, reflects on the specifically deconstructionist way that Leys uses genealogy: “The organic concept of genealogy describes unities that unfold in time. There is no unity to be found, however, in the conflicting and often incompatible assumptions of trauma theories as Leys investigates them. She deals with the ways in which trauma theories have repeatedly led to unresolved problems, impasses, or—in the vocabulary of deconstruction—aporias.”
This deeply unsettling, “alien” form of history is the key to Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” an influential depth-reading strategy “inextricably involved with the recovery of meaning.” Ricœur’s first clear published analysis of the term “the hermeneutics of suspicion” appears in the foreword to Don Ihde’s book, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (1971), has a foreword by Ricœur that contains his first clear and published analysis of the term “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” According to Alison Scott-Baumann, Ricœur “uses the term hermeneutics of suspicion to refer to Freud and Hegel, to the ‘hidden depth meaning of a text which the hermeneutics of suspicion allow to emerge’ and to the dialectical opposition between the hermeneutics of suspicion and phenomenology.” In the same preface, Ricœur makes specific reference to archaeology when he discusses how Freud develops a detour backwards, an archaeological dig into the unconscious mind of the child inside the adult.

In *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970) Ricœur shows how Freud’s model of interpretation was particularly suited to symbolic language, which Ricoeur defined as any form of language “where another meaning is both given and hidden in an immediate meaning.” Ricœur posited that the symbolic function was “to mean something other than what is said,” and posited that “to interpret is to understand a double meaning.” What he called a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in Freud described a method of understanding double mean-

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49 Scott-Baumann, *Ricœur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*, 63.

50 Don Ihde, foreword to Ricœur, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*.


52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 8.
ing based not on the religious model of revealed meaning but on the demystification of illusion. This secular reading of the “double meaning” rejects the idea of a fixed, revealed truth that lies behind the explicit content of a text. In Ricœur’s system, a suspicious reading instead posits “a kind of mourning of the immediate.” This kind of reading has application in luminol theory because it both reveals the instability of meaning and acts in a compassionate, memorializing way.

A marriage of Foucault and Ricœur can be seen in D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*. Miller argues that the novel itself is “the story of an active regulation” — part of a closed system with other regulatory state apparatuses, both ideological and repressive. Using Foucauldian logic, Miller enacts something like Ricœur’s hermeneutics of suspicion upon the realist novel, specifically the nineteenth-century realist novel. By reading *Oliver Twist*, for example, as a carceral world where the “happy family” that Oliver is temporarily fostered into is simply another regulatory institution — like the workhouse, the orphanage, or the prison, it exerts discipline and temporal control over the individual — Miller exposes that “after all what brought carceral institutions into being in the first place were lapses in the proper management of the family.” Baby farms, orphanages, debtors prisons, and workhouses were created in response to illegitimate children, poverty, and debt. He also argues that the portrayal of a different kind of policing by a paranoid, secret police in the realist novel of this era marks a move from “spectacular punishment to a hidden and devious discipline.” In other words, the rise of the realist novel, contemporaneous with this

57 Ibid., 59.
58 Ibid., 22.
shift to “a police defined in terms of the spatial extension of its networks and the temporal deployment of its intrigues” meant that “not unlike the novel, the new police has “charge of a ‘world’ and a ‘plot.’” Hence Miller encompasses both the novel and the police in a closed carceral system.

This type of suspicious reading, inherently to do with latent rather than manifest content, is the subject of an article by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus where they argue for surface reading, or, as Marcus describes it, “just reading.” In Marcus’s earlier book, *Between Women*, she acknowledges a debt to Foucault by titling a chapter “The Genealogy of Marriage,” and, in “Just Reading,” Best and Marcus explicitly describe themselves as heirs of “Michel Foucault, skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation.”

However, both writers believe that Foucault is missing an important possibility of literary criticism, that of attention to the surface as well as the depth. Marcus describes “just reading” in opposition to what is known as “symptomatic reading,” with its overtones of pathology and illness. Marcus suggests:

In the place of symptomatic readings, the interpretations I offer in this chapter are what I call “just readings.” Just reading attends to what [Fredric] Jameson, in his pursuit

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59 Ibid., 23.
61 Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” 2.
of hidden master codes, dismisses as “the inert givens and materials of a particular text.” In tracing the representation of female friendship in the Victorian novel, I do not claim to plumb hidden depths but to account more fully for what texts present on their surface but critics have failed to notice. I invoke the word “just” in its many senses. Just reading strives to be adequate to a text conceived as complex and ample rather than diminished by, or reduced to, what it has had to repress.62

“Just reading” is a specific version of surface reading that attends to the justness or fairness of reading what is on the page and not creating a false binary between latent and manifest content. Marcus suggests that depth reading has failed in the past not only by producing this binary, but also by failing to notice what is visible in the paranoid urge to discover what has been occulted.

Luminol theory is a form of depth reading in the tradition of Foucault and Ricœur, with its emphasis on excavation, removing layers, and revealing the autochthonous horror at the scene of history. It also, however, takes some political and ethical cues from Best and Marcus, attending not only to the depths but also to the surface, reading the text as palimpsestic rather than binary. Luminol theory, too, is invested in the tradition of using detection as a mode of literary criticism.63 Literary critics, theorists, and historians frequently use the criminal and legal lexicon as metaphors for their work. Examples of this specific

62 Marcus, Between Women, 75.

pairing of the language of detection and literary criticism can be found in Jack Lynch’s book *Deception and Detection in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, which employs criminal, police, and legal language (“conviction,” “evidence,” “observation,” “motive,” “facts,” “uniform”) to interrogate eighteenth-century hoaxes.⁶⁴ This kind of detection is itself an adjunct of the centrality of the case study to psychoanalysis.⁶⁵ What luminol theory does differently from pre-existing forms of depth reading is to explicitly pair forensic procedures, specifically the application of luminol at the crime scene, with excavatory readings. It also offers a voice to the marginalized, to the dead at the scene, by approaching what is clearly the subject of the archaeological or suspicious reading—the discovered corpse—through the application of the forensic imaginary.

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At the luminol-drenched crime scene: flashes of illumination throw up words, sentences, and fragments that offer luminous, strange glimpses, bobbing up from below their polished surfaces.
Figure 3. The Abject Parlor. Still from *The Luminol Reels.*