

**Introduction to Cultural Studies**  
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**Lecture – 51**  
**Catherine Belsey Critical Practice - I**

Hi and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled introduction to cultural studies. So today we will begin with the new text, is more of a rehearsal or something that we have already done and this particular book that we will be studying selectively is called Critical Practice written by Catherine Belsey. Now what this book will enable us to do is to rehearse some of the things which we have covered in terms of looking at ideology, common sense, realism, etc.

So these are topics which you remember we have covered already, but it is still important to go back and sort of look up at these things more extensively and also perhaps taking up an example of a literary text in terms of seeing how these practices are employed and how to deconstruct these issues that is realism you know totality, common sense, etc. So what this particular book does very well attained Critical Practice by Catherine Belsey.

Is that it offers you very fresh insights in terms of looking at how realism is constructed as to totalize narrative strategy in terms of describing and totalizing certain things and totalizing representational politics, etc and also how realism works fantastically well in certain genres of literature and very interestingly this book covers the section on Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle.

A very popular literature, very popular fiction, detective fiction as you all know and it sort of looks at how realism is employed in Sherlock Holmes. So the question of realism, the question of gender come in very interestingly. So look at it as a complex in this particular book by Catherine Belsey and also what this examination of realism does?

It gives us a very good example of how to deconstruct realism, how to look at things such as ideology, realism, totalitarianism, totalitarian narrator strategies, etc in terms of looking at it from a deconstructionist perspective. So Critical Practice by Catherine Belsey is a very useful book for us in cultural studies not least because it deals with some of the most salient issues that we have been covering and talking about since the very inception of this course.

So the coming two lectures will be spent almost entirely looking at Belsey's book *Critical Practice* is one of the classics I know one might say in cultural studies today. So you know as a way title suggests *Critical Practice* is basically looking at the proxy of criticism, the proxy the practical application of cultural studies, the practical application of critical theory, etc.

And it takes a really rich range, a really rich historical range from you know structuralism to post-structuralism, semiotics, etc and looks at how these things are employed, these things itself a part of the coded mechanism of culture, a part of the coded narratives of culture and obviously if you are examining narratives as coded narratives what you are essentially doing is the decoding those narratives from a deconstructionist point of view.

So Belsey's *Critical Practice* is a very important book for us in cultural studies today. You know because it talks about what is popular, what is literary and how the popular literary is, all these things are entangled in terms of looking at how culture is constructed and colluded and becomes a complex of different kinds of collusions. Now there is a very interesting section called opacity in this book.

And as you know opacity is the opposite of transparency, so opacity is something that you cannot see through. Opacity is that kind of a condition which restricts of view, restricts you know understanding to a certain extent of certain things. So what this section is essentially, it looks at opacity as ontology, so it is an ontological examination of opacity or examination of the ontology of opacity whichever way you want to see it.

But also what it does is something very important in terms of how it looks at the opacity of language and cultural studies, opacity of language and critical theory because this one of the most common accusations against critical theory, one of the most common accusations of the vocabulary of cultural studies that is it is very opaque, is difficult to understand.

So if you read essays by Derrida, if you read essays by you know Homi Bhabha you know Gayatri Spivak you find oftentimes you find it a bit frustrating in terms of looking at you know the meaning, understanding the meaning of the language and the language seems to be quite dense and condensed as well. Now what Belsey is doing in this section, she is offering not an apology but an explanation for this opacity.

So she looks at opacity as a very necessary ontological condition and necessary linguistic condition. If you are to subvert the tyranny of realism and use of that phrase quite deliberately the tyranny of realism. So realism as a strategy as a narrative strategy that is a grand narrative as a norm of representational techniques. So you know any classic realistic becomes the default choice of representation.

So it has a linearity of representation, a temporal linearity, a spatial linearity, a sequential linearity. So realism as a device as a narrative device, it aims towards the totalitarian form of representation and it is enormous and successful as you all know. It is one of the biggest grand narratives. It is one of the more successful, one of the most surreptitious grand narratives around realism.

So quickly realism colludes with patriarchy, you know it colludes all kinds of the grand narratives. So realism becomes the default favorite in terms of representing any grand narrative. So Belsey's argument in the section is if you have to subvert realism, if you have to subvert the tyranny of realism, the best bet for us is to write in a different kind of language or defamiliarize language.

And again the word defamiliarization is a very important word in literary studies because you know one can trace it back to a school of criticism called formalism started by a few Russian critics including Viktor Shklovsky who is perhaps a founding figure in that particular school. So defamiliarization was a way of looking at language differently was to redesign language, change the coordinates of combination in language.

And thereby offering a fresh perspective, offering a new kind of semantic possibility, generating as a new semantic possibilities out of language, out of linguistic structures. So opacity according to Belsey in this and is very compelling and convincing argument I think is not really a lack, it is not really you know a condition which makes language deliberately difficult, etc.

It is the form of representation which is aimed which is designed to subvert, you know the seemingly the seeming seamless of realism and I used words seeming, seamless

quite deliberately because you know like all grand narratives realism too operates best when it appears when it manages to efface its constructed quality.

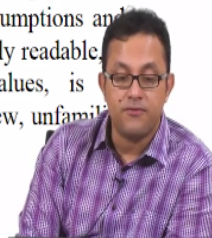
When you do not realize that it is actually a constructed quality, it is actually a constructed category, you assume it, you consume it as a given, you consume it as something which is always that right and it is always that condition of realism something which is deconstructed which is interrupted by the opacity of representation and hence opacity becomes a very important category of representation in critical studies.

And so this is a very important section because like Foucault's what is an author, this too is a very good example of discourse analysis and you know it is very like I said students of you know literary criticism or students of critical theory or students of cultural studies, we often ask about this opacity of language, we often ask why is this so difficult to understand, why is this language you know so unfamiliar, so defamiliarize.

So over here Belsey is offering an intellectual explanation for this, an ontological explanation for this, for this difficulty in you know the kind of language written in cultural studies and critical theory and you know this is very noble not noble very elegant explanation I think offered by Belsey in this particular section. So let us read it in details and then we can analyze it as best we can.

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Partly as a consequence of this theory, the language used by its practitioners is usually far from transparent. The effect of this is to alert the reader to the opacity of language, and to avoid the 'tyranny of lucidity', the impression that what is being said must be true simply because it is clear and familiar. The modes of address of post-Saussurean writers like Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, though different from each other in important ways, share this property of difficulty, and not simply from a perverse desire to be obscure. To challenge familiar assumptions and familiar values in a vocabulary which, in order to be easily readable, compelled to reproduce these assumptions and values, is impossibility. New concepts, new theories, necessitate new, unfamiliar and therefore initially difficult terms.



Partly as a consequence of this theory, the language used by its practitioners is usually far from transparent. So immediately the language is described as being situated opposite of

transparent. It is not something which you know produces meanings very easily. It is not really a meaning producing machine this language but rather it is kind of language which will constantly subvert and frustrate any seamless passion for meanings.

So meanings become secondary over here. The effect of this is to alert the reader to the opacity of language and to avoid the tyranny of lucidity. The impression that what is being said must be true simply because it is clear and familiar. Now in this and all adjectives in this particular session are very loaded adjectives. So true, clear and familiar, so these are often conjoined together.

So we oftentimes consume the fact that you know we assume and consume we believe that what is familiar and what is clear must be necessarily true right. So this equation between truth and familiarity, between truth and clarity is a very important condition for realism to work, realism to operate and its operated principle of realism itself realized to a large extent and is very easy and unproblematic equation between clarity and truth, between lucidity and truth, between familiarity and truth.

And that is something that is attacked, that is something which is subvert and questioned by Belsey over here and she says also that the best way to question these easy equations, unproblematic equation is to draw attention to the fact that languages are opaque or to foreground the opacity of language in critical theory and cultural studies. So that is a very important, a very provocative opening in this particular section.

So this entire tyranny of lucidity, the lucidity and the fact that it is lucid and understandable and that becomes a tyranny because just because it is understandable we oftentimes extend it to the realm of truth, we oftentimes naturally assume it to be true, assume it to be the correct diversion because we can understandably we are familiar with this, the coordinates are familiar to us and that is an error of judgment according to Belsey.

And so what this opacity of language does is that it draws your attention and highlights your attention quite deliberately to the constructed quality of language, to the manufactured quality of language which makes us more frustrated in terms of understanding the meanings out of it. So the modes of address of post-Saussurean writers such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes,

Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, though different from each other in important ways, share this property of difficulty and not simply from a perverse desire to be obscure right.

So it is not really a desire to be obscure, it is not really you know getting a fun out of being obscure that is driving this kind of language but rather you know this property of difficulty is something which is you know deliberately designed by writers of the post-Saussurean tradition. So by post-Saussurean one could also say post-modern or poststructuralist more specifically.

So people like Althusser, Barthes, Derrida and Lacan although they work in very different realms, very different kinds of philosophers, some more linguistics, some more psychological but the representations are quite familiar, quite similar in terms of their deliberate difficulty and this is not really, it should not be seen as a perverse desire to be obscured as something which is deliberate in terms of being obscure in terms of being you know outside of meanings.

But this difficulty is actually a very deliberate design, a very deliberate combination which is supposed to highlight the opacity of language. So language has an opaque construct, language has an opaque ontology that is something which is highlighted in this difficulty which is you know probably present in the writings of these writers, these thinkers okay. To challenge familiar assumptions and familiar values in the vocabulary which in order to be easily readable is compelled to reproduce these assumptions and values.

You know is an impossibility. New concepts, new theories, necessitate new unfamiliar and therefore initially difficult terms. So if we are to challenge familiar assumptions, if we are to challenge no matter categories of knowledge of representation of existence, etc. There is almost imperative that we do so in a language which is new and unfamiliar according to Belsey and its newness for the unfamiliarity is part of the opacity package, part of the difficulty package.

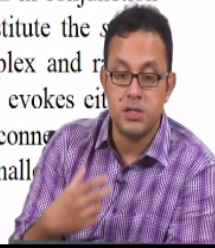
So it will appear difficult initially and its initial difficulty is an important step, is an important temporal condition. So you know what initially is also important, so when a fresh perspective when Avogadro artistic when a new kind of modality of representation is first comes into

being, then obviously you know what is highlighted as a newness and the unfamiliarity of it. And so the unfamiliarity becomes a part of the new package, part of the subversive package.

So the subversion comes along with the newness, comes along with the defamiliarization. So we have a new kind of equation at hand away, subversion and defamiliarization and both are aimed to us dissolving the normative categories of narrative, the normative categories of knowledge, etc. So new concepts, new theories, necessitate new unfamiliar and therefore initially difficult terms.

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For instance, I shall introduce the word *ideology* in a way which may be unfamiliar, associating it with common sense rather than with a set of doctrines or a coherent system of beliefs. My use of the term, derived from Althusser, assumes that ideology is not an optional extra, deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals ('Conservative party ideology', for instance), but the very condition of our experience of the world, *unconscious* precisely in that it is unquestioned, taken for granted. Ideology, in Althusser's use of the term, works in conjunction with political practice and economic practice to constitute the *formation*, a term designed to promote a more complex and radical analysis than the familiar term, 'society', which often evokes either a single homogeneous mass or, alternatively, a loosely connected group of autonomous individuals, and thus offers no challenge to the assumptions of common sense.



For instance, I shall introduce the word ideology in a way which may be unfamiliar, associating it with common sense rather than with a set of doctrines or a coherent system of beliefs. So ideology as we know by now is one of the most heavily used terms in cultural studies and critical theory. Now what Belsey does over here is that she draws attention to the banality of the word ideology.

So it is not really always a very subversive, very Avogadro, very grand intellectual kind of words. Ideology is something that is operated between the most banal conditions, even the most mundane conditions. So drawing attention to what ideology and making it opaque is something which should be a part of the deconstructionist process. And in critical theory if we are to deconstruct ideology.

If we are to deconstruct and debunk the myth of ideology then the word ideology should be used in all kinds of conditions not just an intellectual academic parlance but also equally biased more importantly in very mundane and very you know daily conditions of life.

So this is a bit of a funny example but if you go to YouTube you find there is a video by Slavoj Žižek who is exalter who will take up out of the completion of this book where Žižek talks about how ideology is operated even when you are doing something else, you know visceral and so doing something so mundane as you know going to a toilet. So even if you are going inside a toilet the way the toilet seats are constructed.

They are quite interestingly reflective of certain ideological constructs, certain ideological affiliations. So it talks about the difference in the toilet seats, the designer toilet seats if you are to go to France or in Germany or in England and that has some kind of an interesting reflection on certain ideological affiliations and ideological narratives at work. So what Žižek says on a video and it is very public you can look it up in YouTube.

Where he says quite clearly that you know ideology is not just when you are reading books, when you are giving a seminar paper or when you are doing racial profiling, ideology takes place even when he did something as mundane as going to a toilet and relieving yourself. The design of a toilet is also reflective of a certain kind of ideology and that being reflective of that kind of ideology you know hammers on the point.

The ideology is operative almost everywhere, it is operated in the way we think, the way we eat, dress, behave, socialize, etc. So even you know some very unconscious activities and activities were not conscious of that we just do it naturally is oftentimes a product or epiphenomenon of an internalization of ideology. So it is just an example of perfect internalization or clinically complete internalization that we do not question the presence of ideology in certain conditions.

We just consume it, we just taken for granted as something is already there you know unquestionably okay. So the word ideology is used by Belsey in a very similar kind of way and you know she is trying to talk about how you know if you made the word opaque, if we draw attention to the word ideology then obviously we will stop taking for granted. Then, the



entire transparency and easy internalization that comes with transparency and familiarity will be interrupted.

So in other words what opacity does is that it brings out a very interesting interruption and meaning production and meaning consumption. So the way we consume meaning the way we process meaning is interrupted when we come by opacity of language, when you know opacity becomes the condition of language in terms of how words of design, how language is constructed, how language is you know combined and permuted, etc.

So opacity it becomes part of the interruption mechanism which is of course part of the deconstructionist mechanism because then it opens up to prove possibilities the meaning rather than have monolineal kind of a meaning production whereby we use and produce meanings in a very familiar cleshay kind of a way. So opacity is defamiliarization, opacity is interruption and this interruption becomes a necessary condition in cultural studies especially if we are interested in subversion through deconstruction.

So you know this is what Belsey talks about when she says when she describes and mentions ideology as example of this. So for instance I shall introduce the word ideology in a way which may become, which may be unfamiliar associating it with common sense rather than with a set of doctrines or a coherent system of beliefs. The common sense becomes a very important category in Belsey's analysis.

And we find she spends a lot of time talking about common sense, how common sense can become a tyranny, how common sense can become a grand narrative in its own right and so this easy consumption of common sense and easy subscription to common sense becomes also a form of indoctrination to a grand narrative. So what is common sense?

Common sense is basically a practical wisdom, the most convenient form of knowledge production and knowledge consumption and if you are inside that particular normative network of knowledge which is common sense, then obviously you are part of the indoctrination process, you are indoctrinated, you are interpolated into that ideology of common sense.

But suppose you step out of here, you do something which is absurd that can sometimes become subversive in quality when you know you step out of the map of common sense, the landscape of common sense and enact a subversive act, enact a subversive you know iteration. You inscribe something, you know you iterate something, you cite something which becomes subversive in quality.

And we saw that in Butler's where you remember that you know when Butler talks about the drag, she mentions quite clearly that how the drag becomes anti common sense and how gender is part of the common sense mechanism of identity production, is very binaristic dualistic a kind of identity production you know where the most grand narrative is compulsory heterosexuality which then becomes part of the common sense package.

But common sense to Belsey is obviously a construct like realism, you know like so many other different kinds of grand narratives and we just consume the construct, we internalize the construct without questioning it, without questioning its constructed quality and that becomes a very important tool in critical studies, a question the constructed quality to unpack or expose the constructed quality of any grand narrative including common sense and realism.

So ideology operates, you know as associated with common sense and this association with common sense is something that Belsey was interested in and something Belsey is unpacking and highlighting in this particular section. So my use of the term, derived from Althusser, assumes that ideology is not an optional extra, deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals, conservative party ideology for example for instance.

But the very condition of our experience of the world unconsciously, precisely unconscious precisely and that is unquestioned to take it for granted. So again it is taken for granted status of ideology is something that you know Belsey is highlighting over here and she says quite clearly it is not ideology is not really something out there, something which is extra, something which is about an embellishment.

It is almost a biological organic form of consumption, a biological organic form of appropriation and you know internalization that we just do it as part of a condition of our experience of the world and it is unconscious internalization, unconscious process of subscription whereby we just take it for granted without questioning. Ideology, in Althusser's

use of the term works in conjunction with political practice and economic practice to constitute the social formation.

A term designed to promote a more complex and radical analysis than a familiar term society which often evokes either a single homogeneous mass or alternatively, a loosely connected group of autonomous individuals, and thus offers no challenge to the assumptions of common sense. So according to Althusser and obviously Belsey is drawing on Althusser quite heavily over here.

Ideology and common sense they become very important instruments of you know instruments of consensus which is imperative to as any kind of you know social formation. So social formation becomes a more complex category than society because that is how you know certain communities are formed and communities are formed because some kinds of consensus which are ideologically determined which are ideological governed.

So ideology and common sense far from being intellectual extra, far from being intellectual embellishments and is very vital processes, very vital components of existence or societies as individuals in society to the extent to which we subscribe to those ideologies and common sense and commonsensical ideologies one might say.

So the extent of our internalization, extent of our subscription, the extent of our conformity or confirmation to this ideological common sense or commonsensical ideology determines our location in a particular community. So our location of identity, the location of our particular individuality is dependent or rather one might say is over determined by subscription and internalization of that particular ideology in that particular point of time.

It is important to understand; it is important now that any ideology is context sensitive, any form of dominant discourse is context sensitive and another dominance and discursive quality, the change along with the times when the material coordinates change, when economy coordinates change, when the discursive coordinates change and then ideological flare, ideological color, ideological narrative also changes.

And you know again we are back to this very old theory that we have been talking about since the beginning of this course and that is this constant interplay between inside and

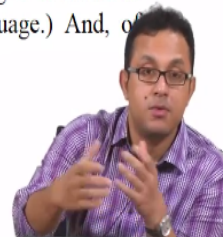
outside is constant dialogue between the inside and the outside, the brain and society, the brain the inside that is you as an individual, inward looking person and the person located in a particular material condition.

So the inside outside loop is highlighted here as well. So ideology becomes not just a discursive activity but also to some extent a biological activity depending on the extent of internalization. So if one internalizes powerfully then it becomes almost biological that to extent that is unconscious. You know you do not realize that you are ideologically over determined creature performing various micro acts or conformity in a particular society okay.

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Ideology is *inscribed in* language in the sense that it is literally written or spoken *in it*. Rather than a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of 'ideas' and is subsequently embodied in words, ideology is a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing. These usages will, I hope, become clear and familiar in the course of what follows.

The danger is that their unfamiliar vocabularies render the new theories inaccessible, or not worth the effort of learning to understand them. (Learning theory is much like learning a language.) And, of



And then Belsey goes on to say quite clearly that ideology is inscribed in language in the sense that it is literally written or spoken in it. So language is ideological as we all know, it is deeply ideological, so you know it is almost impossible to talk about language without its ideological affiliations, without its ideological subscriptions, without its discursive subscription.

So no language is ideology free, no language is discourse free or metadiscourse. So any form of language, any form of representation is ideological by default whether in terms of its conformity to a particular ideology or in terms of its subversion of that particular ideology. So rather than a separate element which exists independently in some free-floating realm of ideas and subsequently embodied in words, ideology is a way of thinking, speaking, experiencing.

This is a beautiful description especially the last word experiencing. So ideology becomes an experience, yeah it as an experiential quality of ideology and in addition remind us of Hawkins (( )) (25:49) that we studied the social construction of what when he talks about the danger that if we are looking at discourse is purely as constructs and not experiences then we end up being you know just hyper constructionists.

Intellectuals who are totally cut off from the reality of ideology even reality of discourses, so it is important for us understand the experiential component of discourses and ideology as well rather than just the constructed categories of knowledge. So ideology discourse has become experiential as well as discursive and a very asymmetric entanglement again one of my pet phrases which I have been using and showing at you.

Essentially, it is the reception of the course but it is handy phrase and should agree and that is this embeddedness of language and ideology is something that we must be aware of and this awareness comes only when we step out of it and only when we begin to question the constructed quality of language itself. The case so this is something that you know Belsey is very keen to highlight, very keen to communicate to us.

So language is not really a free-floating realm of ideas at all but rather language is a way of thinking, speaking and experiencing. So language becomes an experience, so ideology becomes an experience. So the entire ideological formation, the entire ideological affiliation becomes an experiential category not just intellectual category okay. So the danger is that the unfamiliar vocabularies render the new theories inaccessible, or not worth the effort of learning to understand them. Learning theory is like much like learning a language.

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course, the last resort of common sense is to dismiss as unnecessary 'jargon' any vocabulary which conflicts with its own. This is an effortless way of evading conceptual challenges, of course (and eliciting reassuring sneers), but it negates the repeated liberal-humanist claim to open-mindedness and pluralism. Of course jargon exists, but from a perspective in which ideology is held to be inscribed in language, so that no linguistic forms are ideologically innocent or neutral, it follows that terms cannot be seen as unnecessary simply on the basis that they are new. To resist all linguistic innovation is by implication to claim that we already know all we need to know.



And of course the last resort of common sense is to dismiss as unnecessary jargon, any vocabulary which conflicts with its own. This is an effortless way of evading conceptual challenges, of course and eliciting reassuring sneers but it negates the repeated liberal humanist claim to open-mindedness and pluralism. Of course, jargon exists, but from a perspective in which ideology is held to be inscribed in language.

So that no linguistic forms are ideologically innocent or neutral, it follows that terms cannot be seen as unnecessary simply on the basis that they are new. To resist all linguistic innovation is by implication to claim that we already know all we need to know. So what Belsey is saying over here is a dogma of common sense, the dogma of the totalitarian common sense which appears you know everything.

And so the jargon of literary theory, the jargon of you know this kind of new language, it is a new language and that is oftentimes dismissed from the perspective of common sense saying it is not really commonsensical at all, does not make sense from a commonsensical perspective and this dismissal according to Belsey is very discursive dismissal because what this dismissal ensures is that is no subversion to common sense.

There is no subversion to this ideologically you know dogmatic language which appears to be non-ideological. Now this new language is overtly ideological, this new language is overtly discursive and in that over to discursivity and is overtly ideological quality, it appears to be opaque. So the opacity is part of the overtness right, but what that does? This opacity and overtness what it does is that it highlights how language is always discursive in quality.

Language is always ideological in quality you know this quality which is hidden by common sense, hidden by realism, etc. So obviously you know it takes a rocket scientist to believe to understand that how this kind of new language, this kind of new theoretical language would be anathema to common sense or commonsensical ideological formation and so the very convenient attack against these languages would be to say that they are non-commonsensical in quality.

But that is precisely the point because they are directed against common sense and they are designed to be directed against common sense. So as you can see Belsey says quite clearly that no language, no linguistic forms are ideologically innocent or neutral. So we cannot really have a neutral ideological kind of language or an ideology free language as I just said. Every activity in language, every activity in representation is an ideological activity, is a discursive activity.

And what Belsey just highlighted before and that is this discursivity or this ideological quality is not just a socially constructed text, is also a real experience, is also a phenomenal experience, is something which we experience with our bodies, with our brains, with the systems, with the nervous systems and that is something which is now which should be kept in mind. This constant entanglement between experientiality.

And textuality is not really just a text or neither is just an experience but it is a very important combination of experientiality and textuality and that is something that hacking at wonders, hacking at very highlighted, very judiciously I think and that is something that Belsey seems to be saying here as well. So with that we conclude the opening section, we conclude the opening lecture on Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice.

And hopefully we will have one more lecture after this. We will finish with this text and then we move on to the final text of our course when we were waiting for a long time to come to you that is Slavoj Zizek's welcome to the desert of the real but for now we end with Catherine Belsey's opening lecture on Critical Practice and we have one more lecture on this book in the next session. Thank you for your attention.