Kathryn Atherton

Reading Record

Herbert Marcuse

The Closing of the Universe of Discourse

from *One-Dimensional Man*

Response:

In reading this chapter, I was reminded of my professor who told me at the beginning of the semester that “words are vague”, which he implied is not a good thing. Here, Marcuse is arguing the exact opposite; the vagueness of words allows for more creativity and critical, theoretical thinking. Creating strict meanings for words just positively reinforces circular societal thinking.

Discussion Question:

How has making language more concrete rather than conceptual affected gender roles in society (i.e. the concept of a firefighter is genderless, but the image of a firefighter is more often male)?

Outline of Argument:

* Introduction (84-85)
  + Quote from Roland Barthes (84)
  + Happiness of people reflects power society holds (84-85)
* The Language of Total Administration (85-104)
  + Communication shaped by media/the system (85)
  + There is no questioning what is; things just are (85)
  + Colloquialisms more creative (86)
  + But “higher” society (i.e. government, business, etc.) is very traditional in speech (86)
  + Standardization of meaning = no genuine meaning (87)
    - Making language functional closes interpretation of meaning
    - Brainwashed into thinking about meaning (*1984* 2+2=5?)
    - Unable to contradict meaning (88)
    - Reference to George Orwell (*1984*)
  + Now people beginning to accept meanings given to things (89)
  + Commercialized language joining opposite ideas (90)
  + Unification of opposites makes protesting impossible (90)
  + Capitalism based on simple ideas that everyone identifies to sell (91)
    - Relating to people of all backgrounds (91)
    - Personalization - directed to you and you alone (92)
  + Descriptions of people, hyphenations force everything together (93)
    - Hyphenating creates intimidating descriptions, more productive (94)
  + Abbreviations make you forget what things actually mean, not question them (94)
  + Concrete thing = function (95)
    - Images over concepts
  + Grammatical philosophy: noun can enter into relationships, but is not defined by relationships (96)
  + Rational language is not critical (97)
  + Suppressing dimension of thought suppresses history and change (97)
  + Recognize the past, history linked to memory (98)
    - Recognizing the past in the present (99)
  + Contradictions in one word’s meaning is due to historical context and present context (100)
  + Societal requirements prevent room for gray areas and talking about gray areas in meanings (101)
    - No explanation, just commanding (101)
    - Condemns opposition (102)
  + Politics language = advertising language (103)
* The Research of Total Administration (104-120)
  + Although there is freedom of speech/thought, no threat to society because “thought” is defined differently (104)
  + Concept
    - Mental definition of things (105)
    - Thought to be identical to thing itself (105)
    - More abstract, more than as we experience it (106)
    - “Transitive meaning”: beyond facts, destroys society (106)
    - “Excess” of meaning: shows what is limited by society (106)
    - People adapt concepts to what society wants - political (107)
  + Example: labor relations (108)
    - Workers complaints are vague (109)
    - Interpretation of vagueness led to productive changes (109)
    - General goes beyond specific incident, seems universal (110)
      * Concrete for one person, but not real (110)
    - Complaints not universal unhappiness, but specific; less want to oppose managers (111)
    - Translation changes “transitiveness” of complaints (112)
    - Preserve existing norms (114)
  + Example: democracy
    - Analysis of democracy locked in the box created by the researchers’ criteria (114-115)
    - Definition of democracy: “ideological rigidity” prevents true evaluation of a democracy (116-117)
    - Can only evaluate based on democracy that is established, not theoretical (118)
      * Circular thinking
    - Operational: facts not clearly described, analysis incomplete (119)
    - operational/functional thinking = self-fulfilling prophecy (120)