

Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: An Overview, by Jeffrey Di Leo

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In *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: An Overview* (2023), Jeffrey R. Di Leo admirably performs the dual tasks of outlining the older territory of theory and mapping out more recent trends. He does not merely describe each school of thought or theory but develops a critical conversation tying them together in a sustained argument always tightly focused on theory (in all its senses). In his introduction, besides usefully outlining eight ways of viewing theory, he makes use of the vivid, extended metaphor of his book introducing a visitor to the various neighbourhoods of the city of literary theory. He does so in 15 chapters, each covering five areas in each neighbourhood. Di Leo points out how some people prefer to stay in specific neighbourhoods, while others embrace the whole city, and still others avoid the city altogether. His overview is comprehensive although not exhaustive, which is understandable given the constraints of a 460-page book. There is no chapter dedicated to Reception Theory nor a section to the concept of performativity, both of which are mentioned only in passing. I would have liked to see a critical discussion of the differences between performance and performativity, as these concepts are often confused or conflated.

The book is lucidly written and has a helpful table of contents, index, and bibliography (itself 26 pages long). The structure of the table of contents is itself an impressive achievement as it helps to make sense of theory's bigger picture. To use Di Leo's metaphor, it is a useful map of the city of literary theory helping not just to demarcate zones but to show interconnections and contiguous areas. The book includes more established neighbourhoods such as Marxism and Psychoanalytic Theory, but also "hotter" areas like Race and Justice, Globalisation, Affect Studies, Ecocriticism, Pop Culture, Biopolitics and Posthumanism. Besides Cultural Studies and Media Studies,

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the chapter titled “Pop Culture” includes sections on Sound Studies, Gaming and Celebrity Studies, making it very topical. Di Leo’s explorations of Cognitive Studies and Systems Theory in Posthumanism are particularly interesting, as they decentre the human subject as effectively as any Structuralist or Poststructuralist approach. Besides pointing out connections within chapters between different schools of thought, Di Leo also maps interconnections between different chapters as he develops his argument. The concluding chapter “Against Theory” aptly includes sections on Antitheory, Posttheory, Object-Oriented Ontologies, Postcritique and *new* New Criticism, which permits a higher-order and critical reflection on theory itself.

No doubt, owing to the large scope of the book, one is bound to find some omissions or simplifications. For instance, several important Marxist and Feminist theorists are omitted or mentioned only in passing. One example of simplification is Di Leo’s presenting Žižek’s critique of happiness as something novel, whereas it has been thoroughly critiqued before, not least by the philosopher Schopenhauer. Nor does Di Leo present a proper justification for Žižek’s unusual use of Freud’s concept of the death drive. Furthermore, in the section on Animal Studies in the chapter on Posthumanism, Di Leo appears to associate the concept of “interests” with the animal rights position, whereas the concept is central to Peter Singer’s arguments, who, as a utilitarian, explicitly and pointedly rejects the concept of “rights,” preferring the term “interests.” The section on Materialism in Affect Studies seems overly philosophical and its relevance to literary or cultural studies is not at all clear.

In his introduction, Di Leo states that he aims to be as neutral as possible in his presentation of the various theories and schools of thought, although he admits that this is not completely possible, if only because later theories often emerged from the weaknesses of preceding ones. However, despite his stated theoretical pluralism, he does appear to favour the Poststructuralists Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, even as he points out that the theoretical positions containing the word “Studies” developed partly as a rejection of the “High Theory” of Structuralism and Poststructuralism. In this regard, he could have mentioned the work of Postcolonial theorists like Neil Lazarus (2011) and the work of Decolonial theorists, both of whom reject the Poststructuralist turn of the 1990s and promote a return to a more “committed” Marxist approach.

Despite the omissions and apparent simplifications, the scope of Di Leo’s book is vast and the depth of his knowledge profound. His critical argument is always lucid and engaging. The book achieves what Di Leo set out to do: provide a useful and illuminating map of the city of literary theory and cultural studies. Thanks to the structure of the table of contents and the substantial bibliography, he provides plenty of signposts for readers to explore further any avenue that interests them. His book also serves as a work of reference. I can recommend it both to established literary theorists and to students of literature, literary theory, and cultural studies who are being

introduced to theory for the first time. This book will serve them well as a guide to the endlessly fascinating and developing city of literary theory.

References

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<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511902628>