

→ INTRODUCING

CRITICAL THEORY

A GRAPHIC GUIDE



STUART SIM & BORIN VAN LOON

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CRITICAL THEORY

STUART SIM & BORIN VAN LOON



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Contents

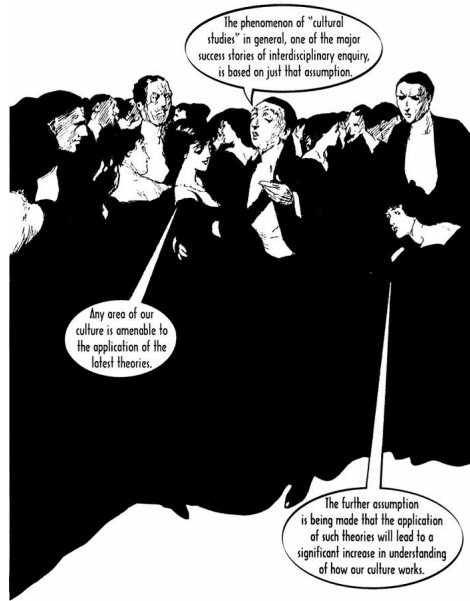
- Cover
- Title Page
- Copyright
- The Theory of Everything
- The Grand Narrative of Marxism
- The Politics of Criticism
- The Synthetic or Magpie Approach
- Bringing Theory to the Surface
- Hidden Agendas and Ideologies
- Theoretical Reflexivity
- Science Studies: the Paradigm Model
- Postmodernism and Science
- The Sokal Scandal
- In Defence of Big Science
- Origins of Marxism
- Absolute Spirit: the Logic of History
- The Communist Manifesto
- Infra- and Super-structures
- Economic Determinism
- The Hidden Text
- Mapping the Origins of Critical Theory
- Reflection Theory
- Zhdanovite Socialist Realism
- The Battle for Class Consciousness
- Lukácsian Theories of the Novel
- A Critical Realist View of Alienation
- The Theory of Hegemony
- Cultural Criticism
- The Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory
- The Progress of Irrationalism
- One-dimensional or “Non-oppositional” Society
- The Alternative or “New Left”
- The Politics of Avant-garde Art
- Against Totality – and Totalitarianism
- Theory of the Aura
- In Combat with Tradition
- Brecht’s Epic Theatre
- Russian Formalism
- The Grammar of Narrative
- Shklovsky’s Defamiliarization
- Bakhtin’s Plural or Dialogic Meanings
- Intertextuality or Heteroglossia
- Jakobson’s Semiotic Linguistics
- The Psychoanalytic Unconscious
- Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory
- Structuralism and Critical Theory
- What is Structuralism?
- The Structuralist Unconscious
- Lacan and Structuralist Psychoanalysis
- Lacan’s Imaginary and Symbolic Realms
- Barthes and the Empire of Signs
- The Common Structure of Narratives
- The Death of the Author
- Readerly versus Writerly Texts

The “Death of Man”
Intertextuality and the Symbolic Order
Eco’s Labyrinth
The Structuralist Marxism of Althusser
Structuralist Marxism and Literary Criticism
Genetic Structuralism
Reader-Response Theory
Poststructuralism: the Breakdown of Sign-Systems
Poststructuralist Deconstruction
Différance and Meaning
Deconstructing “Binary Oppositions”
The Order of Things
The Rise of Scientific Discipline
Uncovering the Hidden Discourse
The End of Humanism
Lyotard’s “Differends”
The Postmodern Condition
Postmodern Science
Scientific Narrative and Relativism
The Enlightenment, “Unfinished Project”
The Problem of Value Judgement
Paganism or Benthamism
Postmodernism in the Service of Capitalism
The “Case-by-Case” Event
Techno-science and the human
A Feminist Response to the Inhuman
The Sociology of Seduction
Against the Marxist Fetishism of Production
A World of Hyperreal Simulacra
Disneyworld America
When Did Postmodernism Begin?
The Double-Coding of Postmodernism
Postmodern Pastiche and Irony
Anti-Oedipus and Schizoanalysis
Anti-Oedipal Networks of Communication
Stay Sane – Keep Moving
Post-Marxism: The Breakdown of Marxism
A Post-Marxist Answer to Capitalism
The Failures of Marxian Theory
Beyond Doctrinaire Marxism
The Spectre of Marx
A Plural Marx
The “End of History”
Our Complicity in Ideology
The New Historicism
Cultural Materialism
A Politicized Shakespeare
The Theory of Postcolonialism
Fanon’s Anti-Colonialism
Poststructuralist Hybridity
Subaltern Studies
Theory as Sexual Politics
A Feminist Literary Canon
Feminism and Marxism
Post-Marxist Feminism
The Theory of Gynocriticism
Against Patriarchy
The Surplus Woman

- Against the Male Canon
- “Heroinism” in Women’s Literature
- French Feminism: *écriture féminine*
- The Undecidable of *écriture féminine*
- Does Difference Lead to Separatism?
- Two Champions of Modern Feminism
- Postfeminism and Positive Womanhood
- A Parallel with Post-Marxism
- Queer Theory and Sexual Identity
- Black Criticism
- Black Feminist Criticism
- Theory is Power
- Critical Theory and a Pluralist World
- Further Reading
- Glossary
- Index

The Theory of Everything

Theory has become one of the great growth areas in cultural analysis and academic life over the last few decades. It is now taken for granted that theoretical tools can be applied to the study of, for example, texts, societies, or gender relations.



The Grand Narrative of Marxism

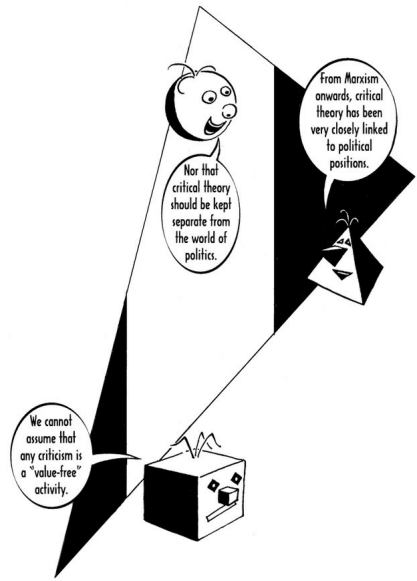
The motivation for this development can be traced back to the rise of Marxism. **Karl Marx** (1818–83) and his followers bequeathed us an all-embracing theory, or “grand narrative” as it is more commonly referred to nowadays.



Entire cultures can be put under the microscope of Marxist theory. It forms a paradigm of the way in which any critical theory in general works. Cultural artefacts are tested against the given projection of the world as it is, or should be, constructed.

The Politics of Criticism

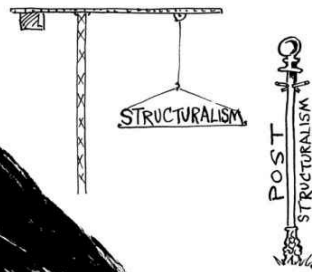
One criticism levelled against critical theory says that it is an “alternative metaphysics”, promoting a particular world view, and, at least implicitly, a particular politics. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such a procedure, as long as it is made clear what that metaphysics entails. What is it trying to achieve? One can then accept or reject its programme.



A great deal of its value stems from its ability to remain politically engaged. Being critical is being political: it represents an intervention into a much wider debate than the aesthetic alone, and that is surely something to be encouraged. We live in politically interesting times, after all.

The Synthetic or Magpie Approach

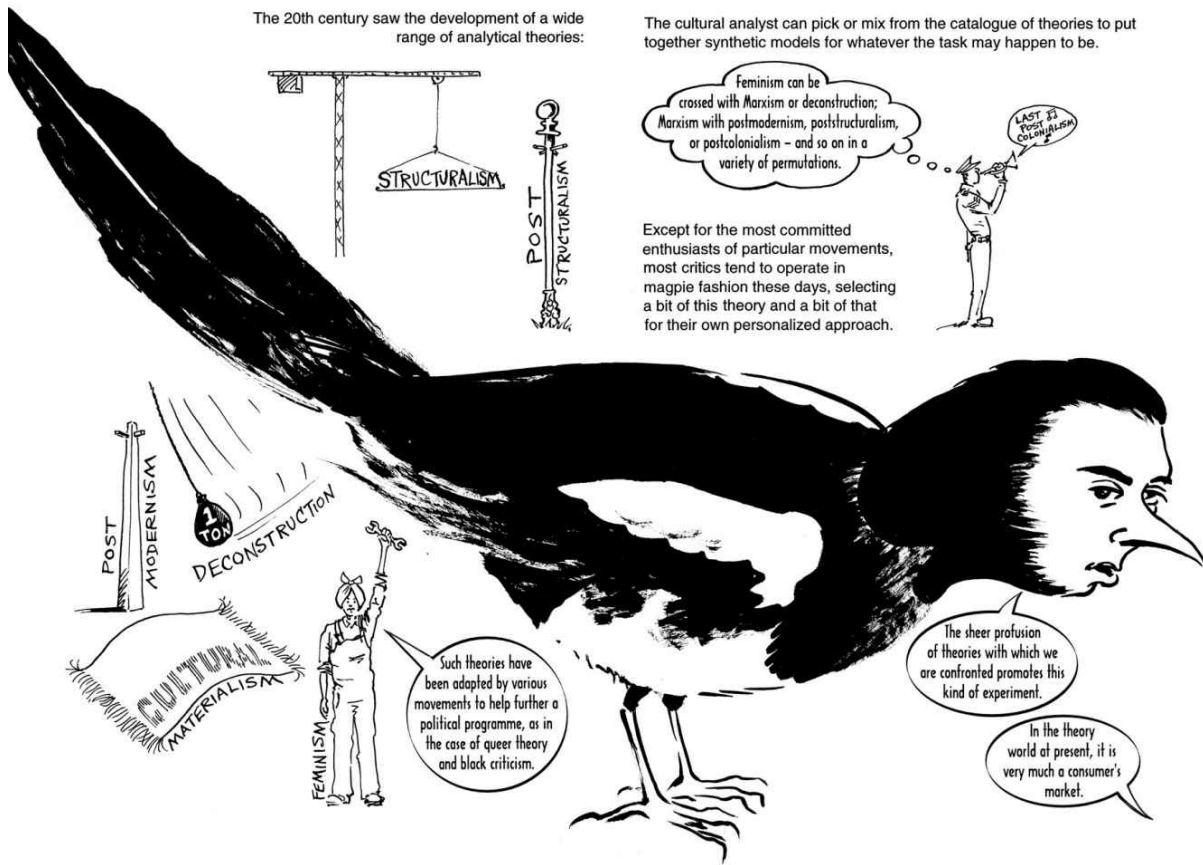
The 20th century saw the development of a wide range of analytical theories:



The cultural analyst can pick or mix from the catalogue of theories to put together synthetic models for whatever the task may happen to be.

Feminism can be crossed with Marxism or deconstruction; Marxism with postmodernism, poststructuralism, or postcolonialism - and so on in a variety of permutations.

Except for the most committed enthusiasts of particular movements, most critics tend to operate in magpie fashion these days, selecting a bit of this theory and a bit of that for their own personalized approach.



Such theories have been adopted by various movements to help further a political programme, as in the case of queer theory and black criticism.

The sheer profusion of theories with which we are confronted promotes this kind of experiment.

In the theory world at present, it is very much a consumer's market.

Bringing Theory to the Surface

To be a critic now, especially in academic life, is also to be a theorist – as any student in the humanities and social sciences will be only too painfully aware.



How we arrive at value judgements, and, indeed, whether we **can** arrive at value judgements, are now at least as important considerations as **what** the actual value judgements themselves are.

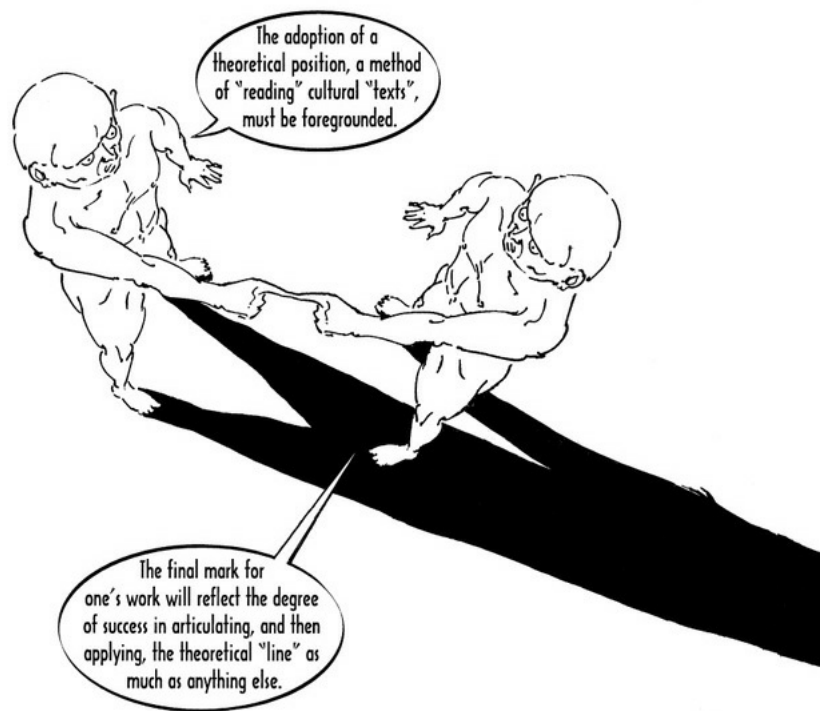
Hidden Agendas and Ideologies

Of course, theories have always operated “under the surface”, prior to the development of the term “critical theory” itself, but they were generally implicit rather than explicit.



Theoretical Reflexivity

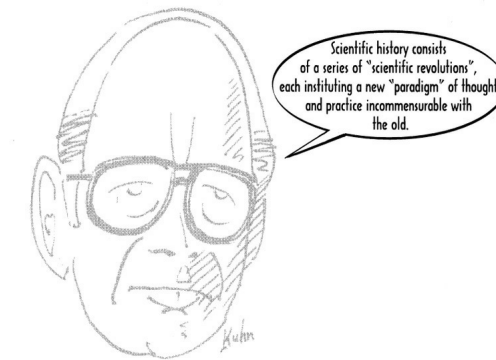
Self-consciousness, or “reflexivity” as we now call it, in the application of theory is what defines the current state of play in the various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. A student preparing a dissertation or thesis will normally be advised to outline the theoretical model being used, first of all, before going on to undertake the actual task of analysis itself.



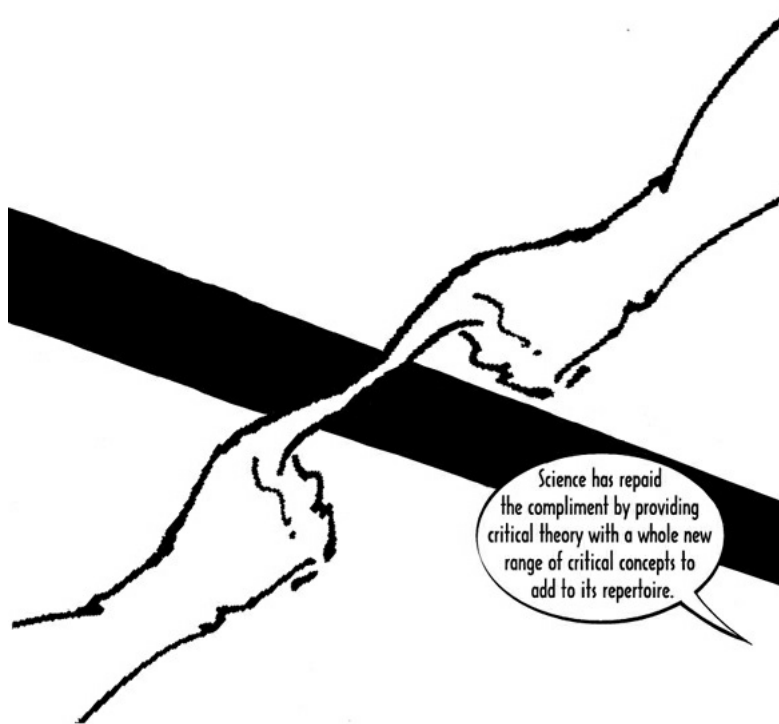
The last thing one wants to be accused of in such situations is being “undertheorized” – that way, low marks lie. The successful student in higher education reaches theoretically-informed conclusions in essays and exams, and can show precisely how the theory informed those conclusions.

Science Studies: the Paradigm Model

But it is not only in the humanities and social sciences that critical theory is deployed. Even the hard sciences have been infiltrated to some extent. Science as a social phenomenon is most certainly a target for critical theory. One well-known founder of “science studies” is the historian and philosopher of science **Thomas Kuhn** (b. 1922).



Like any other social activity, science is a legitimate topic for the critical theorist to explore.



Postmodernism and Science

Postmodernism and poststructuralism, for example, have drawn freely on recent developments in physics to reinforce their world-view, with its emphasis on undecidability, gaps in our knowledge, the pervasive factor of difference and the limitations of our understanding.

Quantum mechanics, chaos theory and complexity theory, in particular, constitute extremely fruitful sources of examples that seem to confirm postmodern "relativism". These sciences suggest that the material world is far less stable, or predictable, than we have traditionally assumed it to be.

Science and critical theory seem in this case to be mutually supportive – but all is not well in this relationship.

The Sokal Scandal

In 1996, an article by **Alan Sokal** (b. 1955), a professor of physics at New York University, appeared in the respected critical theory journal *Social Text*. This article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", arguing for a postmodern "liberatory" science,

proposed an extreme relativism that was clearly lunatic. Sokal had concocted a deliberate hoax, but the journal editors accepted it as serious research.

For instance, I suggest that pi (π) isn't constant and universal but relative to the position of an observer, and is therefore subject to "ineluctable historicity" ...

... that really should have alerted the suspicions of anyone responsibly competent!

Sokal at once revealed his hoax to the press and the scandal became international front-page news. What was Sokal trying to do?



In Defence of Big Science

Sokal tells us in a book published with Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (1997). The hoax served to expose the pretentious and amateurish misuse of recent physics by leading French theorists, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Kristeva. Sokal provided deadly ammunition to the fundamentalists of "Big Science" who reject any hint that science might be "socially constructed".

The notion of a "postmodern science" is entirely illicit.



MARXISM

A Theory For All Seasons

Misappropriations of scientific concepts have occurred in critical theory, that's true; but is it also true, as Big Science defenders argue, that postmodern theorists are deeply hostile to genuine scientific methods and progress itself?

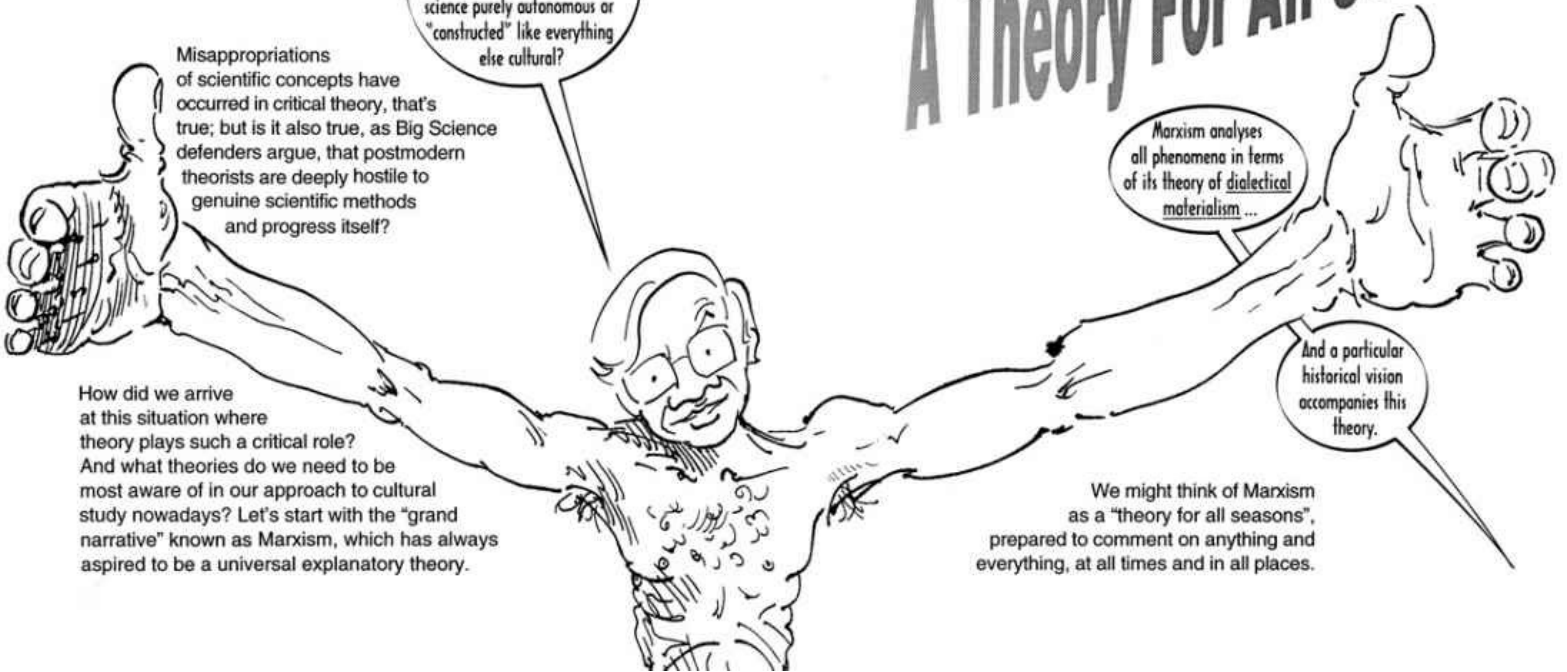
Science cannot be appropriated to the relativist views of critical theory. The issue remains - is science purely autonomous or "constructed" like everything else cultural?

How did we arrive at this situation where theory plays such a critical role? And what theories do we need to be most aware of in our approach to cultural study nowadays? Let's start with the "grand narrative" known as Marxism, which has always aspired to be a universal explanatory theory.

Marxism analyses all phenomena in terms of its theory of dialectical materialism ...

And a particular historical vision accompanies this theory.

We might think of Marxism as a "theory for all seasons", prepared to comment on anything and everything, at all times and in all places.



Origins of Marxism

The immediate source of Marxian dialectical materialism is found in the idealist philosophy of **G.W.F. Hegel** (1770–1831). Hegel enriched theory with the crucial term, **alienation**, which explains the interrelation of **logic** to **history**. In logic, it specifies the contradiction latent in all thinking, meaning that one idea will inevitably provoke its opposite. Hegel’s aim was to resolve this in and by **consciousness** itself ...



Alienation in this scheme is **dialectical**, that is, the inadequacy of one form of consciousness turns into another, again and again, until a “proper science” is achieved.

Absolute Spirit: the Logic of History

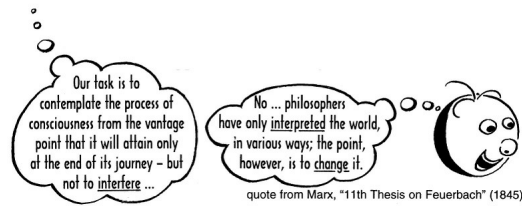
Alienation is a process by which mind – as the consciousness of a subject (*thesis*) – becomes an object of thought for itself (*antithesis*). And thereby the human mind constantly progresses to the next higher stage of synthesis and self-consciousness.



History is the journey of the “World Spirit” in its progress through a series of stages until it reaches the highest form of self-realization, **Absolute Spirit**. That form had been attained in Hegel’s view by the Prussian state in which he served as a public official (i.e. as professor of philosophy at the University of Berlin.)

The Communist Manifesto

Hegel's dialectic is idealist. Marx gave it a materialist foundation, that is, he shifted alienation away from “mind contemplating itself” to the **class struggle** as the real history of consciousness in progress.

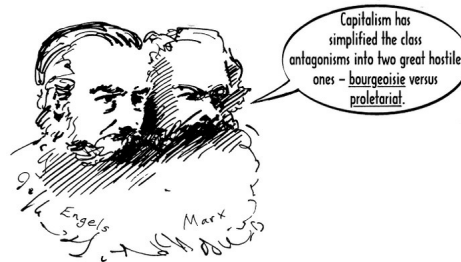


The realization of philosophy – literally its *end* – is for Marx the defeat of bourgeois capitalism by the industrial working class, and the establishment of a Communist society which finally abolishes the “latent contradiction” of exploiter and exploited.



And this is the programme that Marx sets out in
The Communist Manifesto (1848).

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

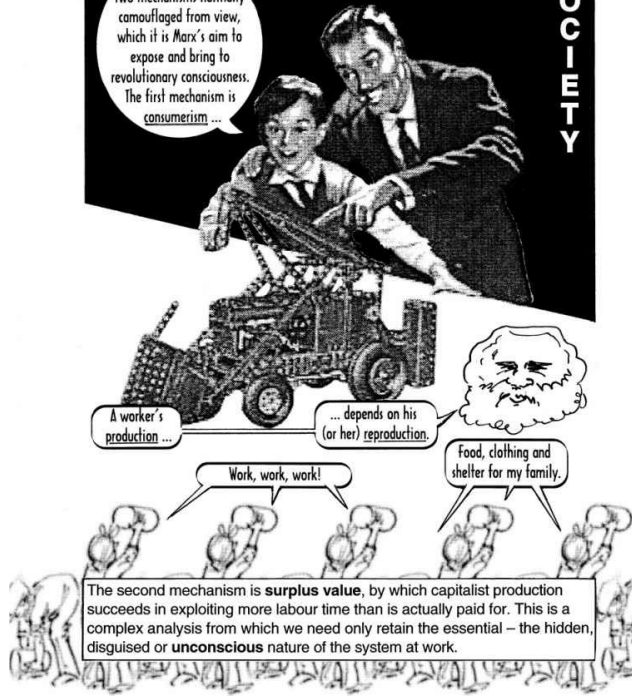


The struggle is reduced to the **private** ownership of the means of production versus the workers who **sell** their labour to this capitalist system of production.

THE HIDDEN MECHANISMS OF SOCIETY

How does capitalism "work"? The real (dialectical) question for Marx is: how does it reproduce and maintain itself?

The answer is: by two mechanisms normally camouflaged from view, which it is Marx's aim to expose and bring to revolutionary consciousness. The first mechanism is consumerism ...



A worker's production ...

... depends on his (or her) reproduction.

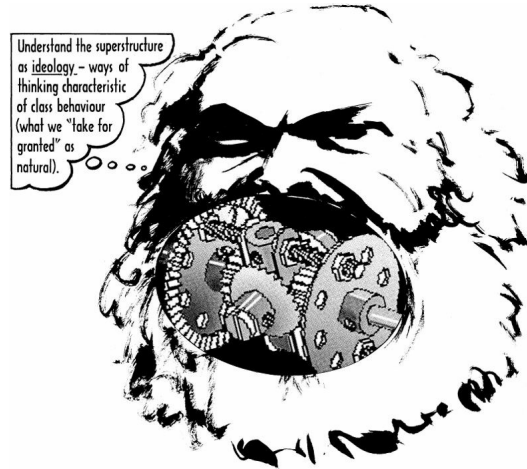
Food, clothing and shelter for my family.

Work, work, work!

The second mechanism is **surplus value**, by which capitalist production succeeds in exploiting more labour time than is actually paid for. This is a complex analysis from which we need only retain the essential – the hidden, disguised or **unconscious** nature of the system at work.

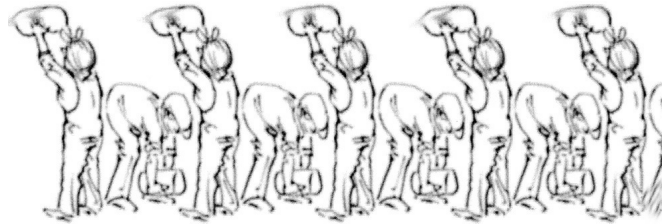
Infra- and Super-structures

There is a third hidden structure which is general and fundamental to all societies, including the capitalist. Society always consists of an economic base or **infrastructure**, and a **superstructure**. The superstructure comprises everything *cultural* – religion, politics, law, education, the arts, etc. – which is determined by a specific economy (slave-based, feudal, mercantile, capitalist etc.).



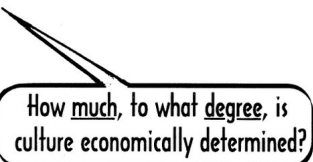
What ideology is literally *based* on is the economic infrastructure – the means by which it **produces** itself, its wealth, and who **owns** those means of production.

Once again, we notice Marx's critical insistence on the hidden: religion, politics, law, etc. – everything cultural that we "live by" – disguises and renders perfectly natural an economic means of production that is unnatural.



Economic Determinism

In the strict, or what is often called the “crude”, view of Marxism, the ideologies of culture (like art) are by-products determined by the economic base.



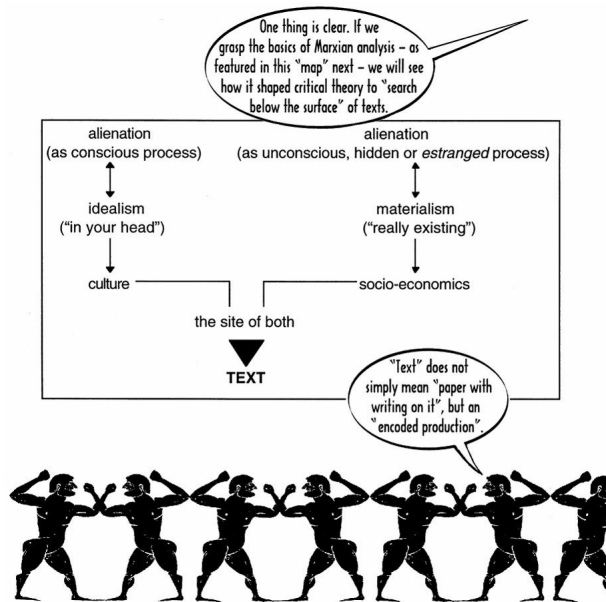
How much, to what degree, is culture economically determined?

This has been a considerable source of debate in Marxist circles. Some theorists conjecture that certain activities in the superstructure – most notably the arts – might have a “relative autonomy” from the base.



But what exactly does “relative autonomy” or “in the last instance” mean? Such debates in critical theory are important in deciding whether or not we can simply “read off” events in the superstructure from events in the economic infrastructure.

The Hidden Text

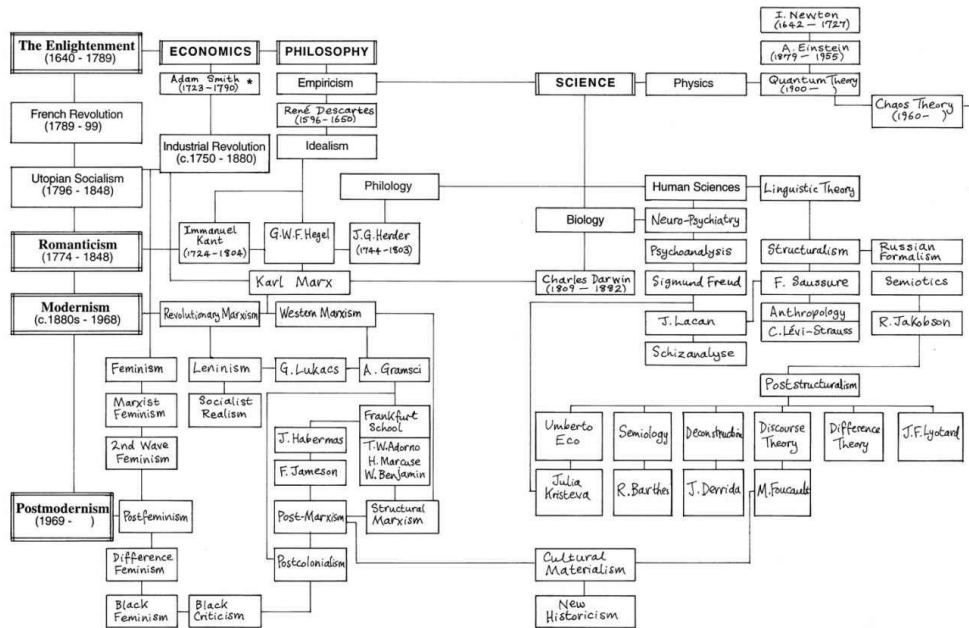


Note, first, that Marx gave a new meaning to alienation – not as the Hegelian process of self-consciousness but as an unconscious **estrangement** from oneself determined by one’s class condition (= false consciousness).

The inheritances of Marxism in critical theory are:

1. Tension of idealism versus materialism (the autonomy versus social construction of a text).
2. A hidden or camouflaged unconscious.
3. Interventionism: a sense that critical theory *can* make a difference.

Mapping the Origins of Critical Theory



* Single names given in the table are 'representative figures'



...Marxism has managed to generate several distinct and opposed schools of critical theory. The question of how economic base and superstructure interact is often at the root of such disagreements.



Often criticized for its academic bias, Western Marxism (which has many variants) has evinced a particular interest in the superstructure, most notably the arts. In its earliest pre-Western Marxist form, however, Marxist critical theory tended to assume that everything that happened in the superstructure, including the arts, was a mere reflection of what happened in the base.

Reflection Theory

The work of the Russian aesthete **Georgi Plekhanov** (1856–1918) is a good example of crude reflectionism. For Plekhanov, art was a recorder of social developments. By examining the art of a given period, we could pin down that period’s ideological character also. This meant that we could indeed “read off” the ideology from the art. If the art was decadent, then it must have been the product of socio-political decadence: a *direct reflection* of it, in fact.



From such a perspective, critical theory became a relatively straightforward exercise, with clearly delineated paths of inquiry. The point was to determine what the art reflected about its society. “Reflection theory” has exercised a powerful hold over Marxist critical practice ever since.

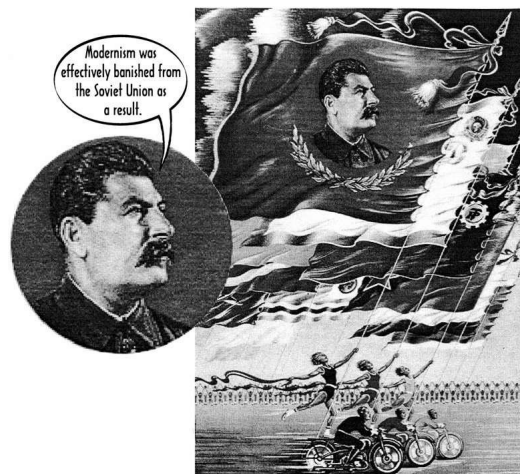
Zhdanovite Socialist Realism

Reflectionist ideas underpin the aesthetic theory later developed under the Soviet political regime, called **Socialist Realism**. It was instituted in 1934 under the watchful eye of Stalin's cultural commissar, the dreaded **A.A. Zhdanov** (1896–1948).



In other words, artists *reflected* social reality as it was ideally conceived of by the Party (and its reading of Marx), and became, in real terms, propagandists for the cause of Communism. To Zhdanov, artists were little better than civil servants – or “engineers of the soul”.

Art, in this formula, had to be presented in a form accessible to the wider public. This strictly ruled out experiment. Art was no longer to be considered the preserve of an élite with specialized interests separate from the lives of ordinary individuals.





We were forced
to write, compose, or
paint in an academic realist
manner that was largely
shunned by our peers
in the West.

Avant-garde modernism was the dominant aesthetic of the 20th-century capitalist West. Even the mere *suggestion* of such modernism in one's art was enough to bring down the full might of the state machine on your head – as composers such as **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906–75) were to discover to their cost.

The Battle for Class Consciousness

Western Marxism is generally taken to begin with the work of **Georg Lukács** (1885–1971), whose early writings on philosophy and literature exerted a huge influence on several generations of Western European theorists. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) preached a more humanist approach to class struggle, in comparison to the authoritarian Soviet Union model. Unlike many Soviet thinkers of the time, Lukács did not believe in the “inevitability” of revolution – it had to be consciously striven for through the combined efforts of the working class and the Communist Party in a creative rather than a dogmatic manner.



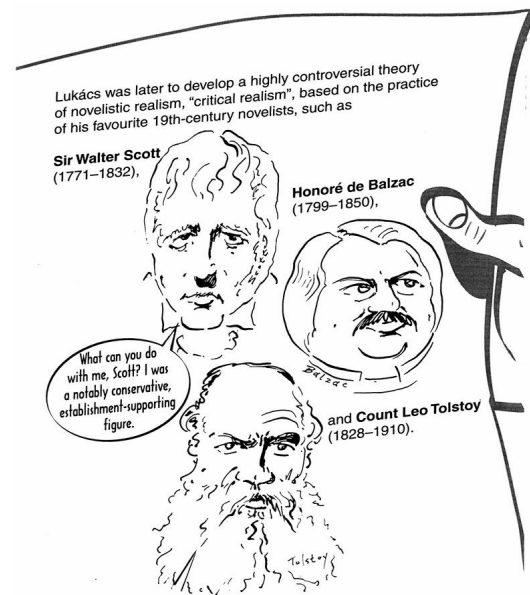
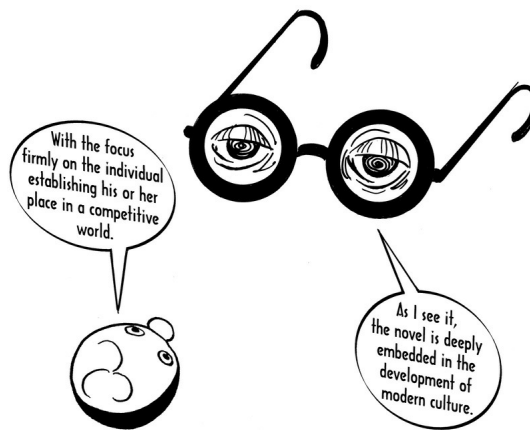
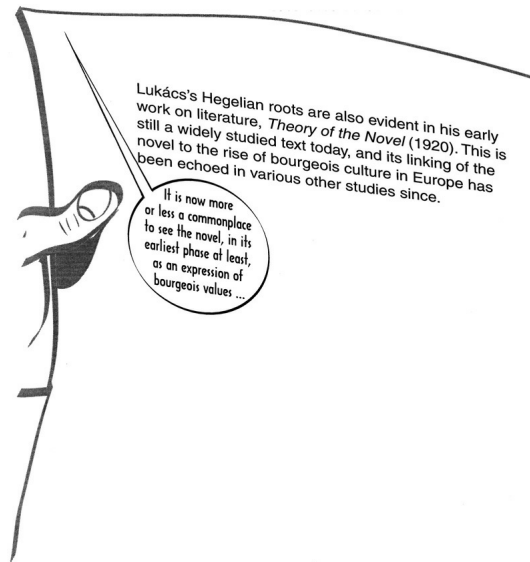
This amounted to a rejection of the deterministic interpretations of Marxist thought so popular in the Party at the time.

To orthodox Marxists like **V.I. Lenin** (1870–1924), who already exercised dictatorial powers – extended even further under **Joseph Stalin** (1879–1953) – such views were considered dangerous to the socialist cause.



This was far too metaphysical a conception for the Comintern. Lukács was accordingly disciplined and forced to offer a public recantation of the work. *History and Class Consciousness* was later to resurface as a favoured text amongst the student revolutionaries of the 1960s (notably in the 1968 *événements* in Paris).

Lukácsian Theories of the Novel

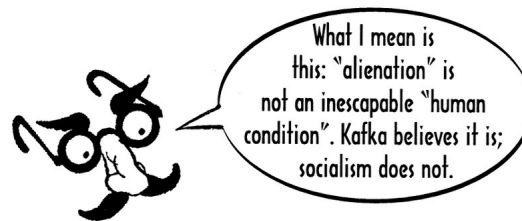
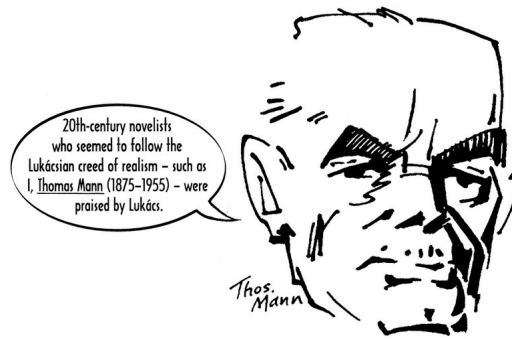




Regardless of their political outlook, novelists must reveal the pressures working within their society that led to the development of its particular matrix of social relations.

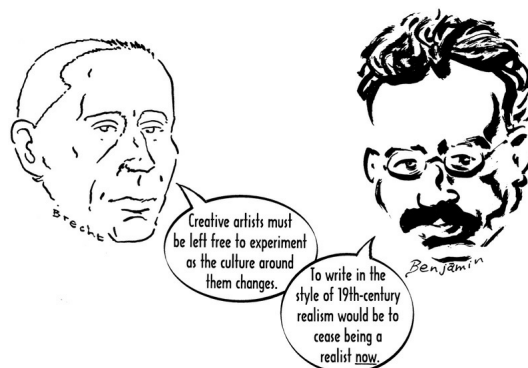
What are the constraints placed on us as individuals within a given social class at a given historical point?

A Critical Realist View of Alienation



“Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann”, a chapter title from *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958), was to become something of a battle cry for Lukács – a political rather than strictly literary choice for the individual to make, whether as author or reader.

Lukács was eventually to condemn modernism in general as presenting a distorted picture of reality which inhibited political action. This viewpoint brought him into dispute with the modernist experimental dramatist and Marxist, **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956). Brecht, backed up by the Marxist critic **Walter Benjamin** (1892–1940), complained that Lukács’s conception of realism was far too narrow.



Lukács was unrepentant. He continued to attack modernism and defend his own vision of realism until the very end of his career. Such stalwarts of modernism as **James Joyce** (1882–1941),



and **William Faulkner**
(1897–1962)



were treated no better than Kafka. Western Marxism, unlike Lukács, has adopted a much more positive attitude towards the modernist ethic and its major practitioners.



Samuel Beckett
(1906–89)

The Theory of Hegemony

Marxists have always found it difficult to explain two problems. Both concern the failure of predicting revolution in capitalist societies.



These have been vexed questions within the Marxist movement. The concept of **hegemony** was developed to explain away such discrepancies. In the hands of the Italian Marxist, **Antonio Gramsci** (1891–1937), this concept became a sophisticated tool for cultural analysis.

Gramsci rejected the crude deterministic notion that the exploited working classes must inevitably recognize revolution as “in their best interests”. Marxism had failed to consider how ideology actually works to make itself **unrecognizable** as such (another “disguise”). This is the trick of hegemony

...



We will see later how Michel Foucault’s “archaeology” of knowledge digs under the apparent layer of hegemonic “consent” to uncover the workings of cultural empowerment – a way already signposted by Gramsci.

Cultural Criticism

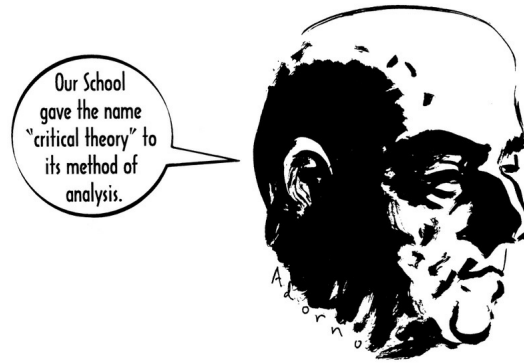
Capitalist societies are adept at disseminating their ideological beliefs without having to resort to force. Ideology is passed on at the *level of ideas*, as much as by economic pressures (often unwittingly by the individuals involved).



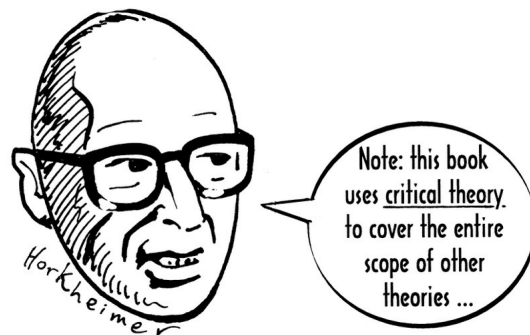
Such ideas were later to be developed further by the structural Marxist movement. Some critics began to wonder how we could ever break out of hegemony's embrace, so successful did it seem in maintaining the political status quo and defusing dissent at source.

The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory

Perhaps the most important strand of cultural criticism in Western Marxism was the Frankfurt School. It developed a rigorous approach to cultural analysis, particularly as seen in the work of its major figures, **Theodor Adorno** (1903–69),



Max Horkheimer (1895–1973),



and **Herbert Marcuse** (1898–1979).



“Critical theory” is an amalgam of philosophical and social-scientific techniques (often making extensive use of statistical questionnaires in its inquiries) that had wide-ranging applications. Established as a research institute at the University of Frankfurt in the early 1920s, the School fled from Germany on the Nazi takeover in 1933 and subsequently relocated in New York (returning to Frankfurt after the Second World War).

The Progress of Irrationalism

Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse challenged entrenched aspects of orthodox Marxist thought – such as the role of the Communist Party and the concept of class. Adorno and Horkheimer’s jointly authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) even questioned the validity of the Enlightenment project itself, of which Marxism is regarded as a constituent part.



We will return later to Jean-François Lyotard’s verdict on “grand narratives”, but, in the meantime ...

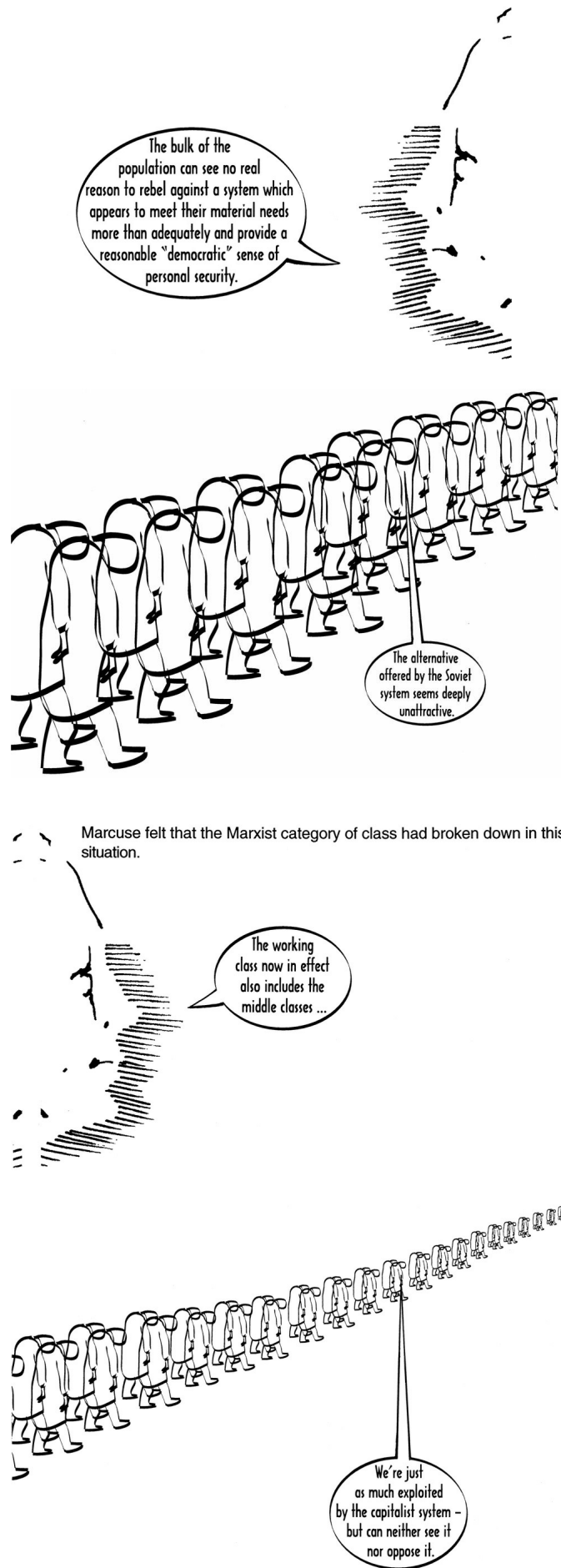
Looking round, as the Second World War came to a terrifying savage end, amid the ruins of civilization East and West, Adorno and Horkheimer could see only deeply repressive “administered societies” on each side of the ideological divide – the West being no less culpable in this respect than the Stalinist Soviet Union.



Hegemony in Western civilization had all but destroyed the possibility of political dissent under a glossy appearance of mass culture “consent”. This was a theme explored in the work of Marcuse.

One-dimensional or “Non-oppositional” Society

Writing in the 1960s, Marcuse recognized a “one-dimensional” society in which the forces of advanced capitalism seemed triumphant over those of the traditional left. Political opposition to capitalism, especially in America where Marcuse remained after the war, had all but been eradicated.



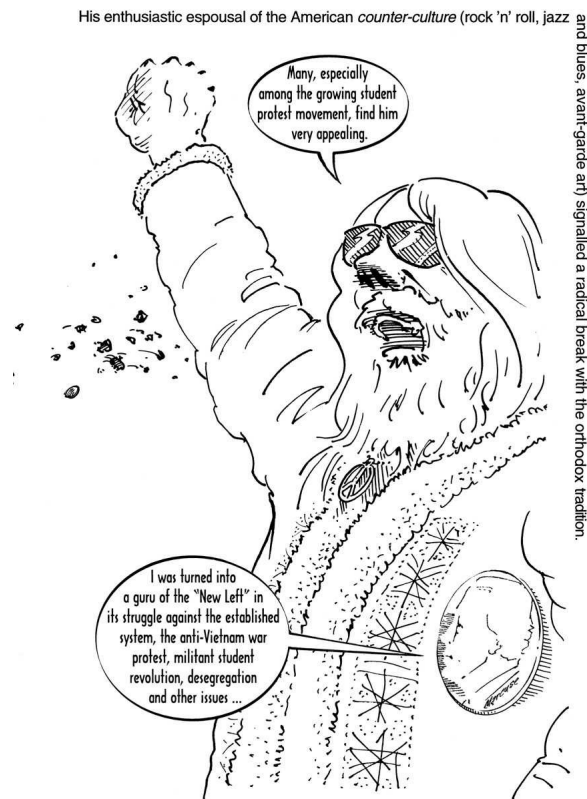
The traditional working class was also in decline, given the speed and scope of technological change now creating a **post-industrial society**, very different to anything that Marx or his immediate disciples could ever have envisaged.

The Alternative or “New Left”

Under such advanced technological circumstances, Marxist thinking could no longer rely on the working class as the saviour of mankind. New constituencies of individuals had to be found to maintain the struggle against capitalism in the name of human liberation.



Marcuse moved away from traditional Marxist notions of how revolution was supposed to come about.



The Politics of Avant-garde Art

Adorno, too, was an articulate theoretical champion of the artistic avant-garde. He was a composer himself and defended the twelve-tone music of **Arnold Schoenberg** (1874–1951) and his disciples, and then later the new German cinema of the 1960s. And he did so for reasons similar to Marcuse.



Although their aesthetic tastes markedly differed (Adorno hated jazz and popular music in general), both Adorno and Marcuse supported the cause of artistic experiment, which put them at variance with orthodox Marxist thought and the Soviet theory of Socialist Realism.

Of Adorno's works, the most critical of the Marxist tradition of thought – and arguably the most influential on later developments in critical theory – is *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Here, it was argued that the notion of the dialectic as a way of resolving conflict and contradiction (a standard view that pre-dates Hegel and Marx, in Adorno's reading) was misguided.



What dialectics revealed, according to Adorno, was “the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived”.

Against Totality – and Totalitarianism

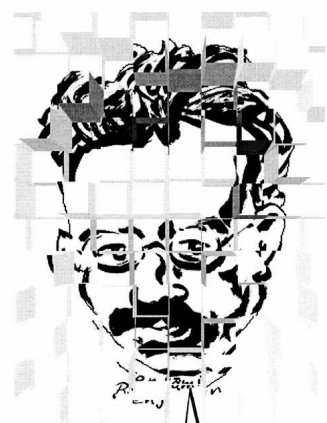
Adorno's objective in developing his negative dialectic of "non-identity thinking" is to undermine the notion of **totality**, as well as the authority that goes with claiming to have grasped the internal workings of this. Classical Marxism certainly made such a claim, with the dialectic being treated as the key to understanding the operations of the **social totality**.



From such a perspective, everything is always in a state of "becoming" rather than fully-fledged "being". And when that is so, Marxism soon runs into difficulties.

Theory of the Aura

The critic and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin was a maverick figure on the fringes of the Frankfurt School. But his work shares at least some of their preconceptions. Although he died well before the School's most influential period (the later 1940s through to the 1960s), Benjamin's work nevertheless has been instrumental in helping to define what we mean by critical theory. Benjamin is perhaps best known for his theory that what marks out works of art is their "aura". This "aura" is what cannot be captured in any reproduction, as Benjamin points out in his highly influential essay, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936).



The ability to reproduce works of art mechanically, especially in quantity, is a relatively new phenomenon ...

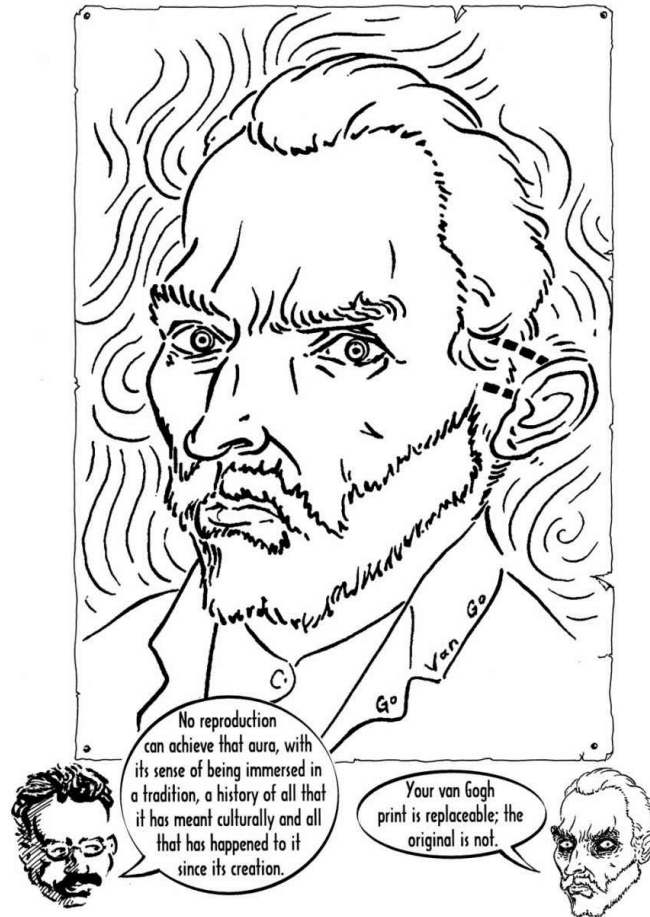


Is my aura on straight?

It is by now a familiar phenomenon, with mass-produced prints of great artworks found in millions of households worldwide.

In Combat with Tradition

But a print of a Vincent van Gogh, no matter how high quality its reproduction, is not the real thing. In Benjamin's words, the print lacks the original's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be"; or, as he proceeds to call it, its "aura".



But there is a positive side to mechanical reproduction.



Photography and film in particular demonstrate this emancipation. It makes no sense to ask which is the "authentic" copy in these cases. In Benjamin's

view, this opens up art to the masses in a way that has never been possible before, enabling them to escape from the clutches of tradition – a highly desirable outcome for the revolutionary-minded Marxist.

Brecht's Epic Theatre

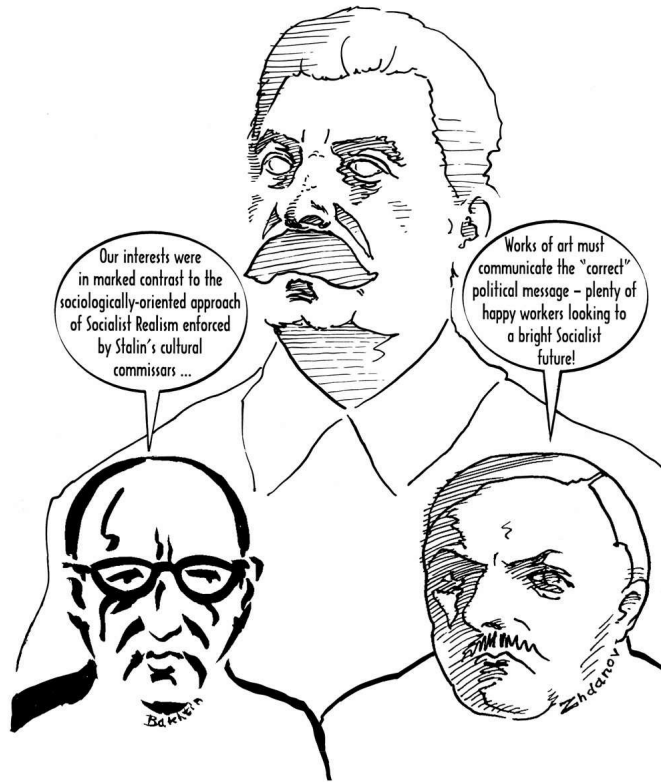
Benjamin was also one of the first champions of the German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht and his concept of “epic theatre”. The great virtue of epic theatre for Benjamin was a clearly-defined political agenda that it self-consciously drew to the audience’s attention. It “does not reproduce conditions, but, rather, reveals them”, showing us the way in which the ruling classes exploit and keep us in a state of subjection to their ideology.



It teaches the working class to question its conditions of existence, and the way in which these are portrayed in the media (by its “revelations”), and thus becomes a truly revolutionary art-form.

Russian Formalism

Although not strictly speaking a Marxist “school”, the Russian Formalists were active just before and after the Soviet Revolution of 1917, and merit some consideration before moving off the topic of Marxist critical theory. Although a casualty of Stalinism and its brutally doctrinaire Socialist Realist aesthetic in 1932, Formalist ideas resurfaced in the West in the 1960s to inspire new generations of theorists in the structuralist movement. Formalist critics, such as those associated with the Moscow Linguistic Circle, concentrated their attention on literary form and literary language.



The Grammar of Narrative

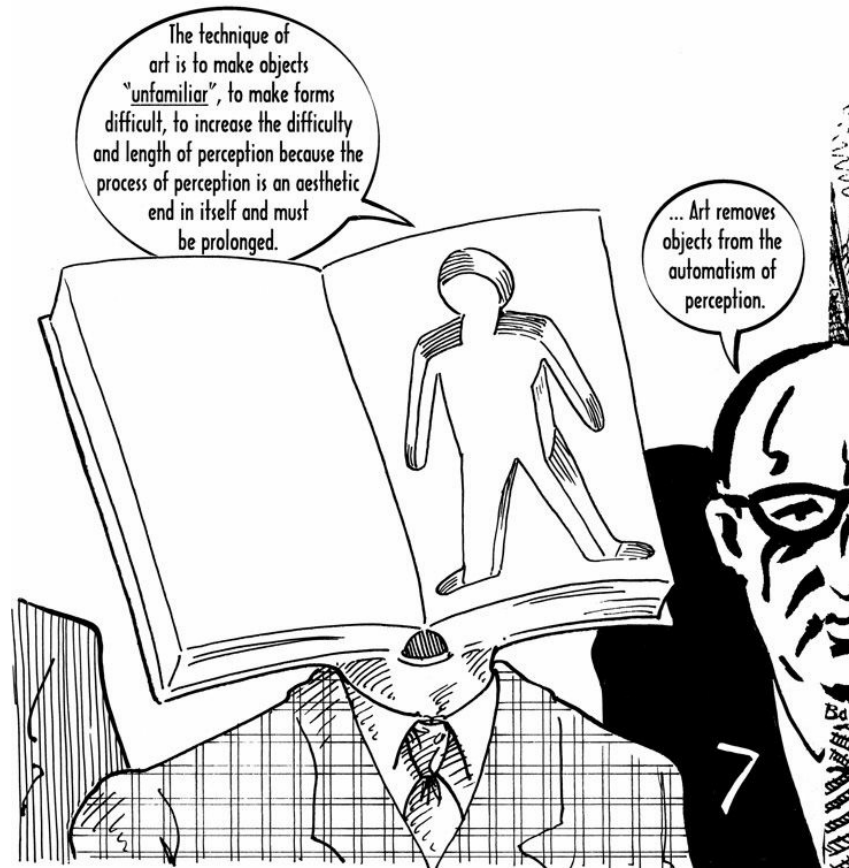
Formalist influence can be detected in the work of such later theorists as **Roland Barthes** (1915–80), who shares the Russians’ concern with “literariness” – those elements, such as the self-conscious use of literary devices, that signal that we are in the presence of “literature” as opposed to other forms of discourse.



As well as Barthes himself, we can also cite the efforts of **A.J. Greimas** (b. 1917) and **Tzvetan Todorov** (b. 1939) in this area. The practice of “narratology” in general owes much to the inspiration of Formalism.

Shklovsky's Defamiliarization

Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984) contributed the concept of “defamiliarization” to his analysis of literary language – the “making strange” of everyday events and objects so that they appear to us in a new light.



Brecht's “alienation effect” is another version of this process which forces us to recognize, by drawing attention to stylistic devices, what lies behind actions and behaviour that we take for granted (their hidden ideological connotations). Note how both Marxism and Formalism emphasize the “hidden” elements behind the textual surface.

Bakhtin's Plural or Dialogic Meanings

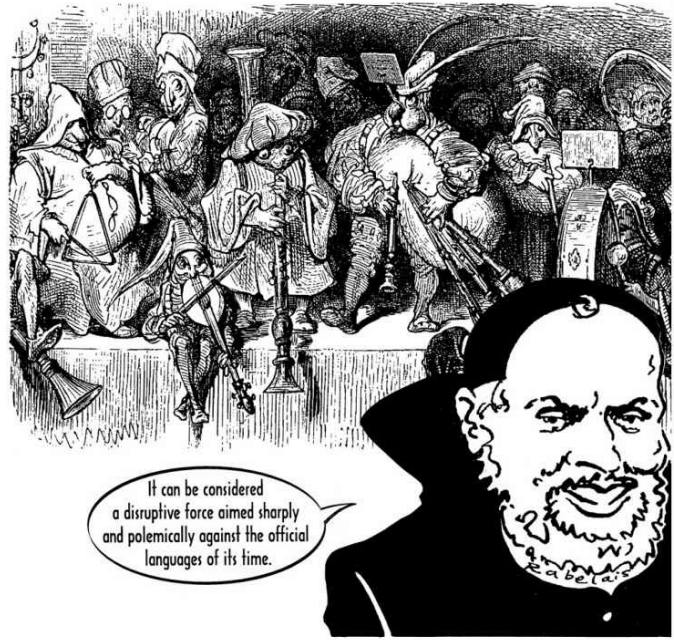
Another figure from this era whose work made a belated appearance in the West was **Mikhail Bakhtin** (1895–1975). His innovative approach to literary analysis also suffered from Stalinist repression – despite his attempt to devise a Marxist philosophy of language. Bakhtin's researches on the novel strikingly prefigure poststructuralism in many ways, particularly in his insistence on the *plural quality* of meaning.



There is no fixed meaning to any narrative, therefore, and it is always open to multiple interpretation. There is a plural quality to Bakhtin's own writings, too, in that he may have published work in the 1920s under a variety of names – most notably, Valentin Voloshinov (an issue still being debated among Bakhtin commentators).

Intertextuality or Heteroglossia

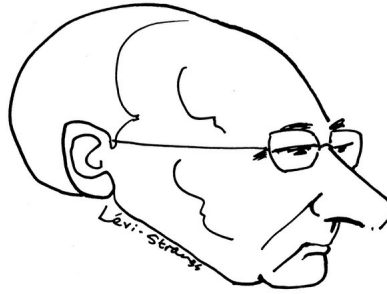
Bakhtin saw novels as intensely “intertextual” – a concept further developed by the structuralist-feminist theorist Julia Kristeva. Novels are not independent unitary creations, but products that rely on “intertextuality”, that is, on references to an entire complex web of past and present discourses within their culture. This process Bakhtin dubbed “heteroglossia”. Heteroglossia works against the unifying tendencies within a culture, as generally advocated by the ruling establishment.



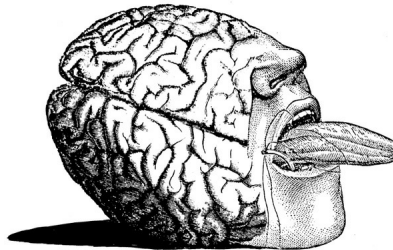
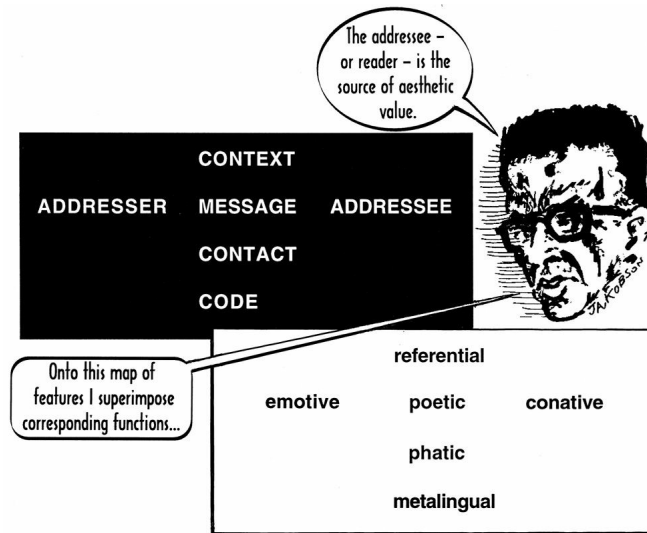
Bakhtin identifies a similarly disruptive influence within the institution of the **carnival**, with its love of uncontrolled parody, whereby socio-political authority is mercilessly mocked and “made strange”. The wildly satirical work of **Rabelais** (1494–1553) is for Bakhtin a prime example of this carnivalesque approach to authority (sadly lacking in the Socialist Realist enterprise).

Jakobson's Semiotic Linguistics

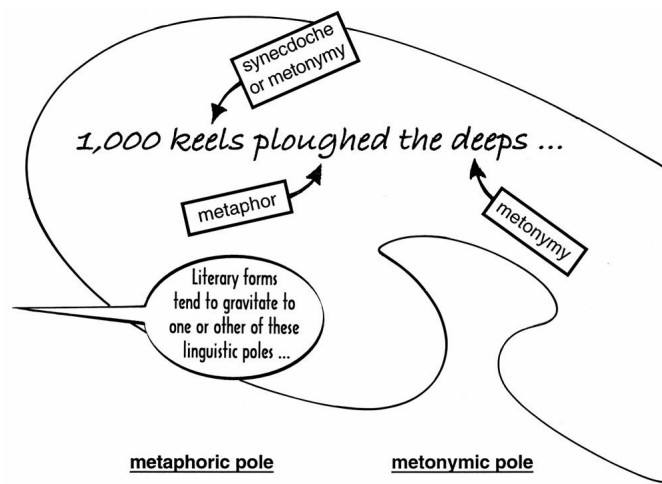
Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) provides a direct bridge between Russian formalist **semiotics** and later poststructuralist developments in critical theory. He began as a member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, then, in exile, the Prague Linguistic Circle (1920), until his arrival in America (1941) where he collaborated with the seminal structuralist anthropologist **Claude Lévi-Strauss** (b. 1908).



Jakobson analysed literary aesthetics (“poetics”) as a sub-branch of systematic linguistics: “The object of study in literary science is not literature but *literariness*.” He means the patterns of linguistic devices that specify literary discourse.



Jakobson's interest in *aphasia* (a language disorder due to brain injury) alerted him to a fundamental linguistic pattern of oppositions: **metaphor** and **metonymy**. Metaphor is a device of comparison (“strong as a lion”) or imaginative unliteral description (“a glaring error”). Metonymy works by substituting an associative part for a whole (“sails” for “ships”), as follows ...



metaphoric pole

Romantic poetry
lyrical songs
filmic metaphor
Surrealism

metonymic pole

heroic epics
Realist fiction
film montage
journalism

The Psychoanalytic Unconscious

After Marx, we can name **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) and his pioneering **psychoanalysis** as the next biggest influence on the evolution of critical theory. Indeed, there is a parallel between them ...



Both are also **therapists**. Marx sought a cure for “economic illness” in the historical process of class struggle and revolution. Freud, circa 1900, broke away from neurological psychiatry to pursue a cure for neurotic disorders by a process of self-knowledge. For both of them, humanity’s “structural defects” are real, serious but not inescapable. There is a margin of freedom to be gained by active self-knowledge.

Marxian dialectics and Freudian psychoanalysis equally emphasize a **hidden agenda** beneath our surface dimension – things are not what they seem. Critical theory follows them in attempting to tease out that agenda. Freud posits a discrepancy between our conscious “surface life” and the unconscious depth which is the unseen, unacknowledged controlling force. “Drives” at an instinctual level dictate much of what we say and do at a conscious level. Dreams, sexual abnormalities, neurotic pathologies will break through the disguises of conscious normality. Drives may be frustrated or displaced for a time – but not indefinitely.



Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory

Critical theorists have adopted the psychoanalytic idea of a “sub-text” to human activity and applied it to a variety of cultural phenomena – literature, film and media, and indeed society itself, as in the case of the Frankfurt School which married psychoanalysis to Marxism. The essential idea for critical theory is that there is nothing *accidental* in a text – in the widest sense of **text as production**. Every indication of what is hidden, repressed or displaced in its structure can be traced back to the “textual unconscious”.



Freud himself in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) suggested that Hamlet had a secret “Oedipal” desire to murder his own father (and marry his mother), hence his difficulty in taking action against the usurper Claudius. Detractors of psychoanalytic criticism object that viewing Hamlet like this is to confuse literature with reality – the “textuality of texts” is ignored in favour of “psychical analysis”.

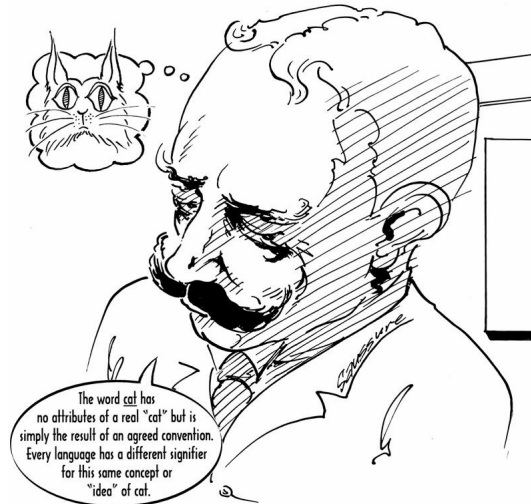


Psychoanalysis does indeed owe much to literature. Freud’s central dogma of the “Oedipus Complex” derives from *Oedipus Rex* by the Greek dramatist **Sophocles** (c. 496–406 BC). Psychoanalytic criticism often falls back on the analysis of fictional characterization. And Freud’s classic case-studies, Little Hans, Dora, The Rat Man etc., whatever value they may have as “science”, are certainly great examples of story-telling.

Structuralism and Critical Theory

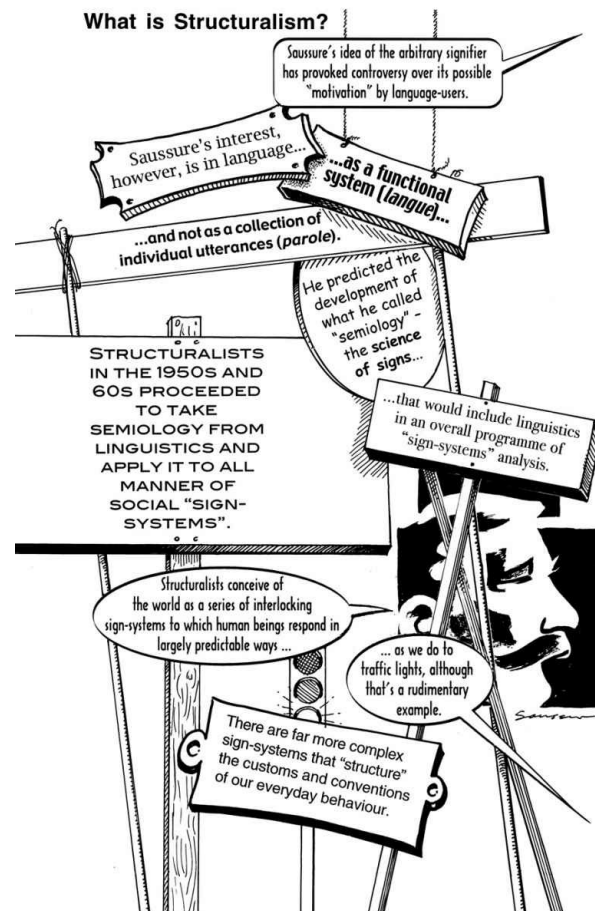
We now arrive at a third influential model of the unconscious which is represented by structuralism.

Structuralism has its origin in the linguistic theory of **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857–1913). Saussure aimed to reveal the universal structure of language as a constructed system of rules. His key idea is the relation of the **signifier** to the **signified**. The connection between the linguistic signifier c/a/t/ and the signified concept “cat” is entirely arbitrary.



Another Saussurean principle is that meaning in language is the product of incremental **unit differences** along a chain of signifiers:

... c/a/t/ : c/u/t/ : c/u/p/ : p/u/p/ ... etc.



The Structuralist Unconscious

Under the surface of all sign-systems is a "deep structure" – something like a genetic programme – which dictates how such systems operate. Marx located an unconscious hidden in economic production; Freud excavated it in our psychic drives. For structuralism, the unconscious is located in language itself. All sign-systems are analogous to language and consist of a decipherable "grammar" of rules that operate on elements of a system by conventions.

Structuralist analysis aims at revealing how we understand each other by such conventional rules – how we "signify" to each other ...



As in chess, we must play by accepted rules. These can change only by general consensus.

Let's now exemplify this by seeing how structuralism was applied to psychoanalysis. We shall look at Lacan's contribution in the 1950s and 60s.

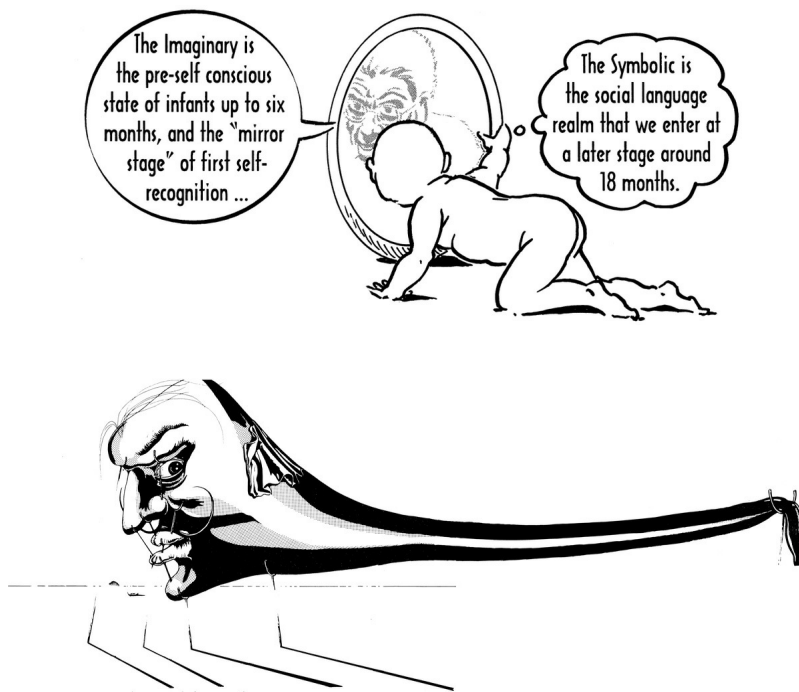


Lacan and Structuralist Psychoanalysis



Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic Realms

Lacan's work is notoriously difficult to interpret. But, as one participant in his famous series of seminars in Paris in the 1950s remarked, no matter how obscure he may be, Lacan nevertheless "produces resonances". This has proven especially the case among feminists in the late 1960s and 70s attracted to Lacan's conception of the **Imaginary** and **Symbolic** realms.



The first stage is identified with the mother; the second with the father, or, in a wider sense, the "masculine" world of order and authority that we inhabit as adults. This is the Symbolic realm of pre-established language systems which in the "Name of the Father", as Lacan puts it, oppresses women.

Lacan himself was originally inspired by avant-garde **Surrealism** of the 1930s, chiefly theorized by the poet and former psychiatrist **André Breton** (1896–1966). Lacanian-inspired critics are likely to be most interested in works that self-consciously challenge the Symbolic world in some way – as Surrealism manifestly does with its reliance on dream imagery and the unconscious.



Surrealism itself was deeply influenced by Freudian analysis. And, in general, modernism's rejection of orderly "realist" styles is likely to appeal to followers of Lacan.

Barthes and the Empire of Signs

Structuralism's task of identifying the "grammar" that underlies whatever system is being studied is perhaps best exemplified (and most accessible) in the work of the cultural semiologist **Roland Barthes** (1915–80). For him, structuralism is not limited to literature and art, but can equally well apply itself to the "sign-worlds" of fashion, advertising and the media – or even wrestling, football and a restaurant menu ...



Structuralism in the 1950s and 60s became a theory applicable to any and every cultural phenomenon, as Barthes shows, and little escaped its attention.

The Common Structure of Narratives

Narrative is all around us – simply an everyday fact of our world – according to Barthes. He worked out a complex method for the analysis of all possible narratives. His objective was to identify the “functional syntax” by which narrative in general is constructed.



Once again, we note the assumption of an unconscious “deep structure” to cultural phenomena, determining their overall form.

The Death of the Author



In a notorious essay of 1968, he even proclaimed the "death of the author". He meant the traditional, heroic "Author" passing on his words of wisdom to a grateful, and essentially passive, public.

This has been a contentious idea. Yet, in its most basic sense, it means no more than that narratives take on a life of their own after they leave the author and pass into general circulation.



This is particularly so over a period of centuries. **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) continues to inspire widely differing – and often wildly conflicting – interpretations of his work. Shakespeare has been appropriated both by the establishment and by those in rebellion against the establishment, and no doubt will continue to be so.

Readerly versus Writerly Texts

Barthes suggests in *S/Z* (1970) that narratives can be divided into “readerly” and “writerly” categories. The latter demands the active participation of the reader; the former an attitude of passivity. Modernist novels, and indeed anything at all experimental in form – such as the novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) by **Laurence Sterne** (1713–68) – are “writerly”. Most 19th-century realist novels are “readerly”.



By implication, readerly texts are authoritarian. In the rebellious climate of the 1960s, when the concept of the “death of the author” was developed, this was a grave charge to make. Critical theory since that date has had a distinctly anti-authoritarian, and often counter-cultural, edge to it.

The “Death of Man”

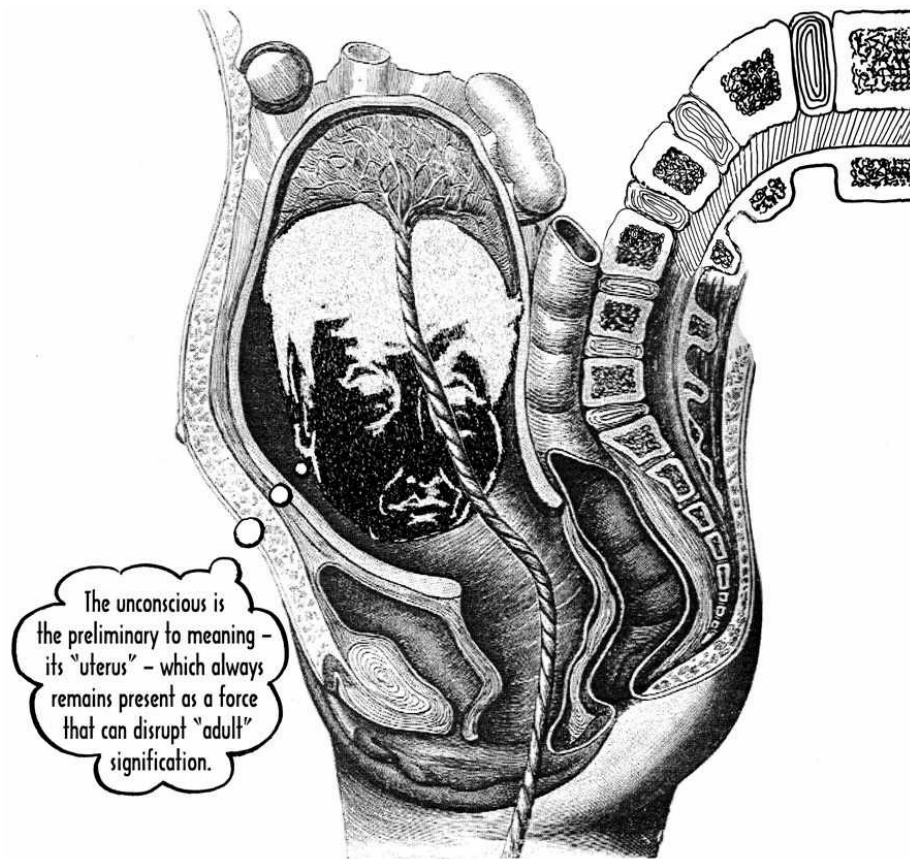
Structuralism also helped to promote the notion of the “death of man” (or “the subject”) which has been so influential in recent critical theory. The idea here is that our traditional Enlightenment notion of “man” as the centre of cultural process – a creature able to exert domination over its environment through the exercise of reason – is a delusion. In real terms, we are controlled by **systems** ...



To “reconsider” is to challenge an entire cultural tradition based on a commitment to individual self-realization and self-expression (whether in the artistic or economic domains).

Intertextuality and the Symbolic Order

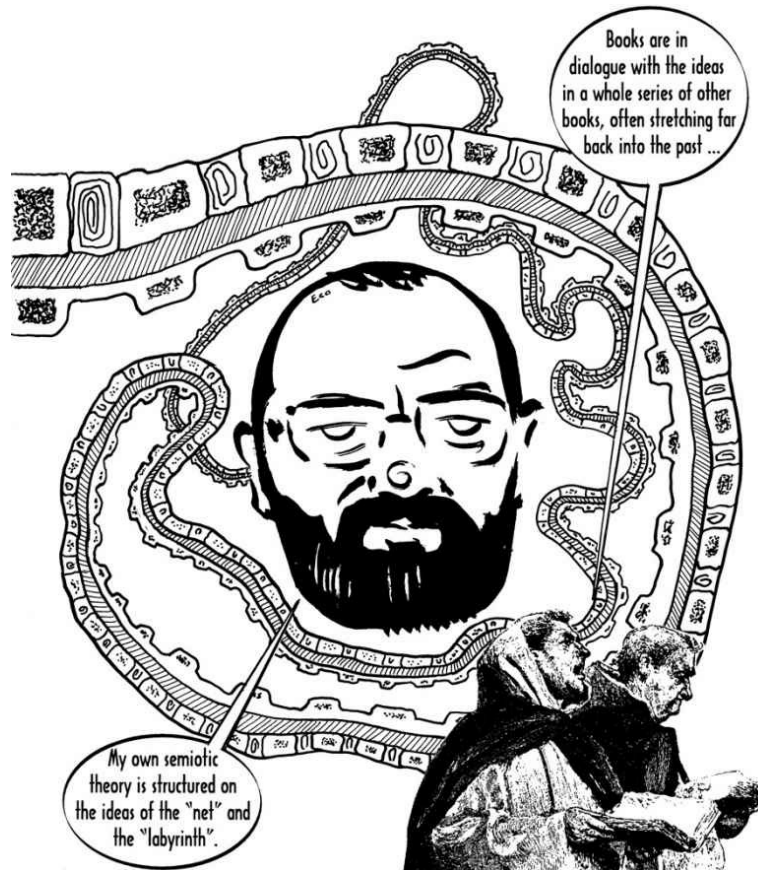
Semiotic theory was developed further by later poststructuralists, notably **Julia Kristeva** (b. 1941). One of her key concepts is **intertextuality**, which can simply mean that narratives are woven of echoes and traces of other texts, a web or “mosaic of quotations”. Kristeva complexities this basic semiotic idea by admixtures of Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism. She agrees with Lacan’s view of an unconscious that can never itself be “spoken”, but departs from him with her idea of its continuity even after the subject enters the Symbolic order of language.



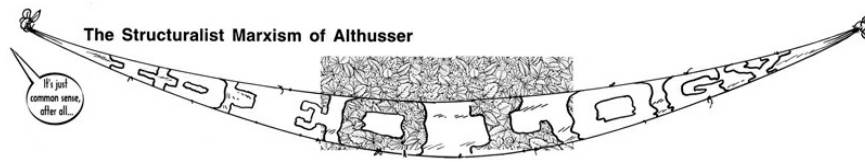
Evidence of such “disruptions” is provided by poetry and narratives which destabilize the repressive domain of lawful Symbolic order. It is therefore also possible for Kristeva to reject the category of “essential woman” or gender as constituted by the Symbolic order.

Eco's Labyrinth

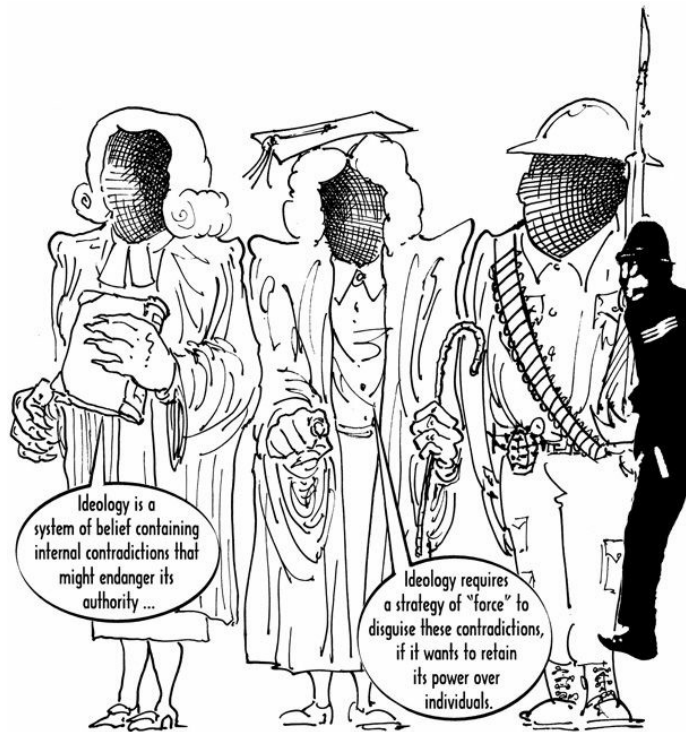
Umberto Eco (b. 1932) offers another semiotic view of intertextuality. One of the characters in his novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) remarks that: “A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs.”



Systems are like nets. There is an infinite number of ways of traversing the distance between any two points on their surfaces. A net, for Eco, is “an unlimited territory”. We might also see this as a labyrinth with no one “correct” way of journeying through it. Texts, as indeed systems as a whole, offer themselves up to multiple interpretations – “endless semiosis”, as Eco says.



The success of structuralist thought in France led to a variant of Marxism called “structural Marxism”, represented by its leading theorist, the philosopher **Louis Althusser** (1918–90).



Ideology is therefore **disseminated** by what Althusser calls the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (institutions such as the legal system, the educational system and the media) and **maintained** by the “Repressive State Apparatus” (the police and army).

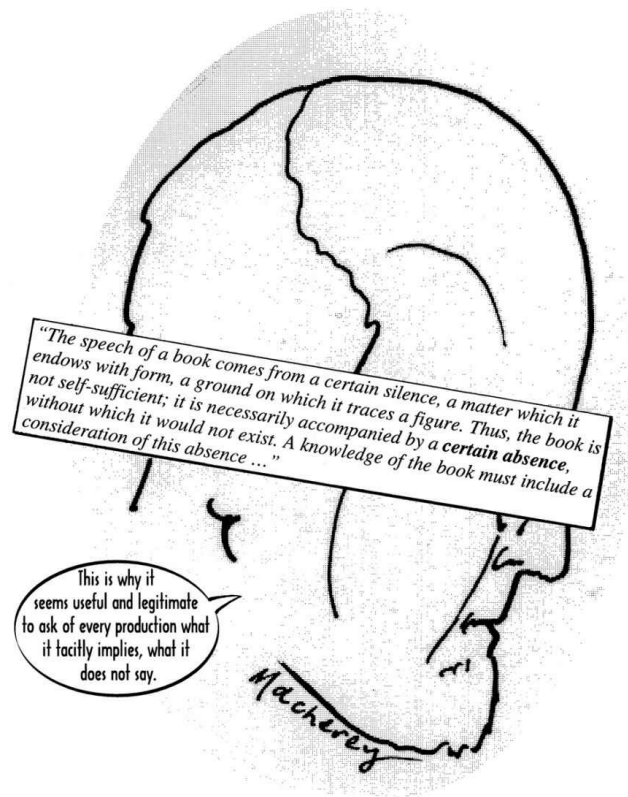
Following on from Gramsci’s “hegemony” theory, Althusser also believed that ideology worked most effectively at the level of ideas – as enshrined in the Ideological State Apparatuses. The duty of the cultural critic is to identify where, and how, these ideas serve the cause of the ruling élite – as well as to identify the contradictions that reveal the gaps and flaws in the ideology in question.



Marxism is the “science of society” that enables us to see through the manipulations of the dominant ideology, and thus develop a revolutionary class consciousness.

Structuralist Marxism and Literary Criticism

The implications of Althusser's ideas were turned into critical theory by his disciple **Pierre Macherey** (b. 1939). In his book *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), Macherey states ...

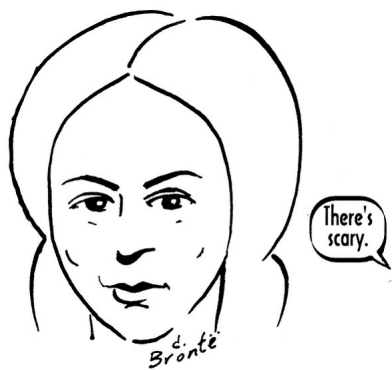


Macherey is saying that criticism must get beneath the surface of a text's ideological assumptions by asking of it what it does not say. Exposing its silences and evasions is itself a **political** criticism – and, we note, an “unconscious” is once again identified.

In the critical theory of Macherey, structural Marxism becomes a “science of texts” – in effect, a sub-branch of Althusser's “science of society” – whose findings are always to be turned to political account. Literary texts have a particular ability to reveal ideological contradictions to us, which turns literary study into a politically subversive act.

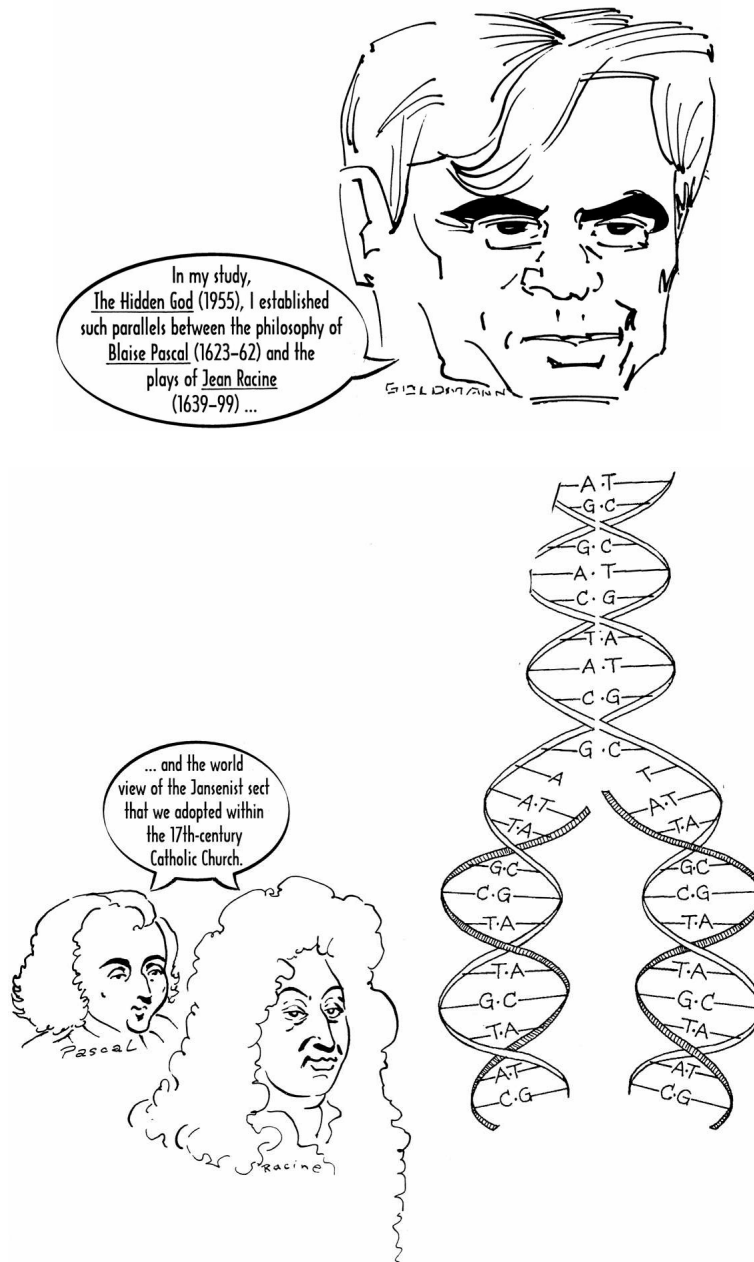


The novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) by **Charlotte Brontë** (1816–55) does not set out to be a discourse on the power of patriarchy, but the “madwoman in the attic” motif starkly reveals it nonetheless.

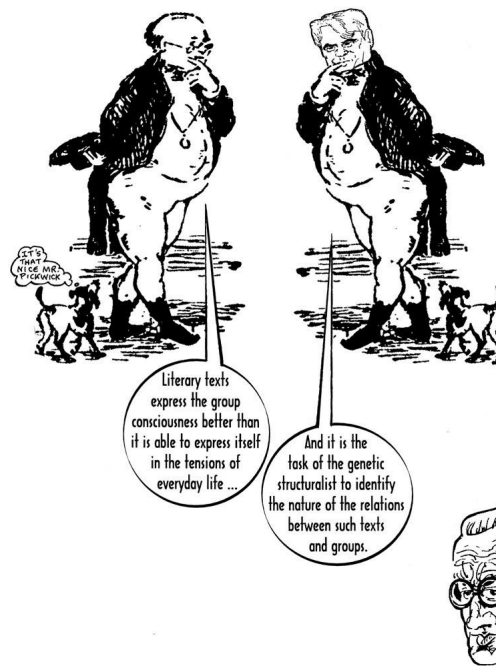


Genetic Structuralism

A related development to structural Marxism is “genetic structuralism”, the approach devised by the Franco-Romanian theorist **Lucien Goldmann** (1913–70). Genetic structuralism posits the existence of parallels – or “homologies” in Goldmann’s terminology – between literary works and certain influential social groups operating at the time of those works’ production.



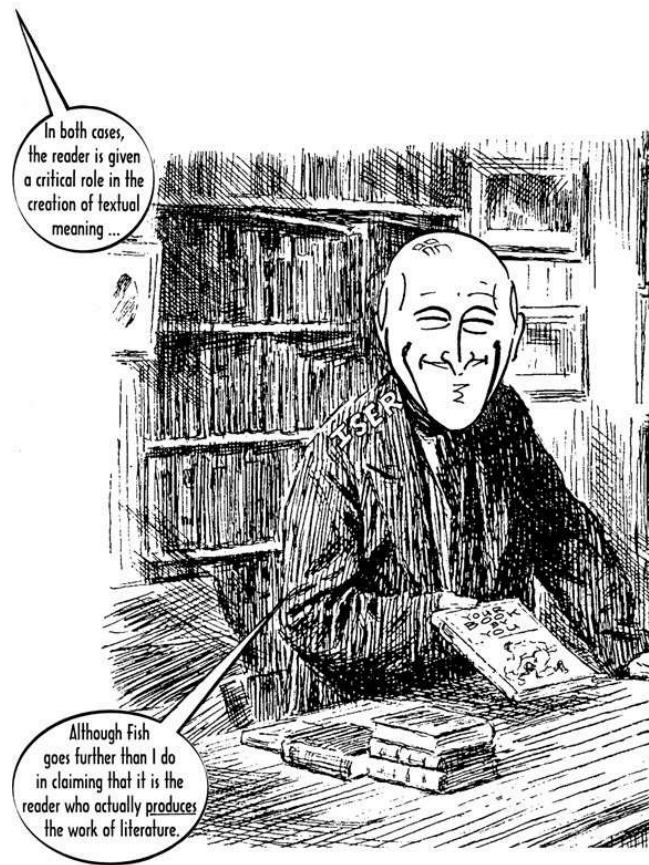
Rather than being just a reflection of the views of such groups, the greatest literature might be seen as a coherent articulation of what was otherwise “vague and confused, and contradicted by innumerable other tendencies” within the particular group in question.



The novel form, too, argued Goldmann, featured such homologies. He followed his major source of Marxist critical influence, Lukács, in tying the novel closely to the rise of bourgeois culture and the spread of the capitalist economic system.

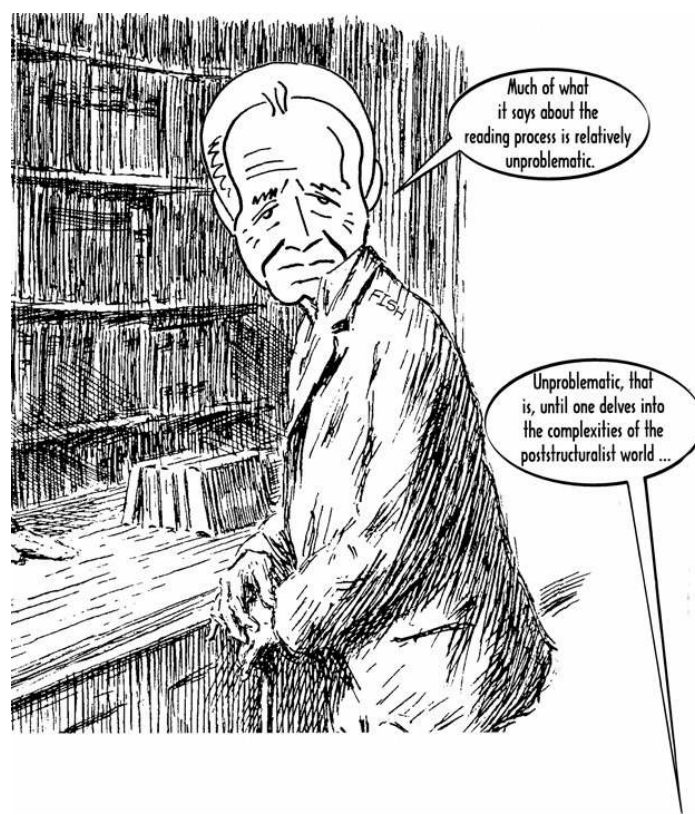
Reader-Response Theory

Before going on to consider the reaction to structuralism in the latter decades of the 20th century, we shall take a brief sideways detour to consider another form of theory which, like Barthes', emphasized the reader's role: **reader-response**, or **reception theory** as it is sometimes called. Key figures here are the German theorist **Wolfgang Iser** (b. 1926) and the American **Stanley Fish** (b. 1938).



Iser assumes a greater sense of interaction between text and reader, whereby the text pushes the reader in certain directions and the reader fills in any gaps left in the text.

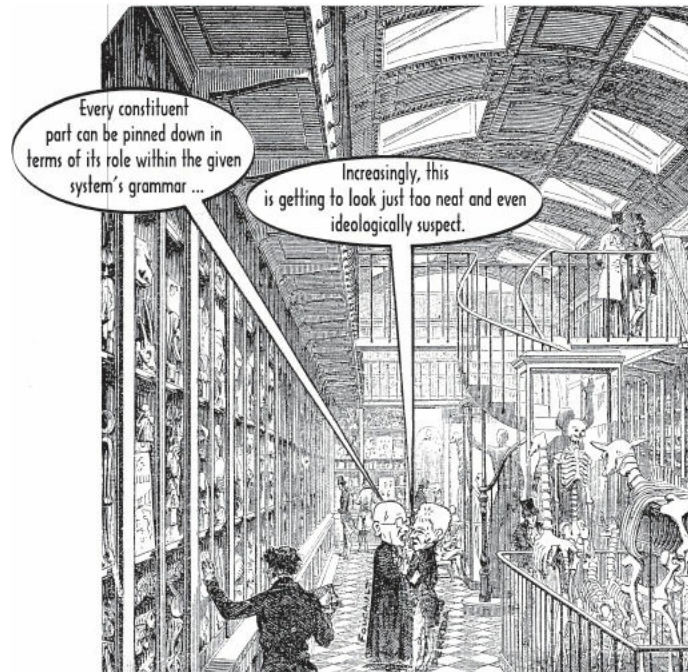
Even Fish's ostensibly more radical approach is tempered by the insistence that the reader is a member of an "interpretive community" whose shared values inform individual readings, as well as providing a criterion for assessing their validity. Reader-response or reception theory is not a particularly contentious form of critical theory.



In that world, we can no longer take our everyday assumptions about the self, language and meaning for granted. From poststructuralism onwards, critical theory becomes much more self-consciously counter-cultural, and, let's admit it, *difficult*. Time to take the plunge ...

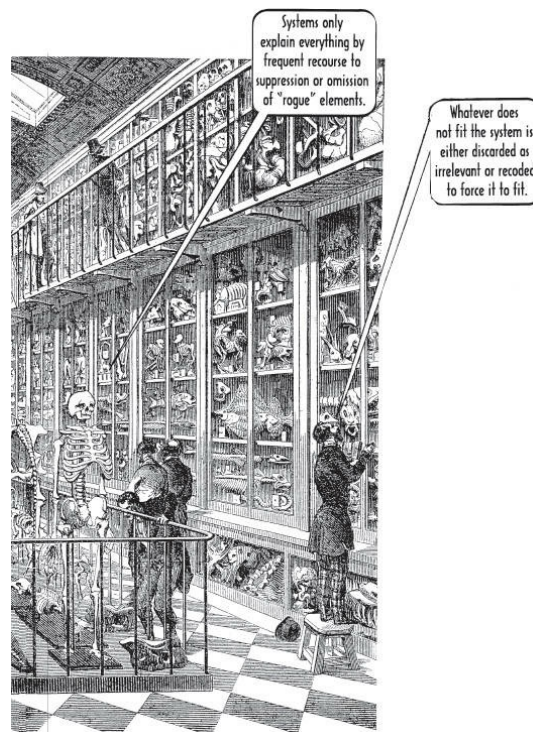
Poststructuralism: the Breakdown of Sign-Systems

Structuralism went too far as an all-embracing form of analysis, apparently able to explain anything and everything about human affairs and the world around us. Everything became a sign-system – in fact, nothing could *escape* being part of a sign-system.



To new generations of cultural theorists, the world was not as “orderly” as structuralism seemed to be claiming. The factor of *difference* began to exert an increasing fascination on what came to be known as the *poststructuralist* movement.

Poststructuralism arose in the late 1960s and covers a wide range of positions. All of them are agreed that the system-building side of structuralist analysis has many critical flaws.



To the poststructuralist mind, this was authoritarianism in action. It set out to undermine this position, introducing a note of radical scepticism into critical theory. It has been a noteworthy characteristic of critical theory, as it develops, to find authoritarianism in the methods of its immediate predecessors. Liberation from oppressive regimes, intellectual and political, is increasingly what we are being offered.

Poststructuralist Deconstruction

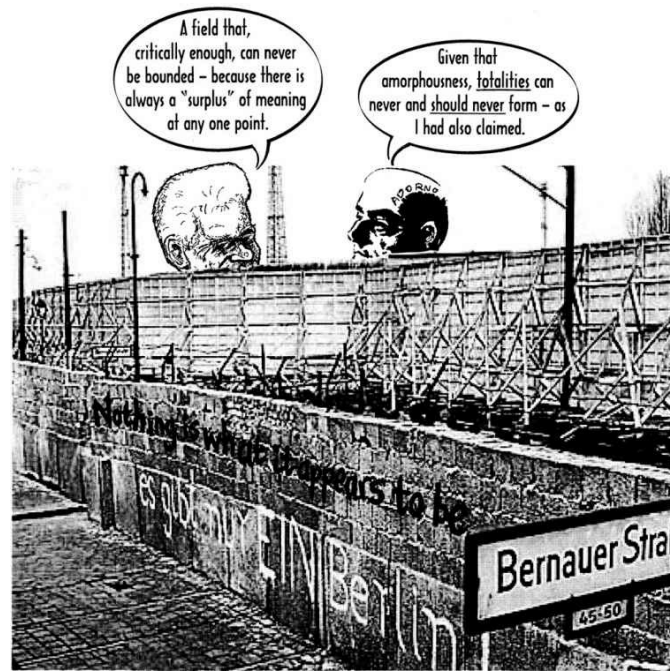
Arguably the most influential branch of poststructuralism, and definitely one of its most sceptic, has been **deconstruction**, as practised by its leading exponent **Jacques Derrida** (b. 1930). Derrida's early work constitutes a sustained attack on the structuralist founders – Saussure and Lévi-Strauss in particular. To his mind, structuralism is both authoritarian in manner and based on questionable philosophical premises.



Derrida argues that the standard conception of meaning in the West depends on an assumption of a “metaphysics of presence”, that is, the full meaning of a word is held to be “present” to the speaker, or writer, in their mind, as they use it. He has named this assumption **logocentrism** (*logos* in Greek has the sense both of “word” and “reason”).

Différance and Meaning

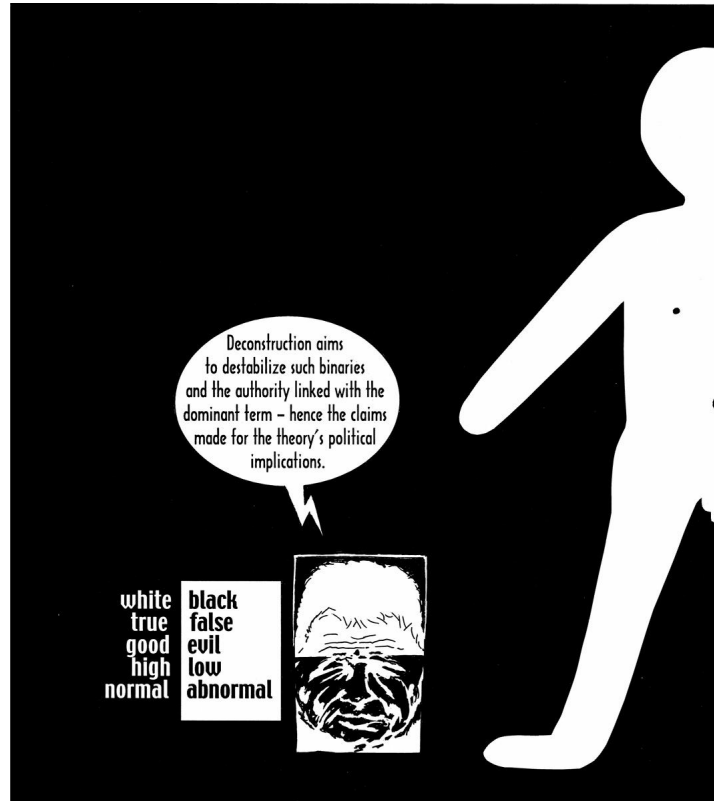
Such transparent presence of meaning can never be achieved, according to Derrida, because of the action of *différance*. He made up this word in French to describe the process by which meaning “slips” in the act of transmission. Words always contain within themselves traces of other meanings than their assumed primary one. It would probably be better to talk of a *field* of meaning rather than a precise one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning.



In deconstruction, we move from system-building to system-dismantling. Derrida's major concern is to direct our attention to the many gaps in our systems of discourse which, try as we may, we can never quite disguise. Deconstruction is a philosophy which very self-consciously sets out to deflate philosophical pretensions about our ability to order the world.

Deconstructing “Binary Oppositions”

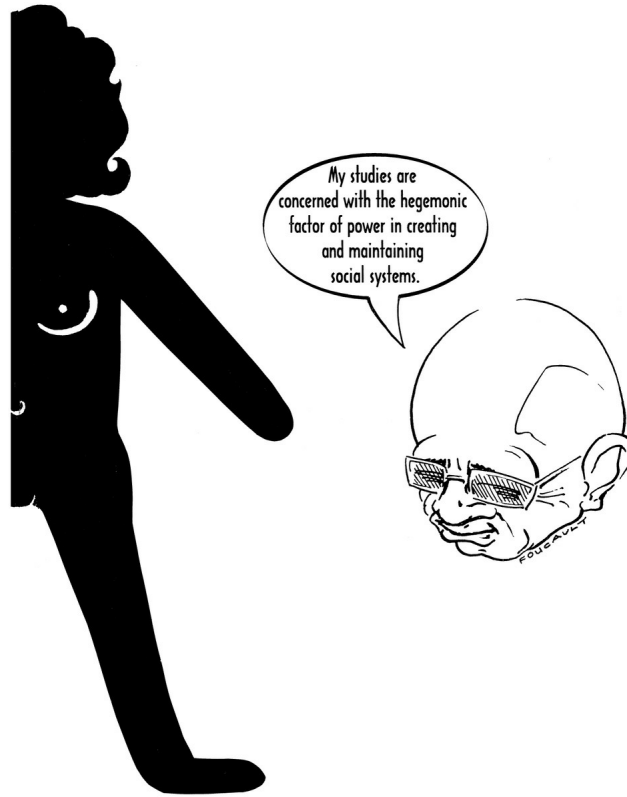
Part of Derrida’s objection to structuralism is its dependence on **binary oppositions**. He considers discourse in the West in general to be founded on a series of such oppositions. One term of the binary always takes dominant priority over the other. **Man/woman** would be one such example of a “loaded” binary.



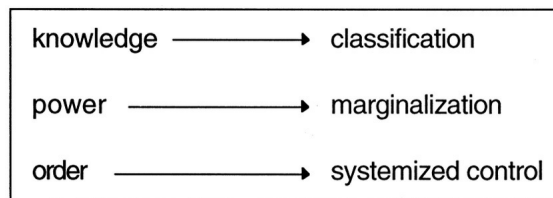
Deconstruction is no friend to the notion of hierarchy which is still deeply embedded even in the most liberal-minded of democratic societies. Feminists most certainly would agree with the notion of the man/woman binary being skewed in men’s favour. Keeping it that way is what patriarchy is all about. Queer theorists are equally concerned to destabilize the binary of straight/gay, in which “straight” is taken to be the dominant term.

The Order of Things

Michel Foucault (1926–84) is another French thinker who reacted against the formal rigidity of structuralism and its insistence that everything be neatly classified in terms of its system-bound role. Foucault deepened Gramsci's inquiry into the problem of hegemony.



For him, the creation of such systems implied the marginalization and exclusion of certain vulnerable social groups in the name of “order”. The fate of such groups became the central concern of Foucault’s historical inquiries: the hidden agenda he was determined to bring to the surface. He delved into the “unconscious” of power.



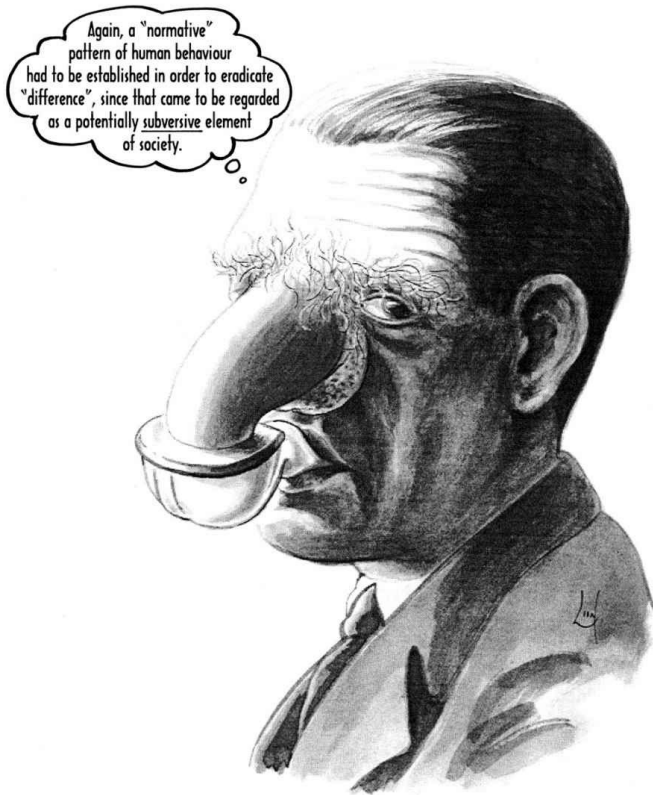
The Rise of Scientific Discipline

Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961) describes how the mentally ill were removed to asylums that formerly housed lepers. From the 17th century onwards, this was the "Great Confinement".



Discipline and Punish (1975) traced the rise of the modern prison service; *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) of modern medicine. In all three instances, we are witnessing the rise of "scientific" forms of social control by the authorities. The lives of individuals are to be strictly regimented.

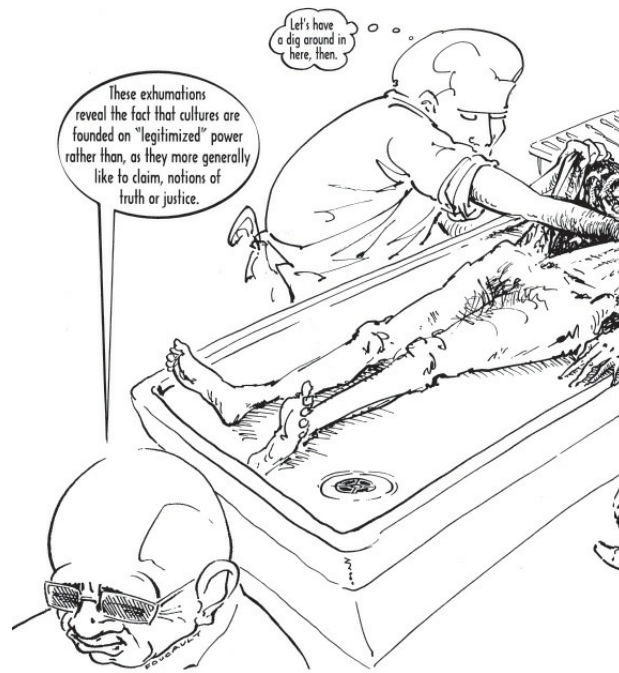
Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality* (1976–84) examined the process by which homosexuality (an unexceptionable form of sexual behaviour in classical Greece) was gradually outlawed by Christianity, until it was turned into a criminal activity.



Heterosexuality became the norm (and is still largely perceived to be so to this day), with all other forms of sexual expression being treated as deviations from that norm.

Uncovering the Hidden Discourse

Foucault described his historical researches as “archaeologies” or “genealogies”, designed to bring to light suppressed discourses in Western society.



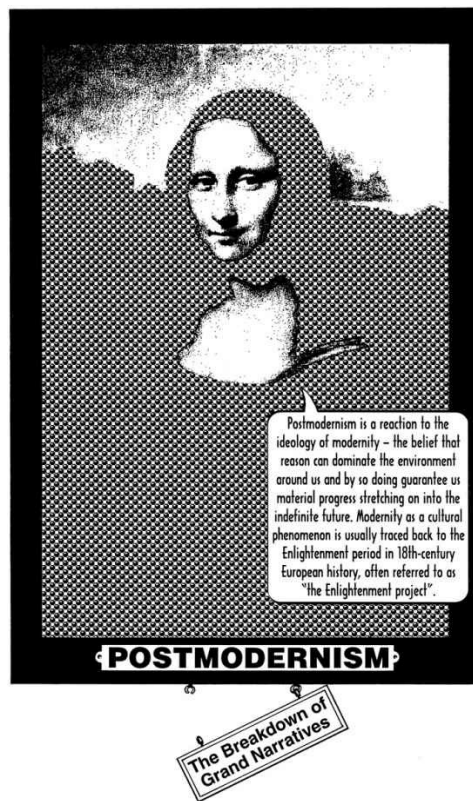
What we are studying in each case of knowledge, power and order is a particular “discourse” which, at base, is structured on power relations. As we shall see, new historicism and cultural materialism have proceeded to draw heavily on that notion.

The End of Humanism

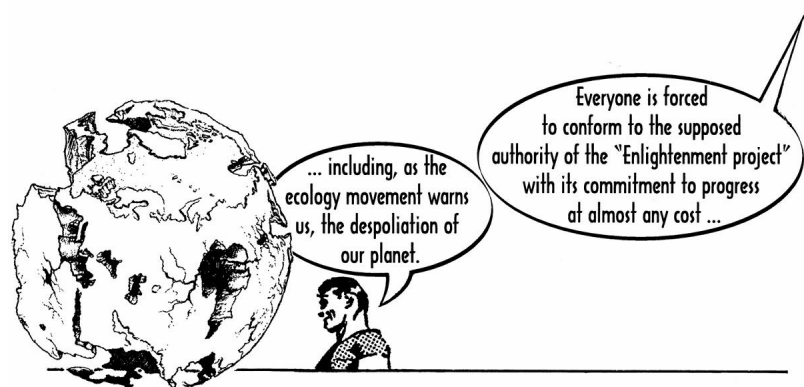
There is no such thing as a universal “human essence” for Foucault. Behaviour, ethics, discourses and societies can – and all do – change over time. Nor is there any pattern to human history, no sense in which we are progressing – for example, to some Marxist utopia. (Foucault rejected Marxism after dabbling with it earlier on.) Indeed, Foucault regarded our conception of “man” – that is, the liberal humanist vision of the individual as the possessor of certain inalienable natural rights – as a very recent invention.



Foucault’s vision of the human race was one that stressed *difference* rather than common elements. He continued to campaign for marginalized social groups – homosexuals, prisoners and ethnic minorities, for example – until the very end of his life.



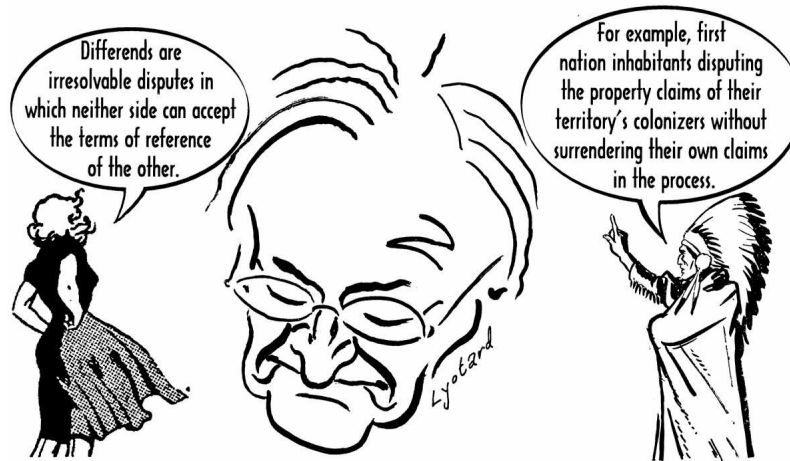
It was a “project” in the sense of actively seeking unlimited material **progress** and socio-political **liberation**. For postmodernists, modernity is a classic example of a “grand narrative” in action.



Again, the dislike of authority that is such a driving force in critical theory is much in evidence.

Lyotard's "Differends"

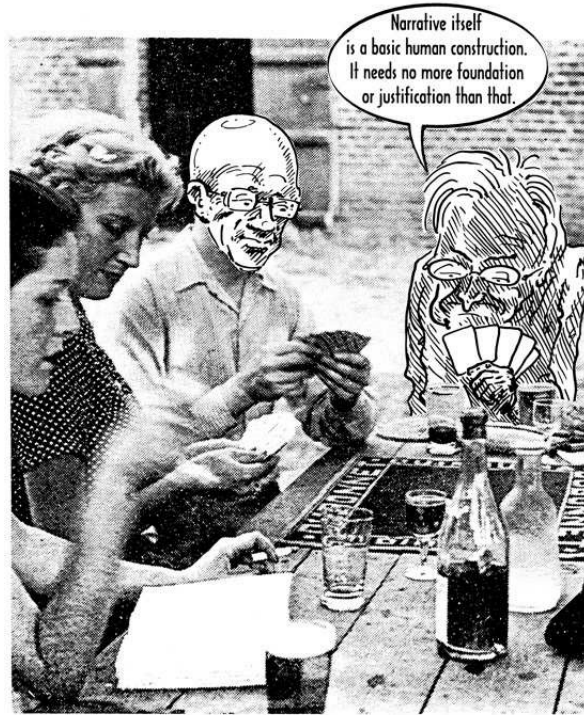
Jean-François Lyotard (1924–99) defined the postmodernist outlook as characterized by an attitude of “incredulity towards metanarratives”. He meant openly expressed disbelief in the ideology or grand narrative underpinning modernity and the Enlightenment project. Modernity tended to involve the suppression of what Lyotard called “differends”.



Unless these differends are respected, Lyotard contends, we drift into an authoritarian society in which many voices are simply silenced by the superior force of their opponents – as in the case of most first nation inhabitants in the “New World” who have found themselves marginalized and ignored by their colonizers.

The Postmodern Condition

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) might be regarded as the bible of postmodernism as a critical theory. Its attack on grand narrative – and championship of marginalized “little narrative” – inspired a whole generation of theorists and has been instrumental in setting the agenda for the postmodern movement in general.



Narrative only becomes problematical when it is worked up into a “grand” form that claims authoritarian or even **totalitarian** precedence over the multitude of “little” narratives (individual or small local group) that any society contains. We note here the kinship between Lyotard’s idea of “differends” and the emphasis on *difference* in Derrida and Foucault. So also his idea of “constructed narrative” allies him to Barthes and other poststructuralists.

Postmodern Science

Lyotard also argued that what he called “postmodern science” (quantum mechanics, catastrophe theory and chaos theory) provides a model for us in our intellectual inquiries. Such science was “producing not the known, but the unknown” – that is, more problems than solutions, as scientists delved deeper into the bizarre world of “anti-particles”, “strange attractors” and “deterministic chaos”.



Quantum mechanics asserts that we cannot plot the position of any sub-atomic particle with certainty.

Chaos theory permits randomness and determinism to exist simultaneously in systems.

Complexity holds that systems “self-organize” themselves into higher levels of development.

In each case, we are confronted with counter-intuitive notions which challenge both our ordinary experience and our concept of logic.

Scientific Narrative and Relativism

There are certain scientists, the astrophysicist **John D. Barrow** (b. 1952) for example, who accept that there are unbreachable limits to our knowledge. As far as scientific inquiry is concerned, there will always, of necessity, be an...

"Unknowable"

Nevertheless, we have already seen (pages 13 and 14) that...

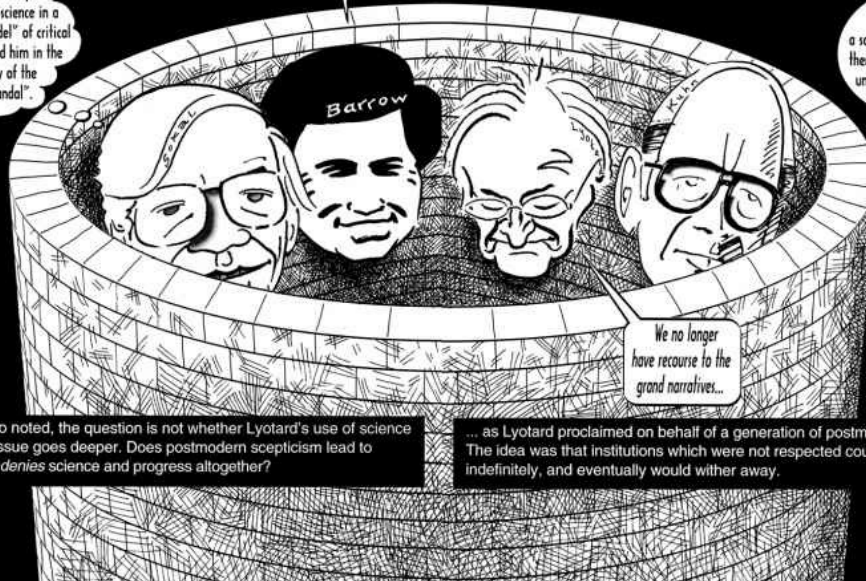
Lyotard's attempt to appropriate science in a "postmodern model" of critical theory enmeshed him in the controversy of the "Sokal scandal".

Any claim to be able to reach complete understanding of the nature of our universe is to be treated, therefore, with deep scepticism.

Science for Lyotard is just another series of narratives rather than a source of truth. This is a position close to the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn's conception of scientific "paradigms", revolutionary "shifts" in the perspectives of science that its hardline defenders would prefer to see as one uninterrupted, progressive storyline – a "grand narrative".

Quite illicitly, grand narratives claim to be a source of solutions to all our socio-political problems. Marxism and science are outstanding examples of this.

We are now encouraged to adopt a sceptical attitude towards them, with the objective of undermining their power and authority.



But, as we also noted, the question is not whether Lyotard's use of science is faulty. The issue goes deeper. Does postmodern scepticism lead to relativism that *denies* science and progress altogether?

... as Lyotard proclaimed on behalf of a generation of postmodern sceptics. The idea was that institutions which were not respected could not survive indefinitely, and eventually would wither away.

The Enlightenment, “Unfinished Project”

Many critics have taken issue with this rejection of the Enlightenment project. The German philosopher **Jürgen Habermas** (b. 1929), himself a product of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, is in the forefront. For Habermas, Enlightenment ideals are still worth pursuing: modernity is an “unfinished project” which, for all its flaws, should not be jettisoned.



Habermas defends the notion of **consensus** which postmodernist theorists have turned their back on in their obsession with difference or “dissensus”. The latter is politically suspect in his opinion, promoting division in our culture rather than a pragmatic approach to socio-political problems.

The Problem of Value Judgement

Poststructuralist and postmodernist critical theory sets many unresolved problems regarding value judgement. Lyotard is one of the few figures from that camp to engage with this issue in some detail. Value judgement becomes problematical in any system of thought which questions the validity of our foundations of discourse, since this tends to lead to a self-defeating relativism ...

... if all truth is relative, then does that statement itself become relative in its turn?



I call for "paganism" as a way of circumventing the problems of value judgement in a postmodernist universe.



You return to my
practical work to find a
method of ethics that needs
no grand narrative
foundation



Aristotle
(384 B.C.-
322 B.C.)

Paganism or Benthamism

Paganism demands that we make each judgement on a “case-by-case” basis with no over-arching system of rules to guide – or in any way constrain – our deliberations. “The judge worthy of his name has no true model to guide his judgements”, Lyotard argues. “The true nature of the judge is to pronounce judgements, and therefore prescriptions, just so, without criteria.”



Bentham’s “felicific calculus” prescribes always performing the action that leads to “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. The Ten Commandments (“thou shalt” or “thou shalt not”, regardless of consequences or happiness) are *out*.

Seductive though the idea of treating every case on its merits can be, the obvious problem with such a system is that it seems to leave us at the mercy of a judge’s individual whims (which the Ten Commandments do not).



The desire to undermine institutional authority, and its assumed authoritarianism, very quickly runs into such objections and charges of arbitrariness, although one can appreciate the general ideal that drives the desire.

Postmodernism in the Service of Capitalism

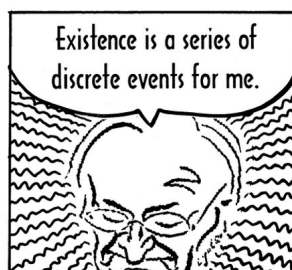
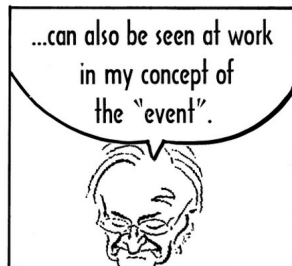
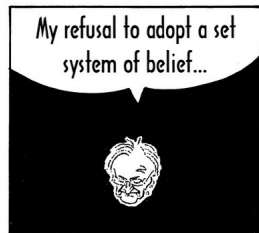


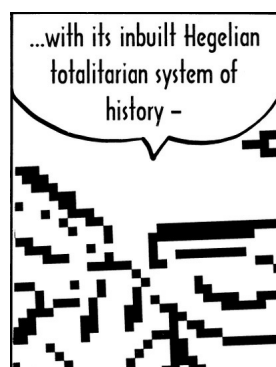
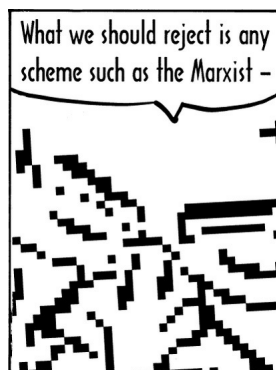
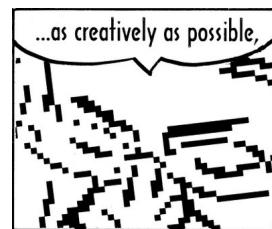
Fredric Jameson (b. 1934) argues that postmodernism's swing away from generalizing "grand narrative" theory serves the cause of capitalism. For Jameson, postmodernism is less a theory in its own right than a symptom of our current cultural impasse, in which all opposition to capitalism is being systematically eradicated.

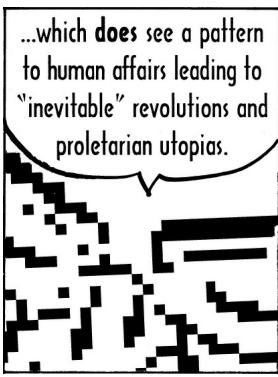


The old order's commitment to competing grand narratives – socialism versus capitalism, for example – can now be discarded. As Jameson points out, this simply leaves us defenceless against the power of global capitalism. Jameson still believes that the Marxist analysis of history is the correct one, and that a "new international proletariat" will eventually emerge to overcome late capitalism and its postmodern theories.

The "Case-by-Case" Event

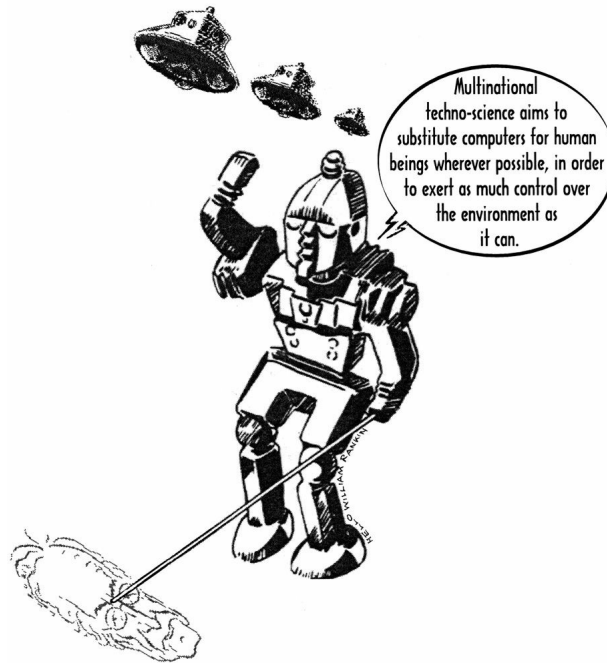




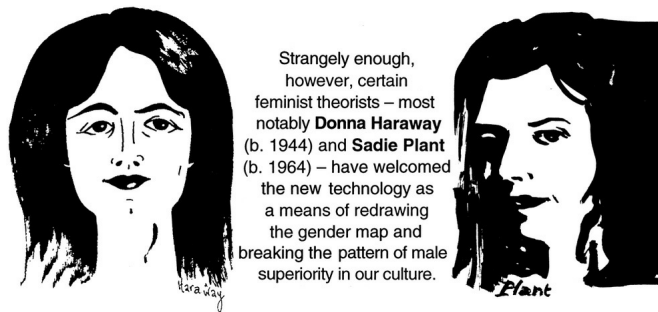


Techno-science and the human

In Lyotard's view, the future is always "open". He is deeply opposed to all attempts to foreclose this openness in any way. The "openness" in Derrida's "deconstructionist" criticism is very similar in this respect. Hence Lyotard's break with Marxism, and hence also his criticism in later life of the forces of "techno-science", the new technology as appropriated by the multinationals.



Lyotard dubbed this process a move towards "the inhuman". He called on humanity to resist this latest attempt to eliminate **difference** from the world. Computers – unlike human beings – are entirely predictable and controllable – and not much given to revolution against the authorities either!



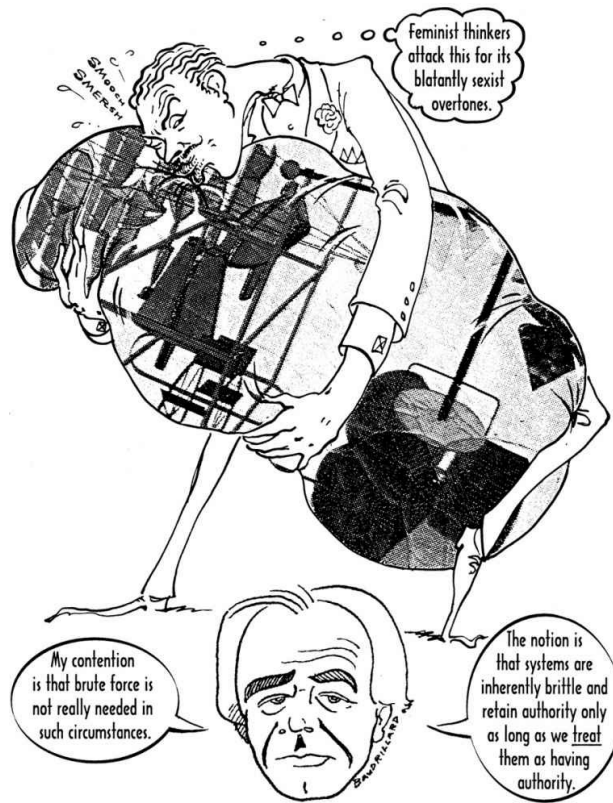
A Feminist Response to the Inhuman



"I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess", as Haraway provocatively declares. Some critics from within the feminist movement have been just as unhappy as Lyotard about such a move away from the realm of the human. One might see a "new humanism" developing at such points, to replace the old discredited one with its emphasis on competitive individualism.

The Sociology of Seduction

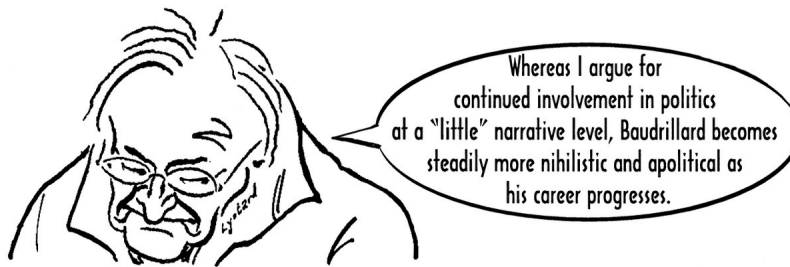
In a move similar to Lyotard's, French sociologist **Jean Baudrillard** (b. 1929) encourages us to use “seduction” on systems as a method of undermining their “masculinist” assumption of authority.



Once *you* lose your fear of systems, *they* lose any hold they had over you – systems can be “beguiled”. It would be nice if it were that simple, although in practice it rarely is. One wonders how one would go about “beguiling” the police force!

Against the Marxist Fetishism of Production

Baudrillard's work has been just as harsh as Lyotard's on the grand narratives of our time. Marxism is dismissed, for example, for having an obsession with production that rivals that of capitalism at its worst.



A World of Hyperreal Simulacra

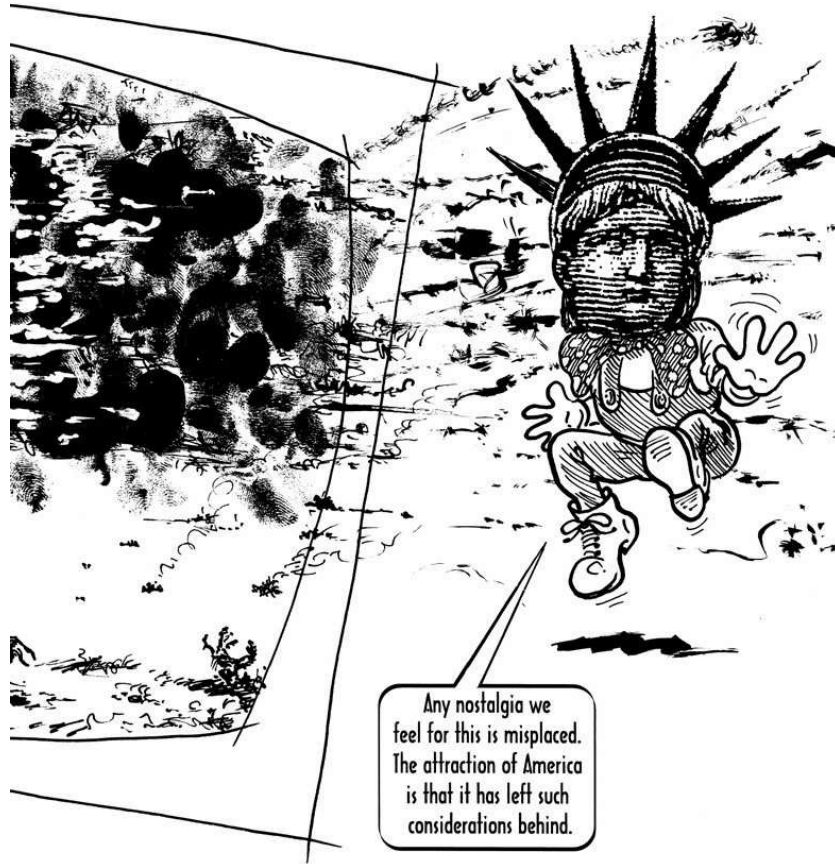
Baudrillard contends that we now inhabit a world of **hyperreal simulacra**.



He is attracted instead to “signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs”. The future is not so much open here, one might say, as *empty*.

Disneyworld America

To seek out “signs without referents” is to reject discourses such as Marxism and to render value judgements, political as well as aesthetic, more or less pointless. That does seem to be the message coming out of Baudrillard’s later work. Value judgement is criticized in his study *America* (1986) as an essentially European preoccupation that belongs to the past.



Postmodern America has gone *beyond* meaning into the realm of the “hyperreal”. Baudrillard even speaks of the desirability of the “extermination of meaning” by means of “theoretical violence” – which certainly brings the nihilism of his thought to the fore. Unless, of course, his rhetorical exaggerations are meant to provoke our reactions.

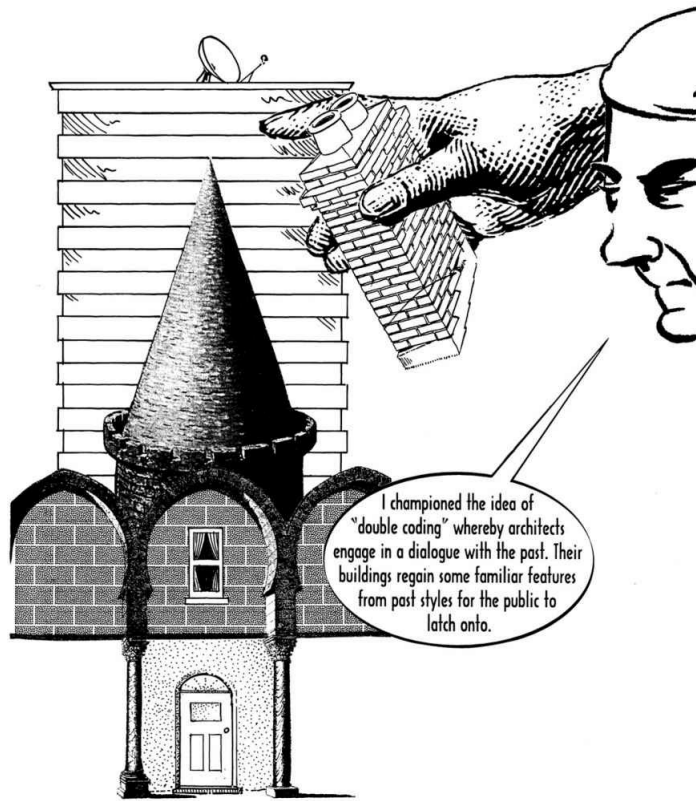
When Did Postmodernism Begin?

Postmodernism has also drawn extensively on the work of the American architectural theorist **Charles Jencks** (b. 1939), who provocatively argued that modernism died at the precise time that an award-winning example of modernist architecture, the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St Louis, Missouri (a fairly typical “new brutalist” project of tower blocks), was demolished.



The Double-Coding of Postmodernism

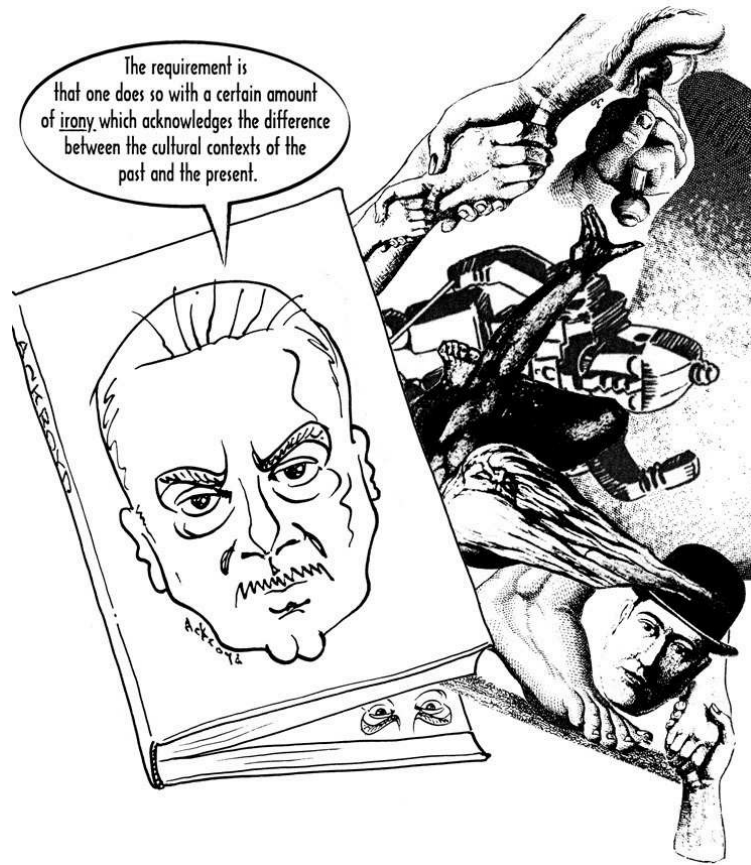
Jencks is a notable critic of this modernist new brutalism who claims that architecture should be able to work on several levels simultaneously, appealing to the general public no less than to the architectural profession.



The aim was to satisfy both one's peers and the public by mixing together past and present styles in a synthetic fashion. That has since become a very widespread architectural practice, as a glance around almost any Western city today will readily reveal.

Postmodern Pastiche and Irony

Much of postmodernist art and literature has adopted Jencks's principle of double coding. The idea is to "mix-and-match" familiar forms in deliberate *pastiche* quotation rather than experiment formally in the manner of the modernist movement. Painters have gone back to representational art, authors to "realist"-style novels – often consciously imitating the linguistic register of the past, as in the novels of **Peter Ackroyd** (b. 1949).



Even in the realm of postmodern theory we can see such principles at work. The new historicists – coming shortly – try to establish a sense of dialogue with older forms of historicist thought.

Anti-Oedipus and Schizoanalysis

On the wilder shores of postmodernism we find **Gilles Deleuze** (1925–95) and **Felix Guattari** (1930–92), whose *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) is an attack on the concept of authority in general and the allegedly authoritarian theories of Marxism and Freudianism in particular. Psychoanalysis for them is a repressive system which forces individuals to conform to restrictive social norms of behaviour. Deleuze and Guattari put their faith instead in “schizoanalysis”.



“Oedipus” becomes Deleuze and Guattari’s shorthand name for the complex of social and institutional pressures by which psychoanalysis tries to make us conform and repress our desires. Neither Freud nor Lacan comes out of this exercise particularly well.

Anti-Oedipal Networks of Communication

In *Anti-Oedipus* and its sequel, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari unleash a series of strange concepts designed to undermine our standard world-view – “desiring machines”, “bodies without organs”, “rhizomes” and “nomadic thought”, for example.



“Bodies without organs” are part of the process by which desire is repressed. Capital, for instance, constitutes the body without organs of capitalism: that is, its sterile and unproductive component.

“Rhizomatic structures” are put forward as the basis for developing new networks of communication. Their attraction for Deleuze and Guattari is that they operate in a non-hierarchical manner.



The Internet is viewed by its enthusiasts as having a similar rhizomatic form of operation. We also find echoes of the rhizome concept in Eco's semiotic "net" and "labyrinth". Rhizomes were also the favoured model of thinking for the philosopher **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889–1951).

~~Stay Sane - Keep Moving~~

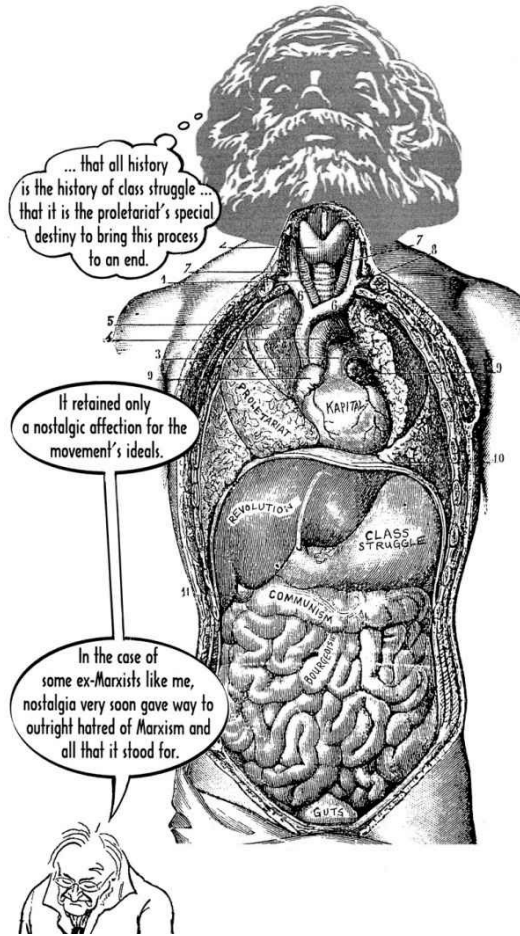
“Nomadic thought” becomes the ideal for Deleuze and Guattari. It is tied to no particular system or source of authority. Authority for them is inherently territorial and thus is the enemy of desire, which does not respect the concept of boundaries.



Which is to say that nomads simply ignore authority – much in the way that Lyotard is exhorting us to do in *The Postmodern Condition* by ceasing to pay any attention to fixed grand narrative territories.

Post-Marxism: The Breakdown of Marxism

By the later 20th century, Marxism began to lose support in the West. The brutal legacy of Communist tyranny in the Eastern bloc and Asia constituted an increasing source of embarrassment to the Western left. A position known as “post-Marxism” was gradually developed. In practice, it involved a rejection of most of the tenets of orthodox Marxism ...



“There is no need to criticize Marx, and even if we do criticize him, it must be understood that it is in no way a critique ... we laugh at critique”, as Lyotard dismissively noted in *Libidinal Economy* (1974). There is not much nostalgia in the attitudes of Foucault or Baudrillard either.

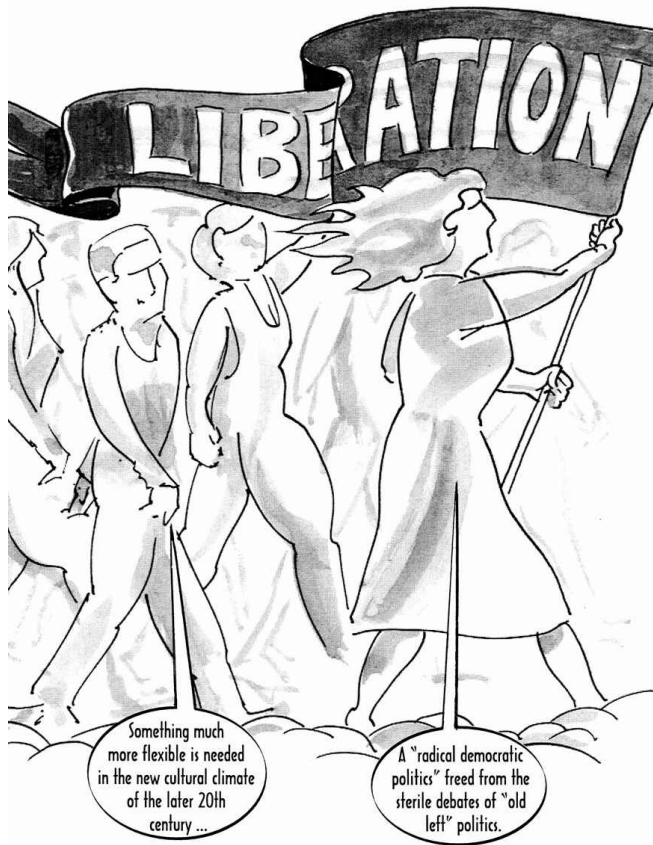
A Post-Marxist Answer to Capitalism

Post-Marxist theorists such as **Ernesto Laclau** (b. 1935) and **Chantal Mouffe** (b. 1943), on the other hand, deliberately draw on a wide range of poststructuralist, postmodernist and feminist thought to attack the evils of capitalist society. They adopt a very pragmatic attitude towards the construction of a new theoretical synthesis that builds on the liberationist ideals of Marxism.



A fresh approach was desperately needed if the onward march of capitalism was to be countered at all.

Laclau and Mouffe's controversial study *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) constituted a rallying cry on behalf of these new social movements, more worthy of support by the left than the out-of-date socialist programme of orthodox Marxism committed to centralized parties and trades unions.



Something much more flexible is needed in the new cultural climate of the later 20th century ...

A "radical democratic politics" freed from the sterile debates of "old left" politics.

The Failures of Marxian Theory

Laclau and Mouffe particularly took issue with the Gramscian concept of hegemony. This was little more than an admission of defeat in the face of some highly problematical gaps in Marxist theory. Hegemony attempts to explain why Marx's predications were taking far longer to come about than his theory had prescribed.



There was something obviously lacking in the theory *itself* that led to its failure to predict accurately.

There were flaws in Marxism's concepts of class and class consciousness, for example, that rendered it ineffective in cultural analysis. There was also a general failure to recognize that the world had altered in such a way as to undermine many of Marxism's most cherished beliefs.



To quote the title of a controversial book by one such theorist, **André Gorz** (b. 1924), it was a case of *Farewell to the Working Class* (1980).

Beyond Doctrinaire Marxism

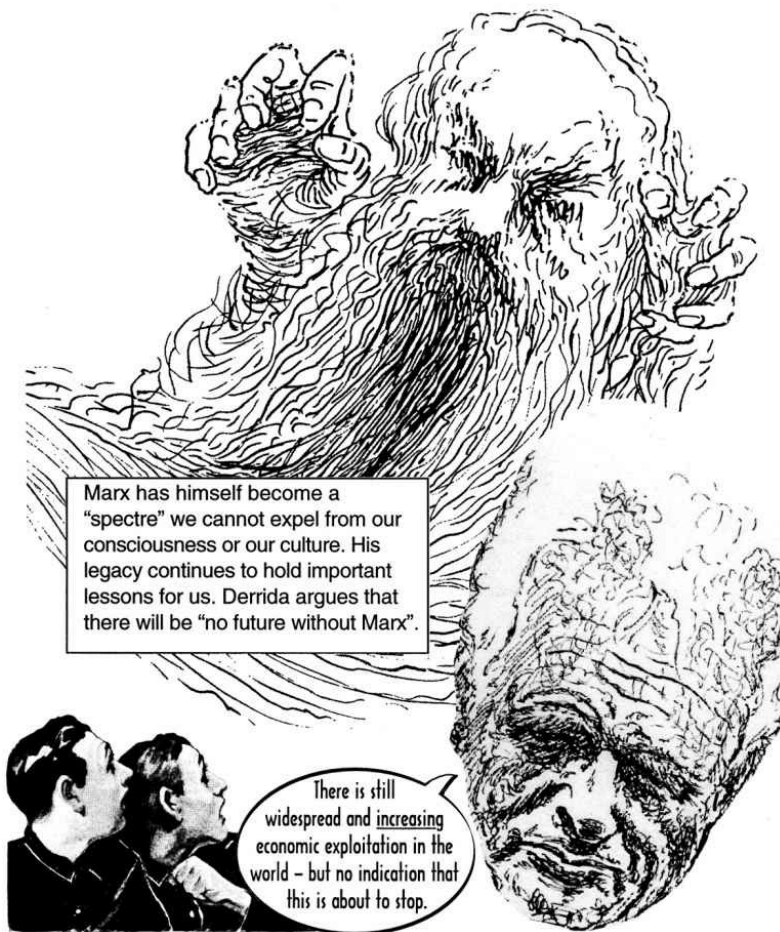
Post-Marxists in general reject the doctrinaire quality of orthodox Marxism which demands unswerving unity of thought and belief – as symbolized by the Communist Party – and almost pathological dislike of spontaneity and individualism. The call is for a much more pragmatic approach to cultural problems, free of the preconceptions of orthodox Marxist thought which refuses to countenance any tinkering with its basic philosophical categories.



Such ideas, floated by many post-Marxist thinkers, have outraged doctrinaire Marxists. Post-Marxists, on the other hand, want to retain the spirit of Marxism without any of its messy history of failure (to most of them) or authoritarian bias.

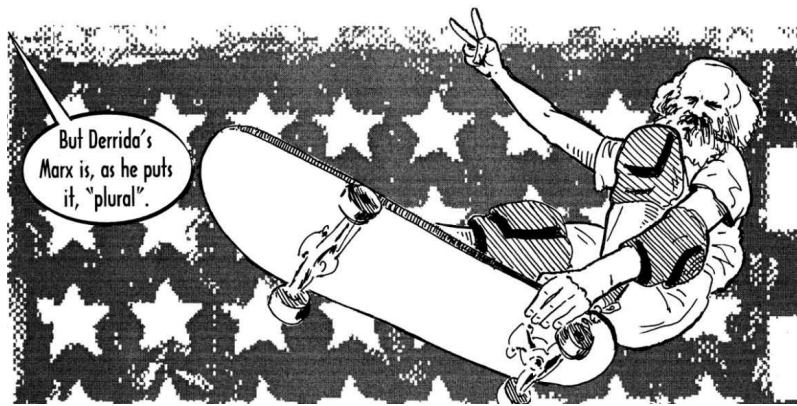
The Spectre of Marx

A particularly pertinent example of that attempt – to retain the spirit without the discredited content of Marxist thought – can be found in Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993).



The multinationals are very much in control. Political oppression is still rife too. Its continued existence calls for principled resistance from the left, just as it did in Marx's day.

A Plural Marx



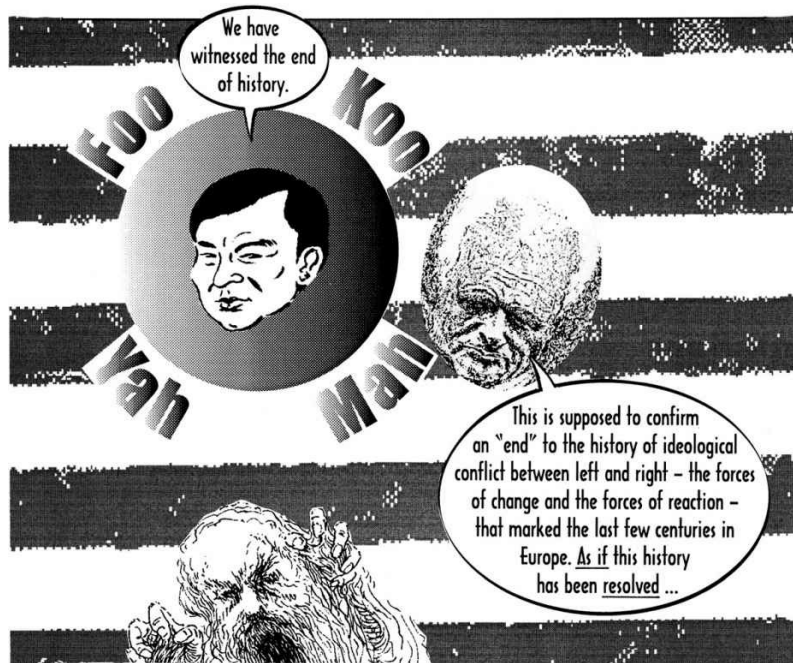
Marx was the first himself to say that his philosophy would be *shed* by changing historical circumstances. He is therefore *as a thinker* open to multiple interpretation and not some set body of doctrine to be followed blindly by acolytes no matter what the political situation.



But this is to be a much looser formation than the Communist parties of old. Derrida dismisses all the works of the Party “dogma machine” for having distorted Marx’s original message of **liberation**.

The “End of History”

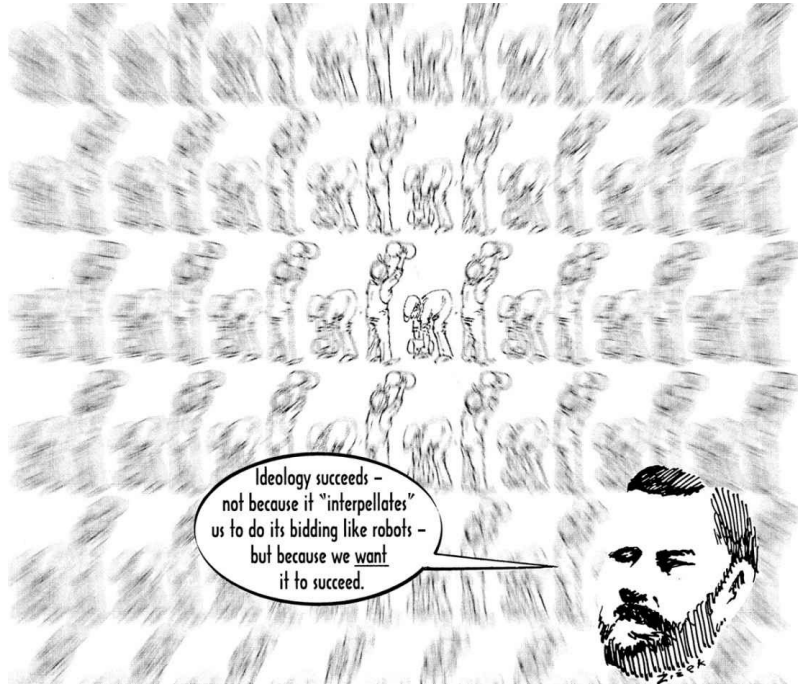
Derrida is particularly concerned in *Spectres of Marx* to refute the notion – current in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire – that liberal democracy had finally triumphed over all other forms of government.



The American political scientist **Francis Fukuyama** (b. 1952) even wrote a book called *The End of History* (1992) in support of this claim. To Derrida, this amounted to ideological disinformation. The “spectre” of Marx will continue to haunt us, Derrida insists, no matter what the ideologues of liberal democracy might think. Even if we wanted to, we could not simply eradicate him from our consciousness – and we should not want to, anyway.

Our Complicity in Ideology

One of the most thought-provoking figures in post-Marxism is the Slovenian cultural critic **Slavoj Žižek** (b. 1949). He challenges the assumption that ideology is a “conspiracy” by counter-proposing that we are all as individuals *complicit* in the operation of ideology. Žižek’s idea is that we are well aware of the gaps and contradictions in our ideology. We just turn a blind eye to them most of the time.



We *want* to believe that we live under a consistent system of belief, and, in effect, we *interpellate ourselves* to make it seem so.

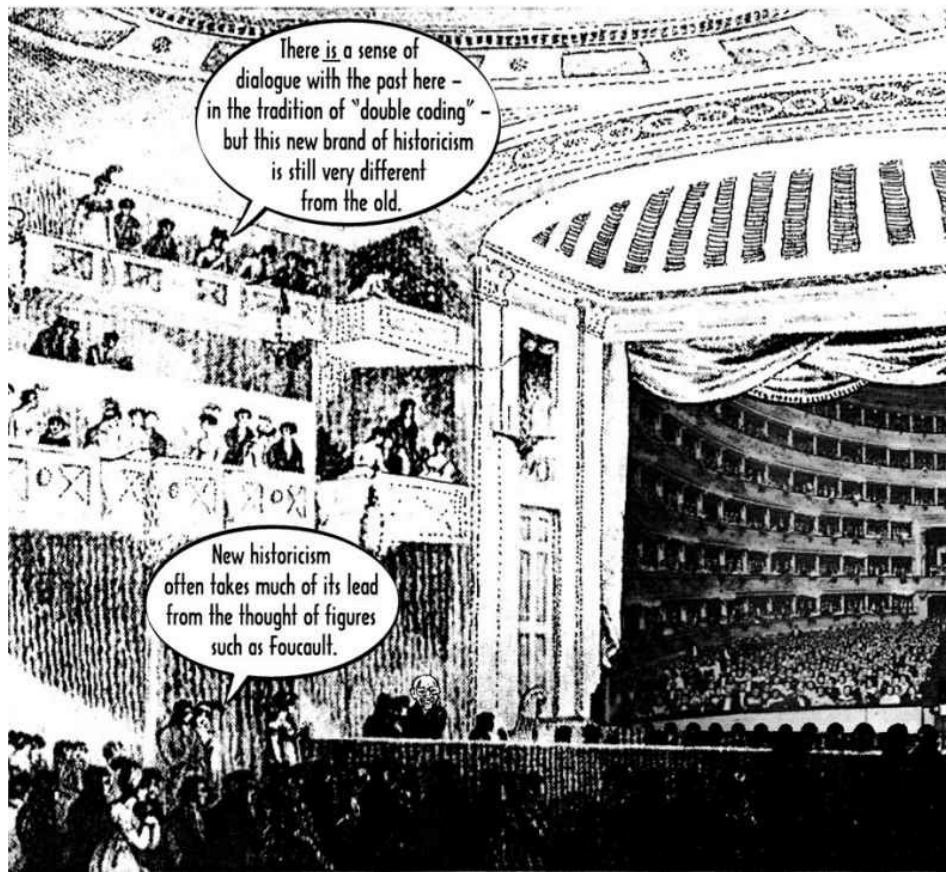
So, contrary to the views of Althusser and Gramsci, the “system” only works because we pretend to ourselves that it does. *We* fill in the gaps and disguise the contradictions, not some political élite on our behalf.



Rather like Lyotard, it becomes a case of withdrawing one’s support and waiting – or at least hoping – for the system to collapse. Again, it would be nice if it really were that simple. Žižek’s criticism does at least have the merit of “empowering” ordinary people who are otherwise seen as helplessly in the control of a political elite.

The New Historicism

Poststructuralism and postmodernism are essentially anti-historicist theories. They deny the existence of any “grand” pattern to history regarded as a steady progress towards some distant goal. But there was a return of sorts to historicist thought in the latter decades of the 20th century which took the form of “new historicism”.



Historical periods are treated as power struggles that leave their “imprint” on all the artistic production of their time. There is an echo of Marxist “reflection theory” here, discussed earlier, although of a much more sophisticated variety than Plekhanov’s crudely materialistic one.

The leading American new historicist critic **Stephen Greenblatt** (b. 1937), with his books *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), influenced the development of critical theory in the Anglo-American world. Greenblatt’s work on Renaissance literature emphasizes that such material is caught up in the power struggles of its time.



A much-imitated aspect of Greenblatt's analytical method is the juxtaposition of literary and non-literary texts in order to expose the power struggles of the time: a police report alongside a Shakespeare play, for example.

Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism is closely related to new historicism in style and method, and is perhaps best seen in the work of the English critics **Alan Sinfield** (b. 1941) and **Jonathan Dollimore** (b. 1948).



Both Sinfield and Dollimore have also been very active in Shakespeare studies. They argue strongly for a politicized reading of the plays, as opposed to the more conservative notion of Shakespeare as a universal genius far above the mere concerns of ideology (still a very prevalent notion in Britain).

A Politicized Shakespeare

Foucault is a clear source of influence in such studies.



The Theory of Postcolonialism

The American-Palestinian critic **Edward Said's** (b. 1935) *Orientalism* (1978) gave impetus to the development of postcolonialism as a significant area of critical theory in its own right. His study examined the way in which the Orient – in this case, what we now call the “Middle East” – came to be constructed in Western culture as a mysterious “other” onto which the West projected its fantasies, sexual and otherwise.



This is an area “beyond”, where normal Western morality and rationality cease to apply. A desire for decadence can be indulged. But there is also something to be feared in this “uncontrolled” area.

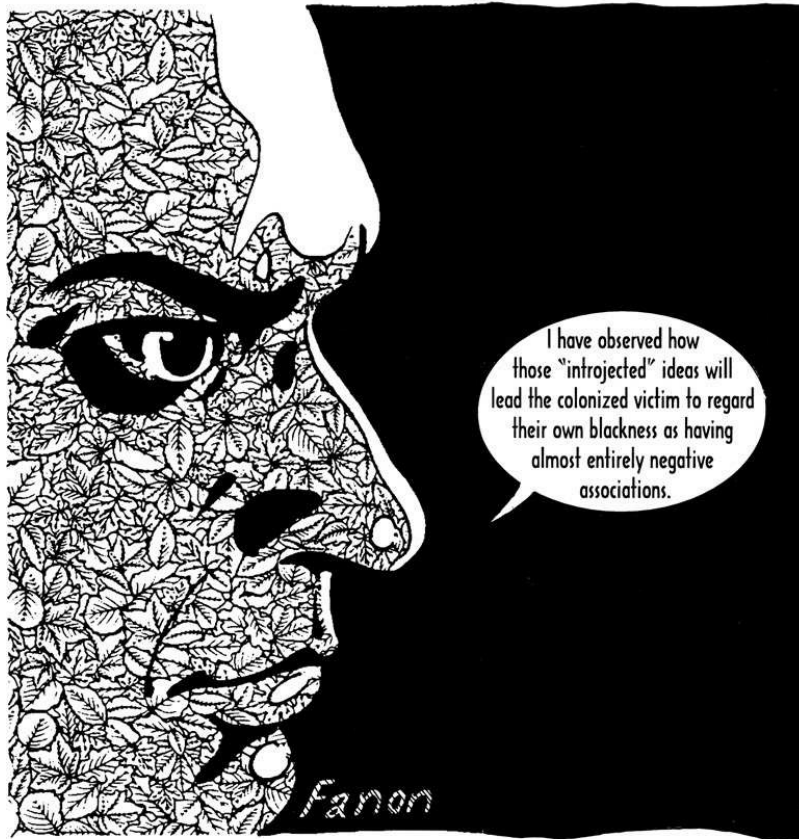
The West has deliberately “infantilized” the East. It has done so not only ideologically but as an excuse precisely to exert political control over the East. “Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”



A Palestinian himself, Said has been a leading voice in the movement for Palestinian self-determination, and a severe critic of Israeli state policy towards the Palestinian people.

Fanon's Anti-Colonialism

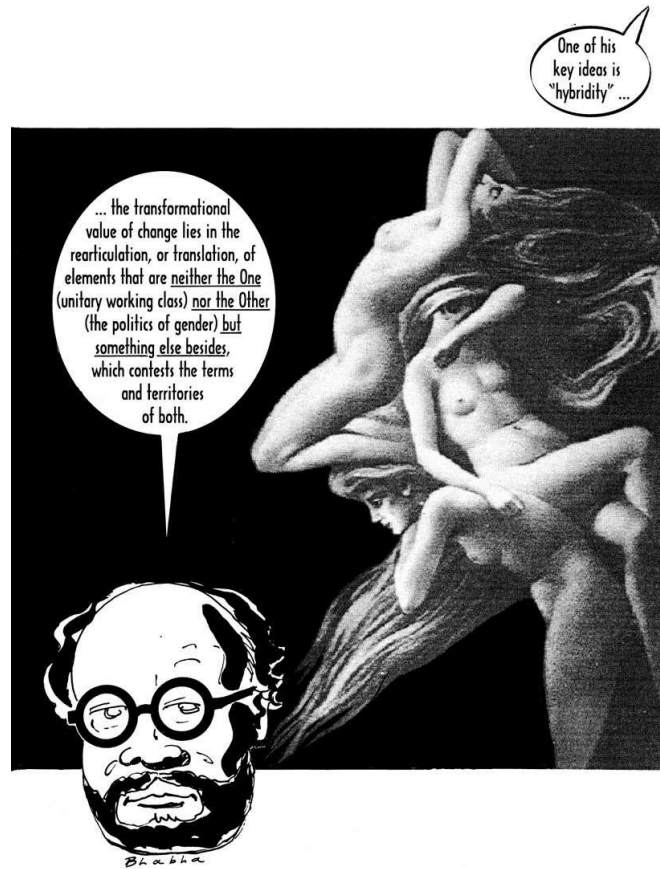
Said has drawn on the pioneer work of the psychiatrist and political theorist **Frantz Fanon** (1925–61). Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) explored the ways in which the black colonized races internalized the ideas of their white colonizers.



Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) uncompromisingly defends violence in the cause of overthrowing colonialism. The revolution in Algeria against the French in the 1950s and 60s became exemplary of what was needed. Fanon was an active member of the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN) at the time.

Poststructuralist Hybridity

More recently, the work of **Homi K. Bhabha** (b. 1949) has also had considerable influence on postcolonial debates.



That notion of "*something else besides*", with its anti-essentialist overtones, indicates the poststructuralist influences on Bhabha's thought.

Subaltern Studies

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1941) is a leading member of the Subaltern Studies group at Delhi University. She is best known for having introduced poststructuralist theories – especially Derrida’s deconstruction – into postcolonial debate.



As one of Spivak’s essays puts it, “Can the subaltern speak?” The concept “subaltern” was first defined by Gramsci in 1934; the New Delhi group use it for the Indian peasantry *doubly* oppressed, first by colonialism, then by India’s own political élite.

Theory as
Sexual Politics

FEMINISM

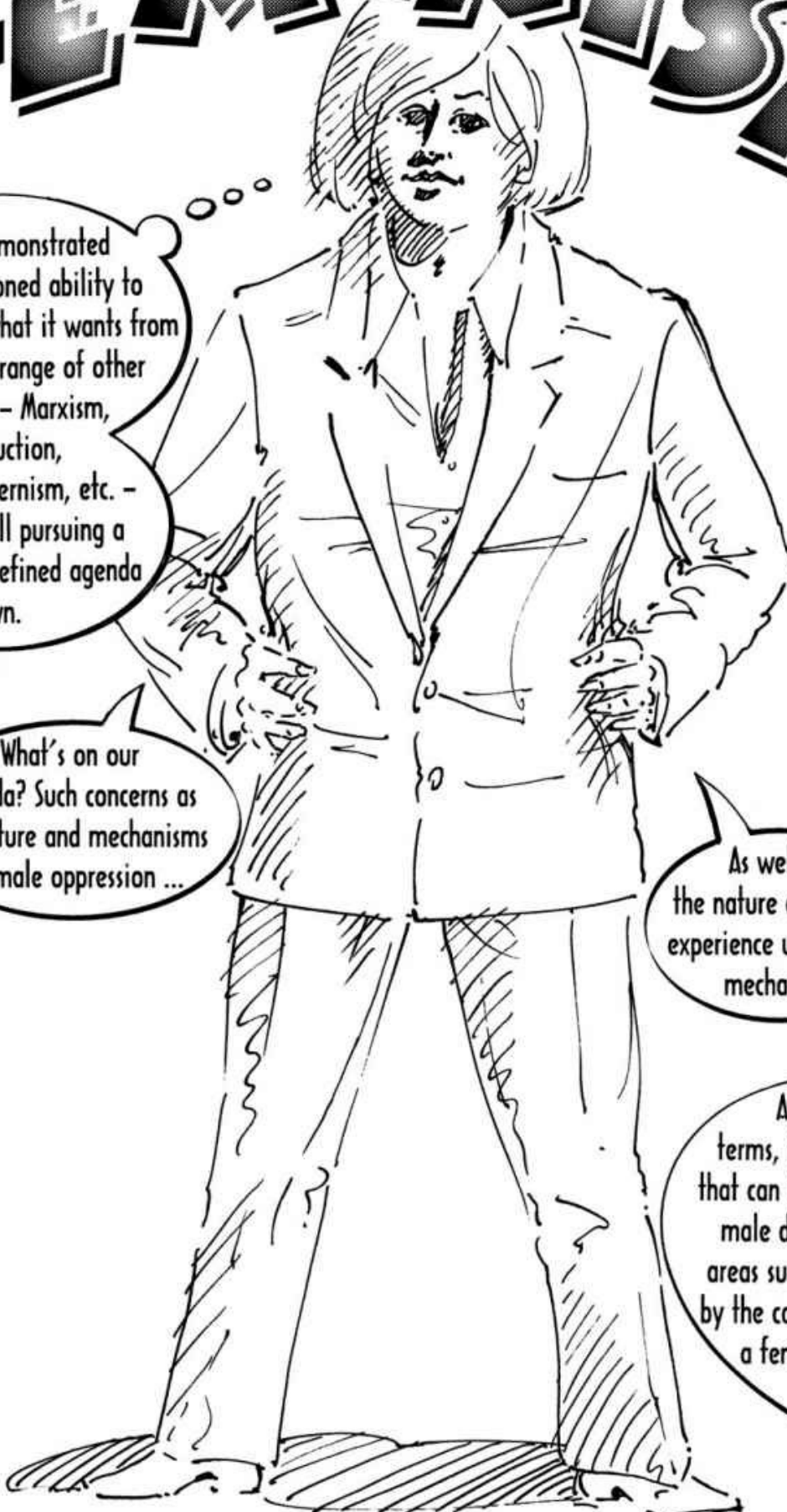
Feminism has exerted enormous
influence on critical
theory.

It has demonstrated
a well-honed ability to
absorb what it wants from
a whole range of other
theories – Marxism,
deconstruction,
postmodernism, etc. –
while still pursuing a
clearly-defined agenda
of its own.

What's on our
agenda? Such concerns as
the nature and mechanisms
of male oppression ...

As well as
the nature of female
experience under these
mechanisms.

And, in critical
terms, the challenge
that can be created to
male domination in
areas such as the arts
by the construction of
a female "canon"
of works.



A Feminist Literary Canon

Literary “canons” of Great Works have generally been weighted in the past towards male figures. Feminism’s challenge has led to the recovery and subsequent republication – often for the first time since the original edition – of a series of novels by hitherto neglected female authors of the 18th and 19th centuries. Two such works of recovery are **Dale Spender’s** (b. 1943) *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Novelists before Jane Austen* (1986) and **Elaine Showalter’s** (b. 1941) *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977).



Feminism and Marxism

So-called “second wave” feminism from the 1960s and 70s onwards has adopted a significantly more militant stance towards patriarchy than the “first wave” did. Such militancy has often involved heavy criticism of Marxism, held to be in league with patriarchy, if only unwittingly. The American feminist **Heidi Hartmann** (b. 1945) famously spoke of “the unhappy marriage between Marxism and feminism”.



Although Hartmann was still hoping that an accommodation could be reached, somehow or other, Marxism having its positive points, several of her contemporaries act as if the divorce has already taken place – and not before time!

Post-Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminists themselves have become increasingly critical of Marxism in the last few decades, and, while acknowledging the theory's scope and power, have come to regard it as a bastion of patriarchal attitudes holding back the cause of women.



Feminist thought now generally has a "post-Marxist" bias. It is no longer willing to wait until the "revolution" comes about for gender issues to be addressed seriously. Some feminists have even gone so far as to argue that the revolution is unlikely to happen at all *unless* gender issues are resolved first.

The Theory of Gynocriticism

Among the significant theorists of second-wave Anglo-American feminism, as far as the development of critical theory is concerned, we might instance Elaine Showalter, **Kate Millett** (b. 1934), the team of **Sandra Gilbert** (b. 1936) and **Susan Gubar** (b. 1944), and **Ellen Moers** (b. 1928).



The main concern of the gynocritic is to trace "the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition". The clear intention is to revise cultural history such that women are brought in from the *margins of discourse* where patriarchy historically has tended to banish them.

Against Patriarchy

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) had considerable impact on the development of second-wave feminist thought. Her denunciation of Freud sparked off an intense debate about his influence on patriarchy.



The work of **Juliet Mitchell** (b. 1940), *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), is a particularly notable “return to Freud” from a critical theory perspective.

Freud remains something of a battleground in feminist theory. It is still very much a live issue whether he furthers or retards the cause of women. Millett also emphasized the patriarchalist role played in literature by such novelists as **D.H. Lawrence** (1885–1930) and **Norman Mailer** (b. 1923).



Literature has in fact become one of the prime sites of second wave feminist research, and the representation of women one of its key concerns.

The Surplus Woman

The team of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) takes as an image of "subordinate woman" the "case-history" of Bertha Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). She is symbolic of women's vulnerability in a patriarchal society: a vulnerability felt no less by female authors than by their readers.



The madwoman in the attic comes to stand for female experience in general under the dominion of male power.

Against the Male Canon

Ellen Moers's study *Literary Women* (1978) is also representative of the growing desire in Anglo-American feminism to construct a canon around women authors. Her concern – as with Showalter and Spender – is to establish a specifically female literary tradition that breaks the male stranglehold on the canon.



The tradition that Moers and others seek is one that recognizably deals with key aspects of female experience over the past few centuries – such as childbirth and economic dependence on men.

“Heroinism” in Women’s Literature

Moers’s interest lies in “literary feminism”, or as she memorably dubs it, “heroinism”. Heroinism is the woman writer setting out “to create a heroic structure for the female voice in literature”. The phenomenon is datable from the late 18th and early 19th centuries.



“Gothik” is an example of what Moers calls “traveling heroinism”, or the “female picaresque”, which allowed women characters to be tested outside the domestic sphere and its lack of “adventure”. A capability for moral development was demonstrated by women that perhaps even outstripped that of men.

French Feminism: *écriture féminine*

French feminism is noticeably more theory-orientated than the Anglo-American. It is particularly concerned with the factor of “**difference**”, which carries Derrida’s hallmark. The concept of *écriture féminine* offers a direct challenge to the assumptions of patriarchy. The battleground in this case is language. For **Hélène Cixous** (b. 1937), *écriture féminine* constitutes a form of writing which enables women to present themselves as *they* want, rather than as men want them to be.



The differences between the sexes are such, it would seem, that they can hardly talk to each other any more. Cixous does allow that certain male writers – **Jean Genet** (1910–86) most notably – may aspire to the condition of *écriture féminine*.



The Undecidable of *écriture féminine*



Deciding what does, and what does not, come under the heading of *écriture féminine* therefore becomes a considerable challenge to authoritarian boundaries. "Difference feminists" seem to appreciate the freedom of manoeuvre that such vagueness creates.

Does Difference Lead to Separatism?

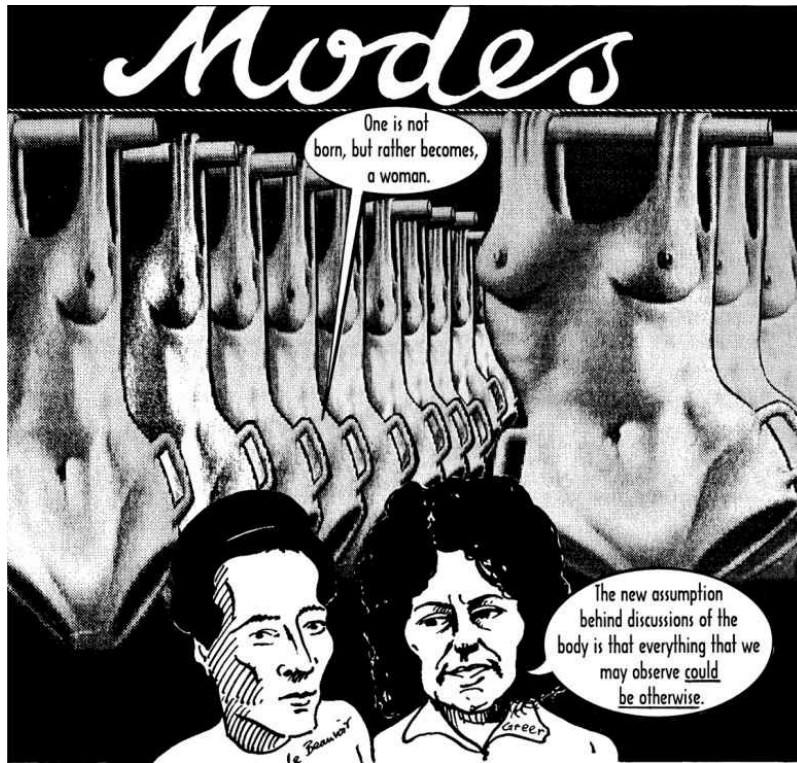
Luce Irigaray (b. 1932) has been a particular proponent of difference feminism. Women's identity is for Irigaray, unlike men's, very diffuse.



The most logical conclusion to such a belief is **separatism** from men, which did indeed become a very powerful movement within feminism in the last decades of the 20th century (with Irigaray being one of its most vocal champions), although its influence is of late on the wane.

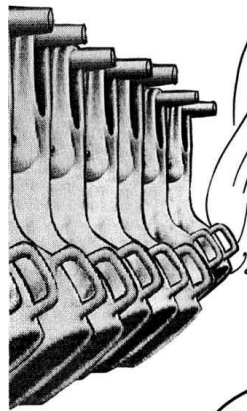
Two Champions of Modern Feminism

A classic pioneering work, *The Second Sex* (1949) by **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–86), set much of the agenda for modern feminism. Existentialism and Marxism combine in her challenge to society which demands “feminine” behaviour from women and “constructs” them in opposition to men as the assumed dominant sex. There is no biological or psychological necessity for this. Becoming a woman means being indoctrinated into a certain code of behaviour that can be resisted.



Germaine Greer (b. 1939) is one of many “second wave” feminists inspired by Beauvoir. Greer’s book *The Female Eunuch* (1970) detailed how women are schooled into constructing their bodies as objects of male desire.

Some feminists, for instance **Rosalind Coward**, complain of what they call “womanism”: the assumption that the female perspective is by definition the only correct one, and thus completely beyond any possible criticism.



The anti-womanist argument is a plea for a more inclusive feminism that does not simply discount the male perspective altogether.

Similar arguments against biological essentialism can be found in the work of Julia Kristeva.

I accuse difference feminism of having allowed itself to sink into an essentialist cult of Woman, whereas I want it to speak for both sexes.

Postfeminism and Positive Womanhood

We can now even speak of **postfeminism**. It stands in relation to feminism much in the way that post-Marxism does to Marxism. The attack on womanism might be seen as an instance of this phenomenon in action.



A Parallel with Post-Marxism

Although it is at best a loose term, postfeminism represents something of a backlash against the more doctrinaire forms of feminist thought. But it has been attacked in its turn for being anti-feminist. **Tania Modleski** (b. 1949), for example, has accused postfeminists of “negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism – in effect delivering us back to a prefeminist world”.

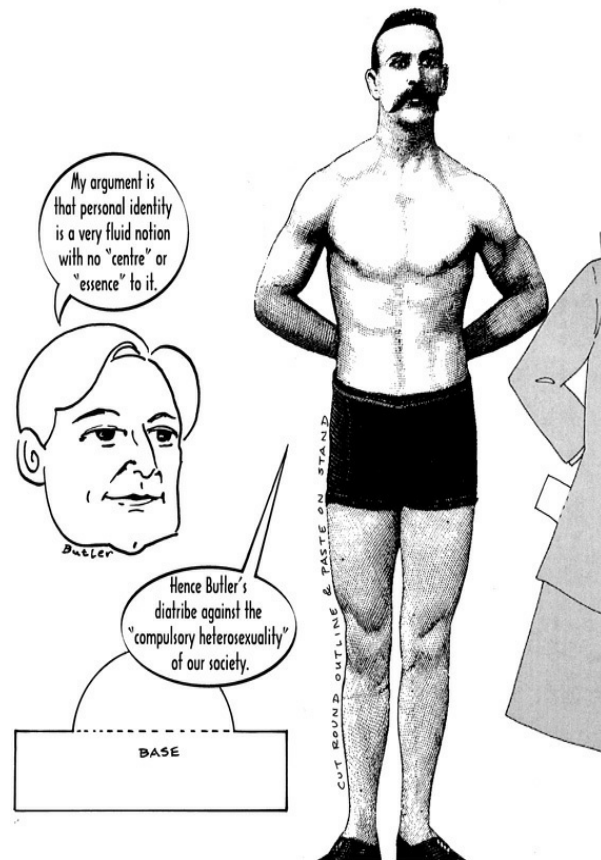


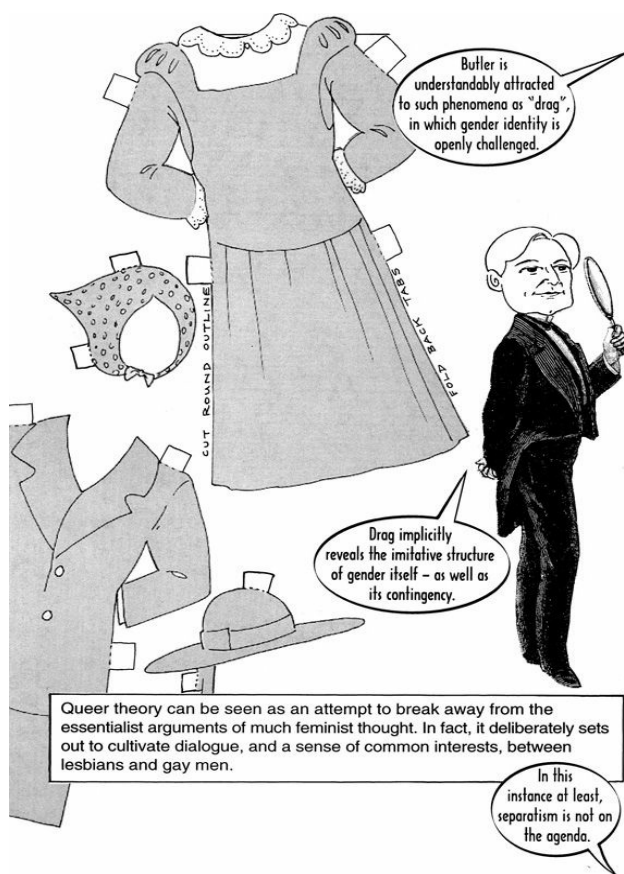
The critique of orthodox feminist thought constitutes yet another rejection of “grand narrative” – in this instance, of second-wave feminism with its essentialist bias and separatist sympathies. Postfeminists share the tendency of their post-Marxist, postmodernist and poststructuralist counterparts to view their predecessors as **authoritarian**.

Queer Theory and Sexual Identity

Queer theory, heavily influenced by both deconstruction and postmodernism, is a late 20th-century development in the field of critical theory.

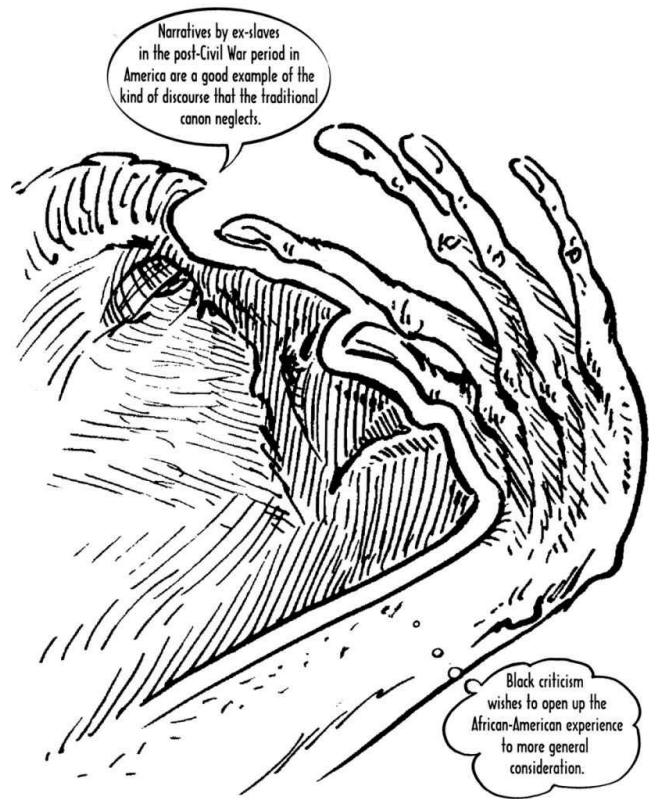
It addresses itself to the nature of sexual identity. In **Judith Butler**'s (b. 1956) words, it attempts "to destabilize the entire system of sex regulation", and "binary oppositions such as gay/straight". Butler herself has promoted the idea of gender as "performance": "a kind of impersonation", as she puts it.





Black Criticism

Black criticism is another recent development in critical theory with a specific political agenda to pursue. Like feminist criticism, it is much concerned to create an alternative canon of writing, this time based on black writers.

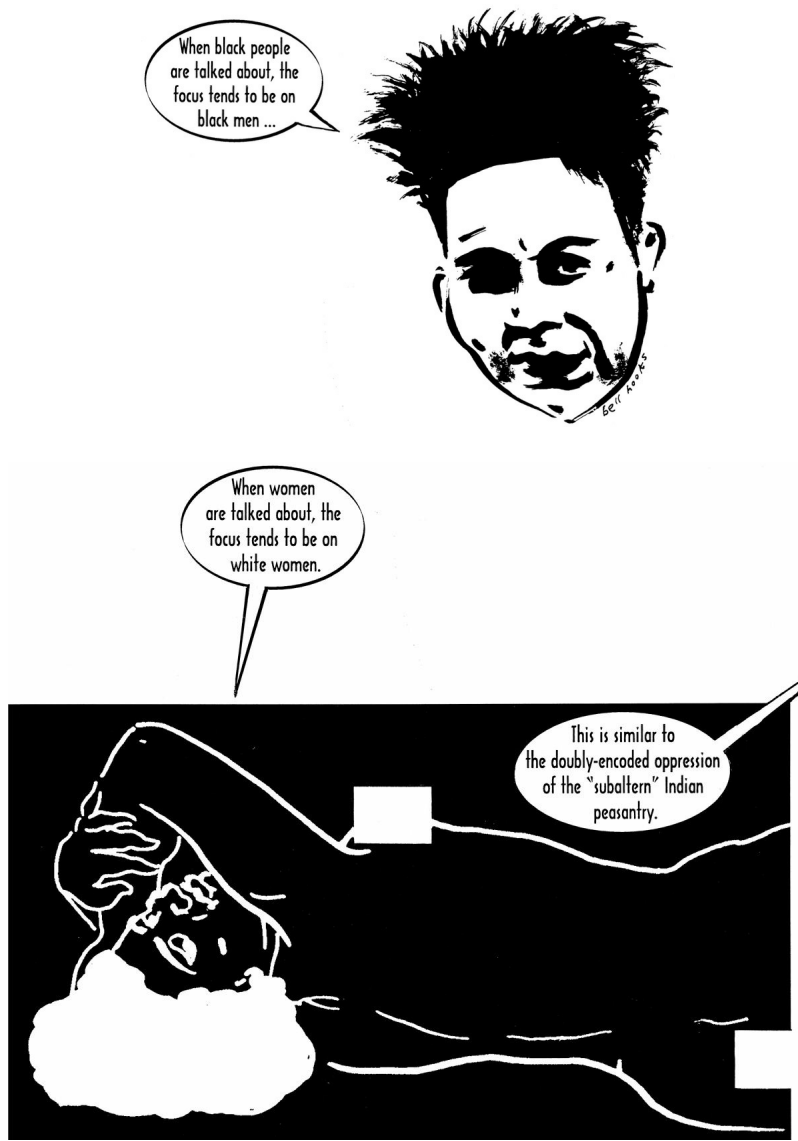


One of the most influential figures in this movement has been **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.** (b. 1950). He draws extensively on poststructuralism and postmodernism in his writings on the African-American literary tradition. In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Gates argues that there is often a hidden discourse within black writing itself.

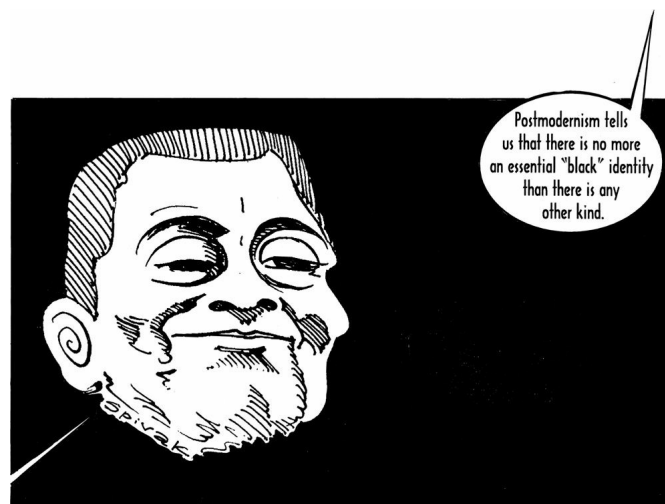


Black Feminist Criticism

Another theorist to make use of poststructuralist–postmodernist thought in this critical area of discourse has been the black feminist **bell hooks** (b. 1952). In her best-known book, *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), hooks points out that black women are doubly discriminated against culturally.



Black female experience is seen to be yet another suppressed discourse which needs to be teased out by the critic. Taking inspiration from postmodern theory, hooks calls for the construction of a “politics of difference” in which “multiple black identities” can be allowed to express themselves.



Theory is **POWER!**

There is a notably oppositional quality to both past and recent critical theory which renders it potentially quite subversive, culturally speaking. The emphasis is on the “critical”. A libertarian political agenda of some form or other has always been a force behind the scenes.



Rather, it constitutes a principled intervention into cultural politics. Arguably, the more “theorized” we are, the more impact our interventions will have. It is often remarked that “knowledge is power”, but we might just as easily say that “theory is power” too, once you know your way around it.

Critical Theory and a Pluralist World

Critical theory is an innately pluralist exercise. It presents us with a range of possible methods and perspectives by which to analyse not only cultural artefacts but also their *contexts* – social, political, historical, gender, ethnic. Pluralism is very much the current cultural paradigm in Western culture. Critical theory helps to reinforce this by fostering debate between various readings and “multiple interpretations”.



In that sense, critical theory helps to promote the cause of democratic pluralism, and is therefore an integral part of the current political scene. **Theory is power.** This is not merely an academic exercise for “intellectual mandarins”, but a perspective on awareness and a talent well worth developing for all of us.

Further Reading

The list below comprises some general introductions to critical theory and to key movements within the field.

Barry, Peter, **Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). A well-organized, user-friendly survey of the major movements, with the emphasis on the literary side of things.

Culler, Jonathan, **Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature** (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975). Comprehensive study of structuralism that still holds up well over a quarter of a century later.

Eagleton, Terry, **Marxism and Literary Criticism** (London: Methuen, 1976). Solid and concise introduction to the field's most important figures and debates.

Gamble, Sarah, ed., **The Icon Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism** (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999; shortly to be republished by Routledge). Comprehensive study of the development of feminist thought and its impact on contemporary culture, complete with extensive glossary of key themes and figures.

Moi, Toril, **Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory** (London: Methuen, 1985). One of the first attempts in English to capture the full range of feminist literary theory, with coverage of both Anglo-American and French approaches.

Norris, Christopher, **The Deconstructive Turn** (London: Methuen, 1983). Spirited defence of the value of deconstruction, in particular the work of Derrida.

Sarup, Madan, **An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism** (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1988). Clear exposition of the major concerns of these movements, with particular reference to the thought of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault.

Selden, Raman, and Widdowson, Peter, **A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory** (Harvester: Hemel Hempstead, 1993 (revised edition)). Highly regarded general introduction, much used in literature degrees.

Sim, Stuart, ed., **The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought** (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1998; shortly to be republished by Routledge). Comprehensive study of the impact of postmodernism on the major discourses of Western culture, with an extensive glossary of the major concepts and figures involved in postmodernism's development.

Sim, Stuart, **Post-Marxism: An Intellectual History** (London: Routledge, 2000). Wide-ranging account of the development of dissenting trends within Marxism, from the movement's early stages through to the emergence of post-Marxism.

Sim, Stuart, 'Structuralism and Post-structuralism' and 'Marxism and Aesthetics', in Oswald Hanfling, ed., **Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 405–39 and 441–71. Two historically-based essays outlining the major concepts and concerns in structuralist, poststructuralist and Marxist critical theory.

Glossary of Terms

Alienation: Many modern thinkers and artists have claimed that a sense of alienation from other human beings is the natural human condition. Marx, on the other hand, argued that individuals were alienated from each other by the dehumanizing processes of industrial labour.

Archaeology: Michel Foucault's term for his historical researches into the hidden discourses of Western society (such as its suppressed history of homosexuality). The aim of these archaeologies was to show that Western culture was based on power relations rather than such idealistic notions as truth or natural justice.

Aura: According to Walter Benjamin, the unique quality which differentiates a work of art from its reproduction. A critical factor in the development of this aura is the cultural history of the artefact itself – its sense of belonging to a certain tradition.

Base/Superstructure: In classical Marxist theory, society is made up of an economic base or infrastructure and a superstructure which comprises all other human social and cultural activities. The base is held to dictate the form that those various activities – religion, the law, politics, education, the media, the arts, etc. – will take.

Body-without-organs: The term used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to describe the complex of forces in our society which strive to repress the expression of individual desire. Capital, for example, is treated as the body-without-organs of the capitalist.

Carnival: Mikhail Bakhtin saw the institution of carnival as a model for subversion of socio-political authority in the way that it parodied the ruling class. The comic genius Rabelais was for Bakhtin an excellent example of the application of the carnival spirit to literary narrative.

Chaos theory: Chaos theory emphasizes how sensitive systems are to changes in their initial conditions, and how unpredictable this makes their behaviour. One of the most disturbing aspects of the theory is that it allows for the simultaneous presence of randomness and determinism within systems.

Class consciousness: The sense of belonging to a specific social class, whose common interests create a sense of solidarity in its members. Marxists believe that when the proletariat, for example, reaches an awareness of its exploited status, then there is the basis for a social revolution.

Complexity theory: Complexity theory argues that physical systems can evolve to higher levels of development through spontaneous self-organization. This phenomenon can be seen at work in organisms as diverse as human consciousness or the entire universe – possibly even within the more sophisticated computer networks.

Compulsory heterosexuality: The contention that heterosexuality is viewed as the sexual norm in Western societies, with all other sexual practices being treated as deviations. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and the queer theory movement have argued that this inhibits the full expression of our sexual natures.

Critical realism: Georg Lukács's term for literary narratives that demonstrate how the economic system forms human character. In the case of capitalism, this is assumed to encourage the development of competitiveness and self-interest. Lukács did not require the author to condemn this practice, merely make it apparent to the reader.

Cyborg: The combination of human and machine (the term is a contraction of “cybernetic organism”). In the work of Donna Haraway, this notion is celebrated as a way of escaping human, and most particularly gender, limitations.

Death of the author: A concept devised by Roland Barthes to describe the process by which texts take on a life of their own after they leave the author. Henceforth, they become the province of the reader, who is in no way bound by whatever the author's intentions may have been.

Deep structure: In structuralist theory, systems are held to have deep structures which dictate how they operate. Roland Barthes, for example, assumed an underlying structure of rules to narrative. Another way of thinking of deep structure is as something similar to a genetic programme.

Defamiliarization: The process by which literary language renders the everyday unfamiliar to the reader. By “making strange” the aspects of our world, authors force us to notice what we normally take for granted. The concept was coined by Viktor Shklovsky.

Desiring machine: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari see individual human beings as motivated by the need to find an outlet for their libidinal energy: in their terminology, as “desiring-machines”. Much of modern society, in their view, is dedicated to suppressing this drive.

Deterritorialization: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari regard institutional authority as inherently territorial in mentality. Attempts to contest the boundaries that institutions set therefore count as acts of deterritorialization. Nomadic thought (q.v.) is an example of such transgressive behaviour.

Dialectical materialism: In the Hegelian dialectic, thesis generates antithesis, with the conflict between the two resolving itself into the creation of a new thesis or synthesis. Marx took over this scheme, but located it in the material world where it manifested itself in the struggle of one class against another. Resolution would come about in our own era when the proletariat overcame the bourgeoisie.

Dialogism: Mikhail Bakhtin conceived of meaning as in a constant process of negotiation between individuals in a given society; that is, as “dialogic”. Rather than being fixed, meaning is plural and always open to reinterpretation – and the same can be said of any narrative.

Différance: The neologism coined by Jacques Derrida to describe the way in which words fail to achieve fixed meaning at any one point. Meaning is always indeterminate to Derrida – both “differed” and “deferred” – and *différance* is the movement within language that prevents it from being

otherwise.

Difference: In poststructuralist and postmodernist thought, difference is always emphasized over unity, and is taken to be an inescapable aspect of human affairs. Systems, and texts, are held to be internally marked by difference and incapable of achieving unity: rather, they lend themselves to multiple interpretations.

Differend: Jean-François Lyotard's term for an irresolvable dispute, in which each side starts from incommensurable premises. An employer and an employee debating employment rights would be one example; colonizer and colonized debating property rights another. Traditionally, what happens is that the stronger side imposes its will on the weaker.

Discourse: In the work of Michel Foucault, discourse constitutes a social practice governed by an agreed set of conventions. Medicine is a discourse, as is law, or any academic discipline. Discourses are founded on power relations, and function something like paradigms (q.v.) in Thomas Kuhn.

Double coding: Charles Jencks's term to describe how postmodern architecture ought to work; that is, to appeal to both a specialist and a general audience. Modernist architecture had signally failed to do so, in his opinion, restricting its appeal to specialist practitioners only.

Écriture féminine: French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have argued that women should develop a style of writing uniquely their own, self-consciously distancing themselves from patriarchal modes of expression. Other than a certain fluidity of meaning, however, it is difficult to specify what the style actually involves.

Enlightenment project: The cultural movement, dating from the Enlightenment period in the 18th century, that emphasizes the role of reason in human affairs and is committed to material progress and the liberation of humankind from political servitude. Modern culture is based on these premises.

Epic theatre: A theory of drama developed by the playwright Bertolt Brecht which demanded that, rather than providing an illusion of real life, theatre should make its artifice visible by "alienation effect" to the audience. Theatre that did so, Brecht thought, would then become a critique of the dominant values of its society.

Grand narrative: In the work of Jean-François Lyotard, a grand narrative constitutes a universal explanatory theory which admits no substantial opposition to its principles. Marxism is one such example, liberal humanism another, with ideology in general tending to operate in such an authoritarian manner.

Gynocriticism: According to Elaine Showalter, the proper object of feminist critics is texts that concentrate on female experience, or "gynotexts". The concern of gynocriticism is to trace the development of a specifically female literary tradition, thus challenging patriarchal accounts of literary history.

Hegemony: In Marxist theory (particularly the work of Antonio Gramsci), hegemony explains how the ruling class exerts domination over all other classes by a variety of apparent "consensus" means, including the use of the media to transmit its system of values.

Heroinism: Literature by female authors in which the female protagonists are placed in situations which test their characters and require them to display heroic behaviour in order to survive. The term was devised by Ellen Moers, for whom 18th-century Gothic novels were an example of "travelling heroinism".

Heteroglossia: Mikhail Bakhtin's term to describe the intertextual (q.v.) nature of novels. The novel is a very flexible and open form, capable of referring to a multitude of cultural discourses. Bakhtin saw this as subversive since it resisted the unifying (that is, conservative) forces operating within most cultures.

Homology: Lucien Goldmann's work explores the way in which literary texts can express the world view of certain influential social groups contemporary with those texts. There is, in other words, a "homology" between text and group, with the former articulating the latter's beliefs more clearly than they can.

Hybridity: The concept of hybridity figures large in postcolonial theory. For Homi K. Bhabha, it represents a condition between states (somewhere between working-class identity and gender, for example) whose virtue is that it escapes the control of either. As such, it has considerable subversive potential.

Hyperreality: Jean Baudrillard's concept to describe the condition beyond meaning that, for him, sums up postmodern life. A cultural phenomenon like Disneyland no longer means anything: it is neither the real thing nor a representation of the past. Rather, it is hyperreal – beyond meaning or analysis.

Ideological State Apparatus: Louis Althusser's term for all those institutions, such as the legal and educational systems, the arts and the media, which serve to transmit and reinforce the values of the dominant ideology.

Imaginary: In Lacanian theory, the pre-self conscious state of young babies aged up to six months or so. Lacan identifies this state with the mother, and we leave it when we move into the symbolic (q.v.) realm of language and social existence at the age of around eighteen months.

Inhuman: For Jean-François Lyotard, all those processes which conspire to marginalize the human dimension in our world. Examples would include the growth of computerization, and particularly the development of sophisticated, and eventually autonomous, systems of Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life.

Interpellation: The process by which ideology manipulates us to conform to its values. For Louis Althusser, it was a case of ideology "hailing" us, almost like a policeman calling us to attention. We respond to such signs in reflex fashion, thus revealing how successfully ideology has conditioned us.

Interpretive community: For Stanley Fish, an interpretive community constitutes the body of scholars working in a critical discipline whose collective practices set the criteria for interpretation. These practices can change over time, and the community might be thought of as similar to Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigm (q.v.).

Intertextuality: A term which describes the way in which all texts echo other texts, and are, as theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva have pointed out, “mosaics of quotations” and references from an extensive variety of sources.

Linguistic model: Ferdinand de Saussure’s model of how language works – a system with its own internally consistent rules or grammar – was appropriated by the structuralist movement which applied it to any and all phenomena. The main concern of structuralist analysis then became to isolate and catalogue the grammar of whatever system was being studied.

Literariness: The quality that differentiates literary language from other forms of language-use. This quality largely derives from the highly self-conscious use of literary devices in literary texts, and according to Roman Jakobson is the proper object of study of literary critics.

Little narrative: The opposite to grand narrative (q.v.), little narratives comprise groups of like-minded individuals who attempt to subvert the power of grand narratives. Little narratives remain at an oppositional level and refuse to allow themselves to be turned into authoritarian ideologies of the kind they are rejecting.

Metanarrative: Another name for grand narrative (q.v.). Jean-François Lyotard uses the terms interchangeably in his best-known work, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

Metaphysics of presence: Jacques Derrida argues that all discourse in Western culture is based on the assumption that the full meanings of words are immediately “present” to us, in our minds, as we use them. For Derrida, this “metaphysics of presence” is illusory: meaning is always indeterminate.

Narratology: The study of how narrative works in terms of the relations between its structural elements. Structuralists like Barthes, in their desire to establish a general grammar of narrative, reduced narrative to a set of functions, specifying how these applied in each literary genre.

Negative dialectics: Both the Hegelian and Marxist dialectic feature a conflict between thesis and antithesis which resolves itself into the creation of a new thesis. For Theodor Adorno, however, the dialectic failed to resolve its internal contradictions, with new theses simply starting another cycle of conflict. Dialectics were negative rather than positive in quality.

Nomadism: Thought which does not follow established patterns or respect traditional boundaries (such as disciplinary ones). For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, nomadism is a transgressive activity which challenges institutional authority, given that the latter is invariably committed to protecting its own particular “territory”.

Orientalism: Edward Said’s term for the way in which the Middle East has been constructed (by writers and artists, for example) as the “other” to Western culture. In the process, the “Orient” is presented as mysterious, sensuous and irrational: qualities which tend to be looked down upon in the West.

Paganism: Jean-François Lyotard argued that paganism was the state in which judgements were reached without reference to pre-existing rules and conventions, but on a “case by case” basis instead. Judgement in any one case established no precedent for another.

Paradigm: A framework of thought which dictates what counts as acceptable inquiry in an intellectual field. Thomas Kuhn saw scientific history as consisting of a series of paradigms, each incommensurable with its predecessor, with periodic revolutions when one paradigm replaced another.

Pluralism: The commitment to multiple interpretations and the rejection of the notion of an unquestionable central authority, whether in critical or political matters. Pluralists refuse to privilege any one interpretation of a text or ideological position, and encourage diversity.

Readerly fiction: Roland Barthes’s term for fiction which imposes a particular reading of the text on the reader, and attempts to close off alternative interpretations. 19th-century novelistic realism, with its carefully worked-out plots and explicit moral messages, is a prime example of this style of writing.

Reception theory: Reception theorists concentrate on the interaction of reader and text (reader-response being another name for the approach). Textual meaning is seen to emerge from the reader’s engagement with the text, with some theorists claiming that the reader is almost entirely responsible for the creation of that meaning.

Reflection theory: Reflection theorists assume that artistic artefacts reflect the ideology of their culture. Thus, for the Marxist Georgi Plekhanov, the art of a bourgeois culture could not help but reveal the character of that culture. Art has a rather passive cultural role from this perspective.

Repressive State Apparatus: Louis Althusser’s term for those forces, such as the police and the army, which the ruling class relies on to enforce its control over a society – by violent means if necessary.

Rhizome: For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the rhizome became a model for how systems ideally should develop. Rhizomatic structures (such as tubers or moss) can make connections between any two points on their surface; a process which these thinkers considered to be inherently creative and anti-authoritarian.

Schizoanalysis: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s attack on Freudian psychoanalysis led them to develop the concept of schizoanalysis, in which schizophrenia was taken as a model of how to resist the methods of the psychoanalyst. The multiple personalities of the schizophrenic frustrated the psychoanalytic desire to turn us into socially conformist individuals.

Seduction: Jean Baudrillard’s method for subverting systems is based on the notion of “seducing” or “beguiling” them into submission, rather than resorting to the more usual means of overt political action or revolution.

Semiology: Ferdinand de Saussure predicted the development of semiology – “the science of signs” – in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Language itself, in Saussure’s formulation, was a system of signs (q.v.) which operated according to an underlying grammar. All sign-systems were assumed to work on this linguistic model.

Semiotics: Although it is sometimes used interchangeably with semiology (q.v.) to mean “the science of signs”, semiotics has also come to refer to the operation of signs in a given system. Thus, one speaks of the semiotics of film or fashion.

Sign/Signified/Signifier: For Ferdinand de Saussure, language is made up of signs, which consist of an arbitrary signifier (word) and a signified (concept) joined in an act of understanding in the individual’s mind. The sign communicates meaning, which in Saussurean linguistics is held to be a relatively stable entity.

Simulacra: According to Jean Baudrillard, signs no longer represent some deeper or hidden meaning (such as the class struggle), but only themselves. We live now in a world of simulations which *have* no deeper meaning to be discovered. Disneyland is a good example of such a simulation.

Socialist realism: An aesthetic theory imposed on artists in the Soviet Union from the early 1930s onwards. This demanded that works of art appeal to a popular audience and, where possible (as in the visual and literary arts), contain an explicit socialist message.

Strange attractor: In chaos theory, the underlying force which controls any given system. The weather, for example, is assumed to have a strange attractor which dictates its patterns. The most extreme example of a strange attractor is a black hole, which absorbs all matter with which it comes into contact.

Subaltern: To be in the subaltern position is to be in an inferior position culturally, thus subject to oppression by groups more powerfully placed within the dominant ideology (as women so often are by men, or the colonized by their colonizers).

Symbolic: In Lacanian theory, the state that succeeds the imaginary (q.v.) at around eighteen months in a child’s life. The symbolic is the realm of language and social existence. Lacan identifies it with the “masculine” world of adulthood. Feminists see this as the entry into repression.

Womanism: Theories which assume the superiority of women. The term suggests a reverse kind of sexism in which the prejudice always lies with the woman’s position.

Writerly fiction: Roland Barthes’s term for fiction which does not impose a particular reading of a text on the reader, and which invites alternative interpretations. In Barthes’s canon, modernism is the style of writing that best achieves this desirable objective.

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Index

Absolute Spirit, the [ref 1](#)
academic study [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Ackroyd, Peter [ref 1](#)
Adorno, Theodor [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)
alienation [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#), [ref 5](#), [ref 6](#)
Althusser, Louis [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
aphasia [ref 1](#)
architecture [ref 1](#)
art [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 and Communism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 defamiliarization [ref 1](#)
 and formalism [ref 1](#)
 and postmodernism [ref 1](#)
aura, theory of [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
author, the [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
authoritarianism [ref 1](#)
avant-garde [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Bakhtin, Mikhail [ref 1](#)
Barrow, John D. [ref 1](#)
Barthes, Roland [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)
Baudrillard, Jean [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Beauvoir, Simone de [ref 1](#)
Beckett, Samuel [ref 1](#)
Benjamin, Walter [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
Bentham, Jeremy [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Bhabha, Homi K. [ref 1](#)
binary oppositions [ref 1](#)
black
 criticism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 feminism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
bourgeoisie [ref 1](#)
Brecht, Bertolt [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Breton, André [ref 1](#)
Brontë, Charlotte [ref 1](#)
Butler, Judith [ref 1](#)

capitalism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 attacked [ref 1](#)
 ideology [ref 1](#)
 Marcuse [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 and postmodernism [ref 1](#)
chaos theory [ref 1](#)
Cixous, Hélène [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
class
 and Marxism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 struggle [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
Communist Manifesto, The [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
complexity theory [ref 1](#)
consensus [ref 1](#)
Coward, Rosalind [ref 1](#)
critical
 realism [ref 1](#)
 theory defined [ref 1](#)
criticism, politics of [ref 1](#)
cultural
 materialism [ref 1](#)
 studies [ref 1](#)

Dalí, Salvador [ref 1](#)
deconstruction [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)

defamiliarization [ref 1](#)
Deleuze, Gilles [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Derrida, Jacques [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)
desire [ref 1](#)
dialectical materialism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
dialectics [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
différance [ref 1](#)
différends [ref 1](#)
Dollimore, Jonathan [ref 1](#)
double coding [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Eco, Umberto [ref 1](#)
economic determinism [ref 1](#)
Enlightenment project, the [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
epic theatre [ref 1](#)

Fanon, Frantz [ref 1](#)
Faulkner, William [ref 1](#)
feminism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#) [ref 5](#), [ref 6](#)
Fish, Stanley [ref 1](#)
formalism [ref 1](#)
Foucault, Michel [ref 1](#)
Frankfurt School [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
French feminism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Freud, Sigmund [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)
Fukuyama, Francis [ref 1](#)

Gates, Henry Louis [ref 1](#)
genetic structuralism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Gilbert, Sandra [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Goldmann, Lucien [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Gorz, André [ref 1](#)
grammar of narrative [ref 1](#)
Gramsci, Antonio [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
grand narrative [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)
 see also narrative
Greenblatt, Stephen [ref 1](#)
Greer, Germaine [ref 1](#)
Greimas, A.J. [ref 1](#)
Guattari, Felix [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Gubar, Susan, [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
gynocriticism [ref 1](#)

Habermas, Jürgen [ref 1](#)
Hamlet analysed [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Haraway, Donna [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Hartmann, Heidi [ref 1](#)
Hegel, G.W.F. [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
hegemony [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#), [ref 5](#)
heroinism [ref 1](#)
heteroglossia [ref 1](#)
historicism, new [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
history
 of ideas [ref 1](#)
 and logic [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
homosexuality [ref 1](#)
hooks, bell [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Horkheimer, Max [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
humanism [ref 1](#)
humanities [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
hybridity [ref 1](#)
hyperreality [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

ideas, history of [ref 1](#)

- ideology [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#), [ref 5](#), [ref 6](#) [ref 7](#)
- imaginary, the (Lacan) [ref 1](#)
- infrastructure [ref 1](#)
- intertextuality [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Irigaray, Luce [ref 1](#)
- Iser, Wolfgang [ref 1](#)
- Jakobson, Roman [ref 1](#)
- Jameson, Fredric [ref 1](#)
- Jencks, Charles [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Joyce, James [ref 1](#)
- justice [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Kafka, Franz [ref 1](#)
- Kristeva, Julia [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Kuhn, Thomas [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Lacan, Jacques [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
- Laclau, Ernesto [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- language [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - and structuralism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Lenin, V.I. [ref 1](#)
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
- linguistics [ref 1](#)
- literary analysis
 - aesthetics [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - defamiliarization [ref 1](#)
 - formalism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - plurality of meaning [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- literary feminism [ref 1](#)
- literature
 - grammar of narrative [ref 1](#)
 - see also* reader response
- logic [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- logocentrism [ref 1](#)
- Lukács, Georg [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
- Lyotard, Jean-François [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#), [ref 5](#), [ref 6](#)
- Macherey, Pierre [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- Mann, Thomas [ref 1](#)
- Marcuse, Herbert [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
- Marxism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)
 - breakdown of [ref 1](#)
 - reasons for failure [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - and feminism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - inheritances from [ref 1](#)
 - rejecting [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - schools of [ref 1](#)ff
 - structural [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - Western [ref 1](#)
- materialism *see* cultural materialism
- metaphor [ref 1](#)
- metaphysics [ref 1](#)
- metonymy [ref 1](#)
- Millett, Kate [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
- models, synthetic [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
- modernism
 - and Lukács [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 - banned in Russia [ref 1](#)
- modernity [ref 1](#)
 - Habermas [ref 1](#)
- Modleski, Tania [ref 1](#)
- Moers, Ellen [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)

Moscow Linguistic Circle [ref 1](#)
Mouffe, Chantal [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

narrative [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#), [ref 5](#)
 scientific [ref 1](#)
negative dialectics [ref 1](#)
new historicism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
New Left, the [ref 1](#)
nomadism [ref 1](#)
novel, the [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 Lukács on [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Orientalism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

paganism [ref 1](#)
Plant, Sadie [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Plekhanov, Georgi [ref 1](#)
pluralism [ref 1](#)
politics of criticism [ref 1](#)
postcolonialism [ref 1](#)
postfeminism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
post-industrial society [ref 1](#)
post-Marxism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
postmodern science [ref 1](#)
postmodernism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 black identity [ref 1](#)
 and capitalism [ref 1](#)
 grand narratives [ref 1](#)
 and postfeminism [ref 1](#)
 and science [ref 1](#)
poststructuralism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
 deconstruction [ref 1](#)
Prague Linguistic Circle [ref 1](#)
proletariat [ref 1](#)
psychoanalysis [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)
 and critical theory [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)

quantum mechanics [ref 1](#)
queer theory [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Rabelais, François [ref 1](#)
reader-response [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
reception theory [ref 1](#)
reflectionism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
reflexivity [ref 1](#)
relativism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
revolution [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 and capitalism [ref 1](#)
rhizomatic structures [ref 1](#)
Russian formalism [ref 1](#)

Said, Edward [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
Saussure, Ferdinand de [ref 1](#)
schizoanalysis [ref 1](#)
Schoenberg, Arnold [ref 1](#)
science [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
 autonomous or constructed? [ref 1](#)
 postmodern [ref 1](#)
scientific narrative [ref 1](#)
Scott, Sir Walter [ref 1](#)
Second World War [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
self-consciousness [ref 1](#)
self-realization [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)
semiology, semiotics [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Barthes [ref 1](#)

Eco [ref 1](#)

Kristeva [ref 1](#)

separatism [ref 1](#)

sexual identity [ref 1](#)

Shakespeare, William [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Shklovsky, Viktor [ref 1](#)

Shostakovich, Dmitri [ref 1](#)

Showalter, Elaine [ref 1](#)

sign systems [ref 1](#)

signified/signifier [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

signs, science of [ref 1](#)

simulacra [ref 1](#)

Sinfield, Alan [ref 1](#)

social

control [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

sciences [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

totality [ref 1](#)

Socialist Realism [ref 1](#)

Sokal, Alan [ref 1](#)

Spender, Dale [ref 1](#)

Spivak, Gayatri C. [ref 1](#)

Stalin, Joseph [ref 1](#)

structural Marxism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

structuralism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)

student protest [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

superstructures [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

surplus value [ref 1](#)

Surrealism [ref 1](#)

Symbolic, the (Lacan) [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

synthetic models [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

systems [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#), [ref 4](#)

deconstruction [ref 1](#)

social [ref 1](#)

technoscience [ref 1](#)

texts, analysis of [ref 1](#)

theory of everything [ref 1](#)

Todorov, Tzvetan [ref 1](#)

totality [ref 1](#)

unconscious, the [ref 1](#)

Utilitarianism [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

value judgements [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#), [ref 3](#)

rendered pointless [ref 1](#)

Western Marxism [ref 1](#)

Williams, Raymond [ref 1](#)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig [ref 1](#)

women, suppression of [ref 1](#)

World Spirit, the [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

Zhdanov, A.A. [ref 1](#)

Žižek, Slavoj [ref 1](#), [ref 2](#)

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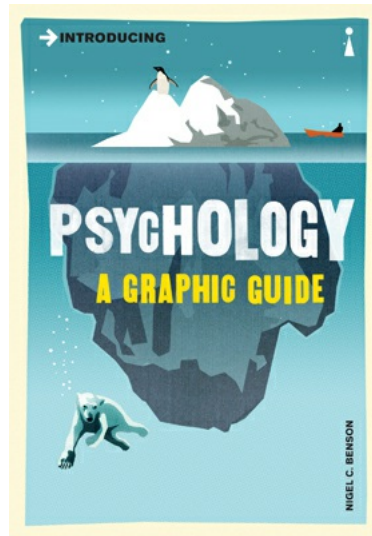
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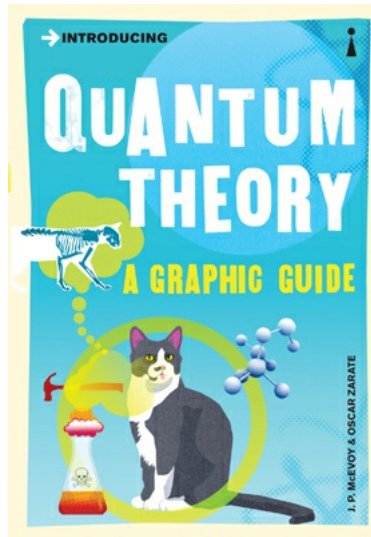
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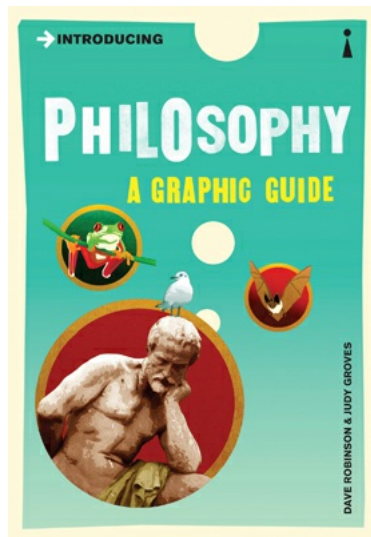
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