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Highmore, Ben (2006) *Michel de Certeau. Analysing Culture*. London and New York: Continuum. ISBN: 0-8264-6073-9 (paperback). xii + 188 pp. RRP: £18.99.

The book title could be misleading: this is not a biography, or an intellectual biography, or even an introduction to Michel de Certeau's work. It is, however, something far more interesting: a book that takes his work as a point of departure for discussing key methodological questions for the study of culture. In this sense, the book is not a roadmap to de Certeau's work, rather it maps a road from it. Even though he conceives of it as a contribution for re-imagining Cultural Studies, I'll argue that Ben Highmore's latest book is in fact an important contribution to contemporary epistemological debates in the social sciences, particularly around the possibilities of a post-positivist empiricism.

Each of the chapters introduces a *field* in which de Certeau's texts come into fruitful dialogue with other authors and disciplines. In a rare achievement, the book manages to simultaneously stay close to de Certeau's writings without being constrained by them. Besides the introduction and conclusion, the themes tackled are the necessary rhetorical condition of history as text (ch. 2); the psychoanalytic aspects of de Certeau's work, particularly as a practice of listening (ch. 3); writing history from subjugated standpoints and allowing the 'zones of silence' to emerge (ch. 4); the relevance of narrative for writing better accounts of culture (ch. 5); and the way de Certeau's approach is aimed at social ends, including his policy-related work (ch. 6). Each of these chapters is somewhat autonomous, but they inform each other creating a coherent whole. Highmore's writing is fluid, unadorned, precise. The book's stated progression 'from the past to the present, from epistemological problematics to a politics of hope, from abstractions to practices' (p. 19) is indeed very well managed. However, I won't reproduce it here. Instead, I'll cut through the text taking the questions issued in the introduction as a guide.

Highmore suggests that studying Michel de Certeau is studying 'inventive (and hopeful) methodologies in the face of epistemological doubt... an ethical demand to go beyond critique, to offer substantive accounts of the world that are more inclusive, more attentive, more responsive to an alterity at the heart of culture' (p. xi). This strong

methodological orientation is one of the book's main contributions and one that in many ways distinguishes it from other monographies dedicated to de Certeau published in English (Ahearne, 1995; Buchanan, 2000; Ward, 2000). De Certeau's engagement with getting closer to the world in order to change it for the better could be linked to Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers or Donna Haraway. In fact, his "science of singularity" is akin to much of STS' program: a science committed to specific, located objects that are allowed to exist in all their complexity, heterogeneity and alterity. As Highmore states, this requires two operations: the first is redefining the relationship with theory, which ceases to be a framework to be applied; the second is mobilising all means necessary for producing better accounts of such a wild object. These are the two themes that guide my reading through the book.

The 'logic of the *application*' of ready made concepts or theories is one form of pacification of the 'sheer alterity of objects' de Certeau contests. Against this method of contention, an *alteration* is necessary: 'to let the object bite back, to de-pacify the object, what is required is a disrupted and disrupting form of attention; a derailing of observation' (p. 7). Highmore defines De Certeau's 'letting go' of theory as parallel to Freud's refusal to offer a general interpretation of dreams, and his study of the *logics* of dreaming instead. It is not about developing an overarching framework, but a vocabulary that can deal with the *operations* taking place. But there's a second, even more important aspect of De Certeau's methodology rooted in psychoanalytic practice: the active listening. 'The sound of the other needs to *alter* the disposition of the hearer: remain the same and you will miss what is being said' (p. 69).

Under Highmore's conduction, De Certeau's work invites us to see the object outside the frame already made for it, which in turn leads to a permanent experimentation of better ways of telling and describing. Here the literary condition of knowledge is not opposed to its objectivity, but is its condition of possibility. De Certeau 'epistemological awakening' recasts the 'poetic condition of historiography as the very condition of its claim to objectivity... The 'being literary' of history is not the most damning indictment that can be levelled at it, rather it is its most challenging potential for knowing the past' (p. 29). Or as Latour has said: 'we don't have to abandon the traditional goal of reaching objectivity simply because we consider with great care the heavy textual machinery. Our texts, like those of our fellow scientists, run the parallel course of being artificial *and* accurate: all the more accurate *because* they are artificial' (2005: 124). In fact, Latour acknowledges the convergence of their projects in a

footnote at the end of *Laboratory Life*: ‘De Certeau once said (pers. com.), “There can only be a science of science-fiction.” Our discussion is a first tentative step towards making clear the link between science and literature’ (Latour/Woolgar, 1986: 261).

To illustrate this search for ‘better ways of making contact with the actual, the real’ (p. 118), Highmore brings in the work of, among others, Margerite Duras, Marin Duberman and Samuel Delany. They too experiment with strategies for writing histories ‘in the name of those left out of the dominant accounts’, histories of/from various ‘zones of silence’, which make the absences speak –without effacing their silenced condition. We’re as far from a naïf positivist naturalism as from idle postmodern textualism. It is this point that draws methodology and ethics (or politics) very close. The work from subjugated standpoints, the work with the silenced, the proliferation of heterogeneity, the embracement of alterity cannot but define the analyst’s responsibility as that of literally *responding* to the other. In this sense, de Certeau’s uncompromised cultural policy work becomes particularly relevant aimed as it was at ‘fashioning spaces more hospitable to the voices of others’, ‘where otherness and heterogeneity could proliferate’, ‘uncontrolled and deregulated’, ‘allowing alterations to occur so that a home culture can be *remade* in response to the other’ (p. 160). Here the methodological engagement with *singularity* becomes a politics of *multiplicity*.

The ‘science of singularity’ *Michel de Certeau* pursues clearly escapes the boundaries of Cultural Studies. In this sense, I think that even if the question Highmore poses in the introduction and retakes in the conclusion might be of certain interest (‘what would cultural studies look like if it decided to engage with the work of Michel de Certeau?’), it is nonetheless the kind of disciplinary concern that de Certeau’s work (and Highmore’s engagement with it) invites not to take too much concern about. In other words, Highmore’s own account of de Certeau’s work ‘bites back’ at him and breaks away from the Cultural Studies frame prepared for it.

References

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