

THE  
THEORY  
TOOLBOX

Critical Concepts  
for the Humanities,  
Arts, & Social Sciences



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Postmodernism demystifies logo-phallo-Euro-Theo-centrism and in the process preserves the status quo because it leaves us without direction. The postmodern artwork foregrounds the complexity of our epoch, thereby remaining an elitist diversion for a leisure class of overeducated white folks who “get the joke.”

### Working Question

Perhaps the questions surrounding “postmodern” boil down to this: Does postmodern art pose interesting questions that demand your response, or does it just ask you to smirk knowingly if you’re part of the crowd that is “in” on the joke? Is postmodernism, in other words, a reactionary or progressive phenomenon? This question is the hot one surrounding “postmodernism,” and one that you could take up in class, using your examples and/or some of the ones we’ve mentioned here: *Seinfeld*, *Unforgiven*, *Hard Rock Cafes*, *Warhol*, *Pynchon*.

We provide a place to start with two paintings, which critic Fredric Jameson has pointed to as representative of their epochs: Vincent Van Gogh’s *Peasant Shoes* (modernism) and Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (postmodernism) (figures 9.1 and 9.2, respectively). Consider the differences between these two paintings for a class discussion.

### Poststructuralism

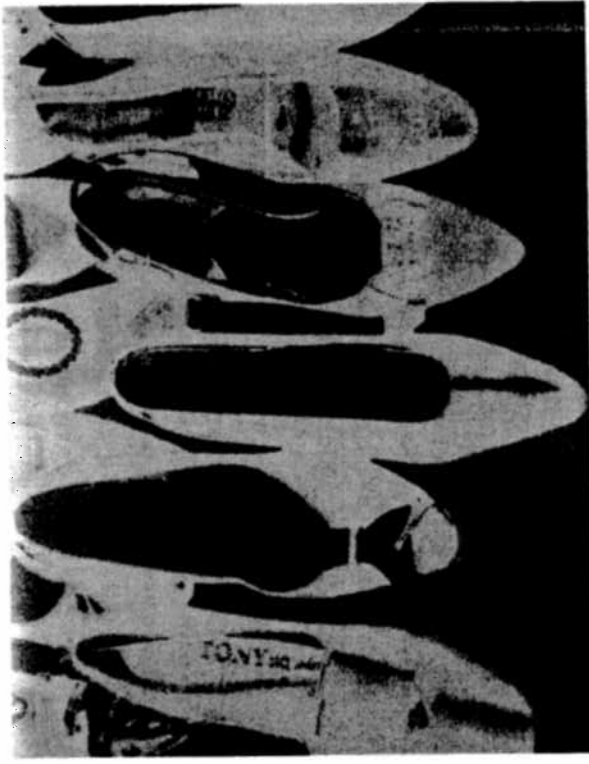
As a term, “poststructuralism” presents much the same problem as “postmodern”: Before you can get a handle on the “post-” part, you need to know something about structuralism, which logically came *before* poststructuralism. Structuralism is or was a cross-disciplinary movement in the humanities and social sciences, having the greatest impact on linguistics, ethnography, anthropology, and literary criticism. Essentially, structuralism is interested in the study of



**Figure 9.1** The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland. BMA 1950.302

signifying or symbol systems, and its basic premise gives structuralism its name: For any given signifying phenomenon, there must be an underlying *structure* that makes the signifying act possible and governs it in some way.

For any given speech act to be intelligible, for example, there must be a common grammar that helps to explain the specific word order, sentence pattern, and position of subjects, verbs, objects, etc. Any signifying or meaningful phenomenon presupposes a kind of structure, a system of rules and values by which it is produced and in which it is at least minimally intelligible to someone else who knows the system. In this way, the sense of “structure” in “structuralism”



**Figure 9.2** © 2003 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / ARS, New York

has some overlap with “ideology,” in its second definition as the baseline “common sense”—the shared but largely unconscious consensus—of a social body.<sup>1</sup>

As an example of a kind of structuralist analysis, we note that for a person to understand the simple English command, “Shut the door!,” both the speaker and the listener must already possess a staggering amount of “structural” information, both about the language they’re speaking and the situation they’re in. The command form is a particularly slippery one in English, relying on tone of voice and other contextual issues (relative social positions of the speaker and listener, some mutual understanding of the

“problem” created by a door being left open, etc.) as much as the “content” of the message; in addition, the subject of the command is implied rather than stated directly, so to know that it really is *you* who are being addressed is, strictly speaking, impossible to pick up from the sentence itself. To pick up the meaning of this simple command, you need to possess an underlying understanding of both the grammar of English and the situation in which this sentence is uttered.

In other words, a number of complicated “structures” must be learned before a simple symbolic act can be rendered meaningful, and structuralism is interested in uncovering these underlying phenomena. As Robert Scholes writes in *Structuralism in Literature*, “in order to exist, any human science must move from the phenomena it recognizes to the system that governs them” (14). In fact, one might say that this movement from *things* to the *structures* that govern them is the central movement of all structuralisms.

Of course, each one of us performs such “structuralist” movements—from the particular symbolic act to the structure that renders it intelligible—all the time, more or less unconsciously sorting signs and symbols according to the structures of intelligibility that we learned long ago. For example, raising your middle finger toward someone is, in itself, a meaningless act, but when you understand this gesture in terms of the structuring grammar of American society, it takes on a very specific meaning. In fact, this process of reference is often so automatic that we tend to notice it only when it breaks down in some way, when, for example, words or images become difficult because they are “over-coded” with multiple meanings (as in literary or poetic language), or when we try to get by in an unfamiliar or foreign language, where we don’t know the underlying social and linguistic structures.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is when you *don’t know* or can’t figure out the underlying structures of meaning that the existence of these structures becomes most apparent.

### Working Question

Think about and describe the last time you were in a situation where you didn’t know the underlying structures of meaning that govern a conversation. A visit to another country, for example? A neighborhood, store, or bar in your own city, perhaps? Attending an office party at a place you don’t work? A cricket match on TV? Or a night out with people who all perform the same job—dentists or computer experts or Deadheads or truck drivers or plumbers or musicians—and who talk endlessly about their jobs or hobbies in a technical language you don’t get?

What specifically didn’t you understand when you were last in such a situation? What effects did it have on you? Is it really the case that you need to know a lot of complex structures to enter into simple conversations?

Perhaps the paradigmatic discourse for structuralism is the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, which we looked at briefly in chapter 3. Recall that Saussure distinguishes between the material *sign* or *speech act* and the underlying structures—respectively, the *signified* and the *grammar*—that render such symbolic acts intelligible. Saussure remains crucial for poststructuralism as well, but poststructuralism picks up and questions structuralism at its most central point, the movement from the particular (the signifier) to the structure that governs it (the signified).

Certainly, poststructuralists will agree, it is in a situation where you *don’t* understand something that the underlying structures of meaning become most apparent: When the plumber is describing to you in excruciating detail the inner workings of a toilet, you realize that she is referring to structures that you don’t understand; likewise, when you order breakfast in Germany and get what looks a lot like lunch, you realize—like Dorothy—that you’re not in Kansas anymore. You haven’t made a mistake in ordering, but what break-

fast means in Germany (what one might call the signified of breakfast) is different than it is in the United States.

However, to these little dramas, the poststructuralist will add another observation: With the realization that you don't understand the plumber or can't order a proper breakfast in German also comes the realization that the structures of intelligibility are *not* universal or abstract. When *your* system breaks down, you see that the underlying structures of meaning (the *contexts* that render meaning) vary from place to place. The structures of meaning, like meaning itself, are *not* abstract or transcendental: The signified (the concept of breakfast, for example) is just as material (dependent on context for its meaning) as the signifier ("breakfast" in English or *Frühstück* in German); the seemingly abstract and universal grammar (*what* you're ordering) is just as concrete and changeable as the *sentence* or *word* that refers to it.

For a poststructuralist, both the signifier *and* the signified are "arbitrary" in this way. There is no essential (or structural) connection between a word and what that word means. This, perhaps, is poststructuralism's most crucial addition to structuralism: Even the deep or underlying *structures* of meaning are themselves *arbitrary*; what we take to be the *cause* of meaning or intelligibility is itself already an *effect*; wherever you think you see *nature*, *culture* has already been there.

To say something is "arbitrary" generally means that it's based on individual preference and therefore easy to change. In this sense, what you had for lunch yesterday is "arbitrary"—it's a fairly inconsequential personal preference that changes from day to day. Of course, this is certainly *not* the sense in which the Saussurean signifier is "arbitrary." In English, that midday meal was referred to as "lunch" yesterday and for many years before that, and it's a pretty good bet that it'll be called "lunch" tomorrow and well beyond. You may exhibit an individual preference to call it "flanjour," but don't expect anyone to know what you're talking about if you say, "Hey, let's have flanjour sometime." The signifier, although it is "arbitrary," is *not* an individual preference.

In fact, as Saussure writes, the "arbitrary nature of the sign is really what protects language from any attempt to modify it" (*Course in General Linguistics*, 73). This seems pretty strange: If "arbitrary" means that there is no "natural" connection between sign and signified (that the relation is "culturally constructed" as opposed to "essential"), wouldn't that also suggest that the relation is easier to change or modify? If the relation between word and meaning is "arbitrary" rather than "essential," then isn't every word subject to easy "modification" in this way?

### Working Question

What sense does it make to say something is "arbitrary" but is therefore *resistant* to change? To change something, don't you have to show how it is not "natural" and thereby able to be changed? If the signifier is "arbitrary" or merely "culturally constructed," why don't a lot of people refer to lunch as "flanjour"?

In the wake of structuralism, to say that something is "culturally constructed" rather than "essential" or "natural" has somehow come to suggest that it's easy to change: If it's not essential or natural, then it should be really easy to modify, right? Well, no. For example, most people would agree that the pressing problems of our day are wholly socially constructed: poverty, crime, discrimination, high taxes, wars. Everyone *knows* that these things are socially constructed; discrimination is not a "natural" phenomenon, any more than high taxes or wars are; people *become* bigots, they are not born that way. This fact, however, doesn't seem to have much effect on the discourse of racism or gender discrimination. Most people seem to agree that women's roles are not simply to be wife and mother, but that doesn't change the social fact of gender discrimination. As feminist theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes,

"I remember the buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet the finding that one or another brutal form of oppression was not biological but 'only' cultural! I have often wondered what the basis was for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program" (*Epistemology*; 41).

In fact, if discrimination were a "natural" thing, and it could be somehow scientifically invalidated, it would in fact be much easier to "change" it than if one agrees that discrimination is and has been a socially constructed phenomenon from the start. Social habits are in fact notoriously difficult to change, and not because they're "essential" but precisely because we're so used to them. There's no necessary reason to play most American football games on Sunday (just as there's no essential connection between the word "football" and the American version of the sport), but the fact that there's no necessary reason why it's done this way certainly does not mean that it would be really easy just to decide to do it another way.

Since "arbitrary" means "socially constructed" to Saussure, it then necessarily also means "resistant to change." Social customs are deeply ingrained, and the conventions of social systems are therefore impossible to change simply through any given individual's action. Language, Saussure points out, is perhaps the greatest example of this point: *Because* language is an arbitrary social system of meaning based on long-held conventions, it's highly resistant to change. What would be the point of changing the word "lunch" to "flanjour," when "lunch" continues to work like a charm in everyday usage? To point out that something is constructed or structured is *not* the same thing as finally understanding it or being able somehow to change it wholesale.

In many of its variants, however, structuralism dreams of finding a kind of universal structure for symbol systems and a kind of ultimate grounding of *nature* that comes *before* any culture. Structuralist anthropology, for example, argues that the incest taboo is the founding or underlying structure of all symbol systems in all

societies. As Jacques Derrida writes about the work of structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss:

Society, language, history, articulation . . . are born at the same time as the incest prohibition [which] is the hinge between nature and culture . . . [The incest prohibition] is moreover not simply one element of culture among others, since it is a sacred and universal interdict. It is the element of culture itself, the undeclared origin of passions, of society, of languages. ("Structure, Sign and Play," 238)

For Derrida, a poststructuralist, what is suspicious here is the "sacred and universal" quality of Lévi-Strauss's claim for the incest taboo. In other words, what is suspicious for a poststructuralist is structuralism's trace of a certain theological or transcendental claim for "structure." However, the structures that seem to *govern* cultural practices are themselves *products* of cultural practices. This is the lesson of poststructuralism, and the point where it most easily hooks back up to postmodernism: Both the postmodernist and the poststructuralist will insist on and foreground the provisional nature of any claim to truth. Truths come about in specific contexts, which is not to say that anything we think is true (as we have seen throughout the course of this text), but rather that truths are beholden to specific contexts.

### Working Question

The big bang theory seems to be the accepted scientific version of the birth of the universe: It all started in one huge mass that broke apart in a huge explosion. The universe will expand as far as it can go and then begin again to contract, bringing everything crashing back into one undifferentiated mass. (This theory also helps to explain gravity, entropy, thermodynamics, and a series of other scientific concepts.)

Is there anything suspicious about the big bang theory from a “poststructuralist” point of view?

## Postcolonialism

As with “postmodernism” and “poststructuralism,” the first question begged by “postcolonialism” is the status or meaning of the root word, “colonialism.” As we remember from world history, the “discovery” of the Americas in the fifteenth century was actually a subplot in the history of colonialism: The United States’s original thirteen states were first colonies of England, much of what is now Canada and the central United States was claimed by France, and large parts of what is now Mexico and South America were colonized by the Spanish. And the legacy of such colonialism remains to this day, most obviously in the languages spoken by modern nations: Brazilians still speak Portuguese; Mexicans speak Spanish, along with many native languages; French is spoken throughout much of colonial Africa; and there remains an intense cultural battle between French- and English-speaking Canadians. Such a battle is in fact looming in the postcolonial United States, where native Spanish speakers will soon constitute a significant percentage of the population. These linguistic heritages and conflicts are the most obvious legacies of colonialism in the new world(s).

Throughout the history of colonialism, colonies provided raw materials and new products for European markets; the colonization of the United States, for example, pioneered the European marketing of tobacco, and the colonization of the Aztecs and Incas provided much gold for Spain and Portugal. European colonialism, then, was a race for territory and wealth that began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; it spread from the Americas to Asia and Africa throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in fact such empire-building colonialism officially ended only relatively recently (and only, one might argue, when there was no “new”

territory left to colonize). Due to increasing unrest among colonial peoples (unrest akin to the revolution that manifested itself in the American colonies in 1776), throughout the twentieth century there has been an increasing and inexorable decolonization that has returned sovereignty to many former European colonies. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, in the face of uprisings by the colonized peoples, the French gave up control of Algeria and Vietnam; in 1962, the English renounced their claim to Jamaica; and more recently, under intense worldwide pressure, the white Afrikaner minority in South Africa held free and open elections, sweeping the formerly imprisoned Nelson Mandela into power. Perhaps the most high-profile case of decolonization was Britain’s handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese in 1999. It is this movement of decolonization that has given rise to “postcolonialism,” the period after the heyday of colonization.

We should note here that for important reasons the “post” in postcolonialism remains subject to much contestation. Many theorists see “neocolonial” as a more apt term for describing the status of so-called developing countries in the New World Order. Since for many recently established independent nations, formal political sovereignty did not translate into economic self-sufficiency, many newly created African and Latin American states and eventually India gravitated toward one or another of the then two great superpowers—the United States or the Soviet Union—to prevent economic collapse or civil war, in spite of a proclaimed policy of “nonalignment.” The upshot is that after the fall of communism and the subsequent end of the Cold War, Western European powers and the United States established a new institutional framework for engaging in projects of global economic and political restructuring: the U.S.-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund. These lending institutions provide aid to developing countries in exchange for neoliberal free-trade policies. A former British colony, the United States ironically has emerged at the dawn of the twenty-first century as the most recent reigning empire.