Also available from Routledge

Poetry: The basics
Jeffrey Wainwright
0–415–28764–2

Shakespeare: The basics
Sean McEvoy
0–415–36246–6

Literary Theory: The basics
Hans Bertens
0–415–35112–X

Contemporary British Novelists
Nick Rennison
0–415–21709–1

The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism (second edition)
Edited by Stuart Sim
0–415–33359–8

The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature
Edited by Neil Cornwell
0–415–23366–6

Who's Who in Contemporary Women's Writing
Edited by Jane Eldridge Miller
0–415–15981–4

Who's Who in Dickens
Donald Hawes
0–415–26029–9

Who's Who in Shakespeare
Peter Quennell and Hamish Johnson
0–415–26035–3

Who's Who in Twentieth-Century World Poetry
Edited by Mark Willhardt and Alan Michael Parker
0–415–16356–0

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO CRITICAL THEORY

Edited by
Simon Malpas and Paul Wake

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

and a politics of action that seeks to break out of the very circumscribed order of possibility that relies on and reproduces such symptoms.

This brings us full circle to the analysis of Marx and his vision of an International (a political movement without regional boundaries) that is capable of taking on the capitalist system. Yet, in contrast to Marx, the content of such an International would not be fixed or pre-given. For Žižek, as indeed for Derrida, such an International would be defined by its constituencies of exclusion and by an unplacatable spirit of politico-ethical involvement and responsibility. It would be an International that constantly strives to remind us that we cannot hide behind terms such as 'globalization', 'market reality', 'regional stability', 'national interest' and so on, as if they described a neutral order of social existence. And it is surely in this sense that a characteristically Marxist critical theory will continue to find its critical edge: in the radical indictment that we have no alibis.

FURTHER READING

Butler, Judith, Laclau, Ernesto and Žižek, Slavoj (2000) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London: Verso.
This is a collection of intriguing polemical exchanges between three major philosophical figures – Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek – who represent important, and contrasting, intellectual traditions.

Derrida, Jacques (1994) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge.
A crucial text by Derrida that revivifies the work of Marx and which, through a series of encounters with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, develops an inspired deconstructive critique of the modern condition.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
This is a major text by two key figures of the Frankfurt School. Among its highlights it introduces the reader to their highly influential 'culture industry thesis'.

Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (1987) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso.
A difficult but rewarding work that reformulates the Marxist problematic in the context of a new emphasis on discourse and a thoroughgoing critique of essentialism. The recent edition also boasts a new preface that helps to clarify the authors' political perspective.

Žižek, Slavoj and Daly, Glyn (2004) *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
A wide-ranging text that introduces the reader to some of the main arguments and ideas from one of the most influential thinkers of our age.

4
POSTSTRUCTURALISM

CATHERINE BELSEY

A WAY OF READING

From the point of view of a critical theorist, the main interest of poststructuralism is its invitation to read differently. Although it is often presented in the form of a set of prescriptions and precepts, poststructuralism developed in a series of practical encounters with texts: the critic Roland **Barthes** (1915–80) read Balzac and instances of French popular culture; psychoanalyst Jacques **Lacan** (1901–81) read **Freud** – and *Hamlet* and Sophocles; while the philosopher Jacques **Derrida** (1930–2004) also reads *Hamlet*, as well as Rousseau, **Marx** and a succession of other works, many of them philosophical. At the same time, poststructuralism is not reducible to a methodology. Instead, it offers a distinctive relationship between readers (or viewers) and texts.

Poststructuralism proposes that the meanings of words, images, stories or other texts are not to be found elsewhere, in the mind of the **author** or in the world depicted. Since they have no external, extratextual guarantees, meanings are unfixed, discontinuous and unstable. Does it follow, then, that poststructuralism locates them in the mind of the reader, holding that we make them up, or that interpretation is purely 'subjective'? Not at all. The poststructuralist account of the reading process is more challenging than that, but more interesting too, since it allows texts to give us back more than our own reflection. How, then, does it work?

MAKING SENSE

We need to go back to the beginning, to reflect on the way children, for example, learn to make sense of what they see and hear. When their fond carers point to a cat and ask them to repeat the word, it looks as if the children are learning to recognize and name cats. And so in a way they are. But cats come in very different sizes and colours: there are variously Siamese, Persian, and tabby cats, not to mention cheetahs. In these circumstances, it cannot be that an image of a cat imprints itself on the retina as the standard by which this recognition and naming takes place. Instead, language begins to come into being for the child as it learns to distinguish confidently between cats on the one hand and, on the other, say, dogs, which also come in very different sizes and colours, and arguably offer even less in the way of visual resemblance to one another.

The primary property of language is that it differentiates. We can confirm that

vocabulary is not acquired simply by pointing to **referents** (things in the world) when we remember that later the child will go on to learn to use words such as 'justice' and 'honesty'. Sadly, we do not always learn the meanings of those terms from actual examples. On the contrary, in fact: we often construe them by differentiating a positive ideal from instances of injustice and dishonesty.

If abstract values are not learnt from referents in the world, what about words that name nothing material, but are crucial, even so, to the process of reasoning, such as 'because', 'although', and 'if'? There is nothing for them to correspond to.

Does language name ideas, then? Poststructuralism would say not. On the contrary, ideas come into sharp relief for us when we learn the meanings of the terms. Of course, there are exceptions – coinages often compounded from existing terms: 'poststructuralism' came 'after' 'structuralism'. Similarly, poststructuralism itself notes the conventional tendency of Western philosophy to assume that meanings exist before language names them, and calls this assumption '**logocentrism**', inventing a new term by putting together the Greek *logos* (meaning, sense, idea) with the familiar suffix 'centrism' (propensity to centre on). But mostly individuals do not in practice come up with an idea and then look around for a word for it. On the contrary, we are much more likely to come across a term and wonder in the first instance what it means. While dictionaries can give the impression that words are full of meaning, like containers with a content, experience shows that confidence in using a new vocabulary has more to do with the ability to *distinguish* when a specific term is appropriate. And an expanded vocabulary offers access to ever finer distinctions. To know how to use '**power**', 'mastery', 'sovereignty' and 'autonomy' is to be in a position to analyse some subtle political differences.

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de **Saussure** (1857–1913) gave a preliminary impetus to poststructuralism without knowing it when he put the case that ideas do not exist in some psychic realm independent of language. If they did, all languages would name the same concepts (Saussure 1974: 116–20). But anyone who has ever struggled with the process of translation from one language to another knows that different languages make distinctive differences. How, for example, would you distinguish in English between the French *science* (knowledge) and *connaissance* (knowledge), not to mention *tu* (you) and *vous* (you)? But they are not interchangeable, and the French know the difference.

THE SIGNIFIER

Meanings are not confined to words. Images, maps, traffic lights, gestures all signify. Saussure preferred to discuss the **signifier**: the spoken, written, drawn or otherwise material indicator that does the signifying we learn to interpret. Moreover, signifiers are not always equivalent to individual words or images. 'How are you?' is a single signifier, and what it signifies is a polite interest in the well-being of your interlocutor. Is Picasso's *Guernica* best seen as an assembly of signifiers, or one? It is possible to break the painting down into its individual

components or, alternatively, to read it as a single condemnation of the horrors of war.

Saussure called meaning the **signified**. The signified is distinct from the referent; indeed, as I have suggested, many words we use constantly have no referents. Meaning resides in signifying practice, in the material *text*, where the signifier 'text' is understood in the broadest possible sense to include, for instance, images, maps, traffic lights and gestures.

(How revealing that conventional English has no single word to embrace the range of signifying practices Saussure's theory enables us to bring together for the purposes of interpretation. What poststructuralism's detractors condemn as jargon is often an attempt to stretch the existing distinctions to accommodate a new way of relating them to one another. And how awkward that English has no single word for the range of addressees of these texts. Here I uneasily refer to them all as 'readers', with occasional references to 'viewers', in order to remind myself that 'reading' is also to be understood figuratively.)

Signification is a matter of social convention. It is hard to see how green lights have any natural connection with safety, but we are so accustomed to this convention that it has entered into the English language: schemes and projects are metaphorically 'given the green light'. But the fact that meaning is conventional removes it from the realm of individual **subjectivity**. If I choose to read red lights as meaning it is safe to proceed, I might not last long. If I consistently interpret 'How are you?' as an invitation to punch my interlocutor, I can expect to be locked up. Language – or signifying practice – does not belong to individuals. Instead, it already exists before we are born into a world where people reproduce it all round us. Though it constantly changes, these modifications prevail only to the degree that they are shared. In that sense, meanings belong to other people. Lacan calls language 'the **Other**'. If I opt to hijack it for purely private purposes, I must expect to be seen as psychotic.

DIFFERANCE (WITH AN A)

Is interpretation a matter, then, of laying hands on the signified? Sadly, no. We cannot confront meaning itself, the pure concept, as a free-standing idea. On the contrary, what we encounter is always the signifier in its materiality. And the signifier, Derrida (1973) argues, 'defers' the meaning. In other words, the red light, or the greeting, or the painting always stands between us and the danger, or the warmth, or the condemnation it represents, so that we never meet these meanings as pure ideas. Representation implies an absence: your representative stands in for you when you are not there in person. The idea represented in language is not there *in itself* either. Instead, the signifier takes its place, relegates any supposed pure concept to an inaccessible background, supplants it. (This does not mean that events do not happen in the world, or that they have no implications for us when they do. You cannot encounter the idea of danger as pure concept independent of the signifier, but you can still crash your car, and

take the material consequences of that. Those consequences can be *named*, discussed and analysed, however, only in a language that may not quite match them.)

When it comes to interpretation, then, all we can be sure of is the signifier or signifiers that constitute the text. And that is what we interpret: a materiality (sounds, images, words on a page or computer screen, contrasting colours) that signifies as a result of social convention, where meaning is not guaranteed by anything outside the text, whether as idea or thing, and is not available for direct inspection either.

Good news even so?

No wonder, then, that poststructuralist writing often seems so elegiac in its mode of address. And no wonder it has so many detractors. Poststructuralism takes away the comfortable certainty of traditional criticism that meaning could be definitively settled – by reading the author's biography, perhaps, knowing the cultural history of the time, or just pointing to the way things are.

But how comfortable and how certain was that belief? Not very, in practice. Meaning seemed to be just as hotly contested then as now. After all, the biography, the context and the state of the world were themselves subject to interpretation. For all the reams of paper produced to denounce poststructuralism, its account of language does not ultimately change all that much, we might think.

And yet poststructuralists would probably argue that this new way of looking at textuality changes everything, and in the end, paradoxically, for the better. The debates about the meaning of a given text continue, but they are located where they belong: in the process of interpreting the text itself, and not in appeals to external authority. There can be no one single correct reading of a text, but there can still be misreadings, as a result of inattention, unfamiliarity with the signifiers, or failure to recognize resemblances or allusions to other texts. If texts lose what once passed for 'depth' (access to the psychological state of the author) or 'truth' (fidelity to the world we seem to know), they gain in complexity and density. And rather than needing a cultural context in order to make sense of them, we learn about the culture that produced them from the texts themselves. Texts (in the broad sense) are, indeed, the only available instances of that culture. And the texts that tend to form the material of cultural criticism (more interesting, usually, and more enigmatic than traffic lights) cannot be closed down by the one final definitive reading that would surpass all others. Instead, they can be shown to reveal more than their authors knew, and more than previous critics have identified.

Interpretation

How is this done? Take fiction. Instead of looking for the author behind the text, poststructuralism begins by attributing meaning to difference. Even the simplest

story differs from the other stories that it also resembles. While both are fairytales, 'Beauty and the Beast' differs from 'Cinderella' to the degree that its heroine is more active: she domesticates the Beast, and loves it in spite of appearances, with the effect of transforming it into a handsome prince. And what happens when Disney retells the story as a twentieth-century movie? Beauty becomes a reader, and she is drawn to the Beast in the first instance by the huge library in his palace. Each instance is intelligible in its resemblance to and difference from other parallel texts, or **intertextually**. Whether their authors intended it or not, the stories themselves allude to other stories belonging to the same **genre**. Epics invoke and differ from other epics; individual instances of science fiction take their differential place within a tradition of science fiction.

This emphasis on difference, incidentally, is what distinguishes poststructuralism from structuralism. Structuralism focused on the resemblances between stories, reducing them, in effect, to variants of a single, endlessly repeated narrative. Roland Barthes marked a turning-point in 1970, when he opened *S/Z* by repudiating his own earlier flirtation with structuralist analysis as 'undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference'. How ironic, he reflects, that Saussure's attribution of meaning to difference should lead to the flattening out of texts 'under the scrutiny of an in-different science' (Barthes 1990b: 3).

Poststructuralism acknowledges the resemblances and then goes on to attend to the differences both between and within texts. First, the relations between them. Genres set up distinct expectations: romantic comedies, like the fairytales they draw on, generally have happy endings; tragedy ends in death. But what happens when *King Lear* rewrites the folktale of the king whose youngest daughter is the only one to tell the truth, and then breaks with the genre to end in catastrophe? It feels, if the critical tradition is to be believed, like the bleakest of all Shakespeare's tragedies. And arguably this is because it *does not* fulfil the expectations its intertextual fairytale allusions have set up. The founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) locates the **'uncanny'** in a clash of genres. What looks like realism turns out to include an unexpected supernatural component that causes a frisson by unsettling our comfortable relations with a familiar genre.

Indeed, form and content cannot be read separately. Style in general, itself a form of signification, is necessarily a place where meaning resides. If ideas never exist as free-standing entities, it makes no sense to isolate an imagined content independent of the specific genre, vocabulary, sequence of images or lighting effects which compose *this* individual work.

Addressing the reader

By drawing on – or breaking with – the conventional assumptions shared to varying degrees between author and reader, or artist and viewer, texts offer their addressees a certain relationship to the world they depict. They invite us to take up a position in response to the account of things they construct, to feel reassured,

saddened, mystified or challenged. Traditional detective stories, for instance, seem to invite the reader to share a confidence that, whatever criminal events may take place in the course of the story, a knowing figure will emerge to reveal the truth, and justice will eventually prevail. In the process, they offer the reader the reassurance of a certain knowledge. The classic **realist** text begins in enigma, but it promises to deliver that form of closure which is also a disclosure: in the final chapter or reel, if not before, the sequence of events will be made clear and the motives of the characters laid bare. We shall be able to look back through the story, reinterpreting retrospectively where necessary, to see that the narrative made sense all along, though not always the sense it seemed to make at the time.

By contrast, some of the irritation, hostility or 'boredom' readers feel in response to modernist and postmodernist works amounts to an irritation with their difference, a frustration that such closure is withheld. But a more sceptical age than the Victorian epoch, which specialized in classic realism, tends to see narrative closure as delivering a false certainty and an illusory transparency. In life, it might be argued, we never see motive so clearly or uncover the truth so unequivocally. The initial project of much modernism, it is worth remembering, was a deeper verisimilitude. Alternatively, texts may set out to lay bare their own intertextual composition, knowingly alluding to existing works, or breaking the illusion that they give transparent access to a fictional world, by self-referentially naming their own textuality and inviting the ironic complicity of their readers. Conceptual art asks us to be shocked by the unconventionality of each work, but also to place that shock in a respected line of descent from Marcel Duchamp, who in 1917 offered a readymade urinal for exhibition as a work of art.

The reader's active role

Are we, then, always at the mercy of the text, alternately reassured, dismayed, challenged, gleeful or shocked, according to genre? Not necessarily. No text can ensure a specific reaction, and the vocabulary of conventional criticism does less than justice to the complexity of the reading process when it affirms that a work can 'force' us to respond in a specific way. On the contrary, poststructuralist readers have taken an active role in identifying the strategies of the texts they analyse. They thus read other-wise, refusing simply to succumb to the blandishments of the text – at least on a second, more analytical reading.

Psychoanalysis has been influential here. The main interest of psychoanalysis for poststructuralism has not been as a guide to content, explaining the state of mind of the characters, and still less of the author. Instead, it offers a model of *attention* to the text. Freud's innovation was a concentration on the utterances of the analysand. Psychoanalysts listen closely to what is said, but they do not take it at face value. Instead, they treat the thematic content of the utterances as **unconsciously** designed to mislead, to distract both speaker and analyst from unconscious issues, commonly **desires** that cannot or must not be fulfilled. They therefore look for the moments of *in*coherence or *un*certainty, which betray

another concern, unspoken because, perhaps, unspeakable. They understand that consciousness seeks a specific relationship with the analyst which obscures unconscious wishes, and they adopt a distance that prevents them from fully subscribing to the relationship the analysand proposes. If we apply this procedure to the practice of cultural criticism, we can see that the text may reveal more to a reader who does not simply accept at face value the reassurances or challenges it offers, but looks instead for the differences *within* the work.

In *S/Z* Roland Barthes brought such a reading to bear on Balzac's classic realist short story 'Sarrasine' (Barthes 1990b). On the face of it, the narrative uncovers the solution to the enigma it sets up. But certain hesitations and concealments betray another agenda, which gives us a new kind of access to the forbidden desires of nineteenth-century French culture. In a meticulous, phrase-by-phrase analysis Barthes identifies sequences of vocabulary and imagery not explicitly connected by the text itself, but linked by the critic, to expose the impossibility of sustaining the gender differences taken consciously for granted in the work.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction also finds both more and less in the text than its author might have 'had in mind', but it approaches the issue from the perspective of language rather than psychoanalysis. If meaning depends on difference, the meaning of the self-same always bears a **trace** of the differentiating other. In other words, the signifier necessarily alludes to the terms from which it differs. We understand a signifier by reference not to the world, or ideas, but to another signifier that defines it *as* different. For example, if 'good' is not accessible as a pure, free-standing concept, but is brought to mean in and by its difference from evil, the definition of 'good' always retains a trace of the repudiated evil. We apprehend each by reference to the other; and in consequence a trace of the other is always capable of incursion into the self-same.

No wonder, then, that Milton's *Paradise Lost* has such difficulty in holding apart its mighty opposites, God and Satan. Since William Blake, criticism has suspected that Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it. But perhaps the logic of Milton's epic depends on the way language works, as much as on the revolutionary sympathies of its author. The story requires its villain to be created good by a loving God, but susceptible to evil, turning in the process to hate, and capable of undergoing punishment for this disobedience. It is thus the devil who is shown as subject to temptation, capable of inner debate, able to suffer intensely. In order for the God of love to be everything that the devil is not, the poem makes God aloof, remote and inflexible and therefore, in certain respects at least, unloving. The differentiating other reappears where we should least expect it. Meanwhile, Satan paradoxically loves and therefore envies the Eden he destroys. But these doublings and reversals by no means constitute a weakness in Milton's poem. On the contrary, they turn the story he tells from a moral fable to a tragedy.

Can the epic's final stance be settled by an appeal to Milton's known radical sympathies? If we could date it with certainty, would we know how to read it in the light of a specific political context? Poststructuralism would say not. The only way to tease out the position it offers on authority and revolt would be by a meticulous attention to the textual details of the poem, and even then, since the signified is always deferred, not accessible, an element of undecidability would remain.

Paradise Lost is more widely admired than read these days, and in any case it might be argued that we hardly needed poststructuralism to identify its ambiguity. What, then, can be said about the classic detective stories that are in many respects its popular and secular descendants? Surely the works of, say, Agatha Christie offer the most straightforward, least ambiguous account we could hope to find of the opposition between good and evil? Crime is always brought to justice.

If Derrida's account of **differance** holds, however, we should expect to find an element of undecidability there too. In my view – and only a minute textual analysis would show for sure – while traditional crime fiction condemns murder as cruel and inhumane, it is often the inhumanity of the detective that it also puts on display. Justice's delegate is permitted no allegiances and, in the capacity of detective, no human sympathies. Like Milton's God, he or she must remain inflexible, capable of cruelty. Chillingly, even the fluttery Miss Marple has 'a mind like a bacon-slicer'. The virtue that binds the social fabric here is not compassion, but the relentless authority of an inhuman abstraction.

Desire

What draws us to works of art, or literature, or fiction? All known human societies seem to tell stories. Cave paintings are among the earliest extant instances of human culture, and since then people have widely chosen to decorate their walls, or surround themselves with images. Why?

Jacques Lacan consistently returned to the appeal of art, giving the question a central place in his *Seminars 7* and *11* (Lacan 1992, 1994). Cultural objects, he argued, allude to loss; they name or indicate the lack which also characterizes the human condition; and in the process they enlist desire.

According to Lacan's account, the accession to language entails both a gain and a loss. The little human animal, if we can imagine a child that is not already surrounded by signifying practices at birth, would be continuous with the organic world it inhabits, an undifferentiated part of it. But language, Lacan proposes, drawing on Saussure and, to a degree at least, anticipating Derrida, cuts off that direct relation to the world, in so far as the signifier interposes itself between us and our relation to things. The signifier, which differentiates and divides, offers a way to specify our wishes, but at the same time its advent divorces us from a direct apprehension of what Lacan calls 'the **real**'. The real is unnamed, unnameable, concealed in the shadows cast by the light language throws on the entities it

denominates. The signifier names the referent in its absence; it thus relegates the real, obscures it, renders it missing from consciousness by taking its place. (Derrida would go on to deconstruct the opposition between presence and absence in his account of differance.)

At the same time, as human organisms we continue to inhabit this inaccessible real. In the speaking being, Lacan argues, unconscious desire emerges in the place of its loss. We long to fill the gap made by the lack of access to the real with something that would reunite us directly with the world, seeking a succession of objects of desire. It is easy to see how sex plays its part here, enlisting the human organism and the speaking subject inextricably in a love story, where the physiological activities of sex are also intelligible as signifiers. But Lacan insists that sex is not the *origin* of desire. Nor does it allay desire. None of our conscious objects of desire, including the sexual objects, will fully deliver the complete satisfaction they promise, since they cannot by definition replace what has been lost.

Art, Lacan argues, does not offer to replace it either. Art is thus not a substitute for love, as it tends to be in the work of his predecessor, Freud. Instead, it enables us to acknowledge the loss at the level of the signifier. Lacan understands the term 'art' in the broadest sense. (Again we encounter an inadequacy in a conventional vocabulary that distinguishes between high and popular culture, and between visual, aural and written texts.) As an example, he offers the work of the potter. A vase, for instance, he argues, operates on the real in exactly the same way as the signifier. It carves out of the continuity of the real a substance that surrounds a lack. Where there was previously an organic continuity, there is now a material object with nothing at its centre. The vase *makes* emptiness. Architecture works in a similar way: palaces and temples are a way of enclosing vacancy, their decorative surfaces fencing off the absence they both produce and surround. Perspective painting introduces the illusion of space into a continuous and two-dimensional canvas.

Art thus 'pacifies' desire by bringing its cause into the light of day. It puts on display not what is lost, which remains unnameable, but the fact of the loss itself, an analogy for the hollow at the heart of the speaking being. Ironically, then, the positive seduction of art for the viewer is the negativity it inscribes.

This is not necessarily a thematic negativity, though Lacan takes a special interest in tragedy, as well as the poetry of the troubadours, addressed to an absent, unattainable mistress. The lack at the heart of the work comes into existence whenever a signifying surface is shaped or decorated. Fiction, for instance, presupposes an absence. Even the most illusionist forms, the Victorian novels and narrative paintings, Hollywood movies and television soap operas that present themselves as a window onto a world we can believe we recognize, are no more, in the end, than signifiers surrounding vacancy. That is what fiction means. There is nothing beyond the signifiers themselves, the words on the page, paint on a canvas, the set, or the actors' impersonation of fictitious characters.

Enigma

Adapting this account, we might see the elusiveness of a substantial conclusion, a definitive reading or a final meaning as integral to art's appeal. What draws us to cultural texts in the first instance is the promise of closure, their offer to deliver an answer to the questions they raise, in conjunction with a reluctance to arrive at that moment, and a readiness to withhold the complete disclosure that would cause us to lose interest. Isn't the resolution of the plot always just slightly disappointing? To the degree that they sustain their mystery, texts also retain their fascination. Research indicates that very few people reread the last popular romance; instead, they prefer to start another. By contrast, the texts we return to again and again are more likely to be those that keep us guessing in some particular respect, or seem to conceal a secret we cannot finally master.

At the same time, if Derrida is right about differance, closure is never finally achieved. Even popular romances keep their options open to some extent, as I discovered when I noticed that, in accordance with the conventions of the genre, moments of passionate ecstasy are consistently defined in images of disaster: earthquakes, floods, tempests, fires (Belsey 1994: 21–41). Perhaps Lacan's insight is confirmed in this apparently most unlikely of quarters: pleasure entails naming a loss.

Why read?

If we go along with the poststructuralist view that closure is always ultimately withheld, is there any point in reading at all? If in due course we shall encounter undecidability everywhere, why bother?

It is a reasonable question. There are, in my view, two related answers to it: in the first place, reading can reveal the pleasures of the text; and in the second, while the world itself becomes increasingly undecidable, we make decisions none the less, and reading can expose the role of representation in the construction of choices.

First, then, if we allow that closure is not possible, one of the projects of interpretation becomes the attempt to resolve not the question the text itself raises, but the broader issue of the work's appeal to readers and viewers. Why have particular cultures or cultural moments been drawn to specific works more than others? What is it in *this* text that gives pleasure? What specific position does a particular text offer a reader? What knowledge does it withhold? What desire is indicated and pacified there?

The question of pleasure is one traditional criticism has preferred to evade, or to mystify by reference to 'great art'. That phrase has rightly become suspect, since it obscures a good deal more than it reveals, or dignifies a personal preference by an appeal to a supposed generality. The difference of 'art' becomes a value. Moreover, the term too readily turns prescriptive: a list of the criteria of great art carries the implication that we *ought* to like any work which fulfils them.

Poststructuralism offers the possibility of a more culturally relative account of the pleasure of the text, and permits us to differentiate between forms of pleasure without recourse to prior value judgements.

In the second place, society itself requires us to make decisions in a world that increasingly acknowledges undecidability in the areas that matter. Gender studies, for instance, pays more and more attention to the way the binary oppositions between two sexes do not hold in practice: the supposition of an antithesis between masculinity and femininity is giving way to the recognition of a range of differences. Postcolonial studies juxtapose the alternatives of assimilation, separatism and multiculturalism in the context of **globalization**: what are the differences we want to hold on to in an increasingly homogenized world? Justice is desirable but it includes an element that is inhuman: where do we stand? Dictatorship is out of the question, and yet we increasingly perceive the contradictions of democracy, where opinion is so easily constructed and antagonisms incited. The idea of opting out of all these undecidable questions is more and more attractive, until it becomes apparent that our actions inevitably align us one way or another, whether or not we have consciously decided to take a position. Even opting out represents a choice: to leave thing as they are.

There is no escape, then, even in a world of undecidability, from choosing, and the possibilities, which have material implications, are understood at the level of the signifier. In the poststructuralist account, fiction foregrounds this, makes it explicit. Poststructuralism repudiates the view that fiction *reflects* the world: the signifier constructs an illusion of reality not its **simulacrum**. At the same time, however, fiction repeatedly confronts its readers with choices. Which suitor would *you* marry? Which suspect would you blame? Which account would you rely on? The fictional characters decide – and readers decide whether they are right or wrong. These decisions are not always straightforward. King Lear makes the wrong choice; so does Othello. But what about Hamlet?

Cultural criticism offers a 'safe' environment to practise making choices. But more than this, in the process of posing alternatives, fiction, and perhaps all art, draws attention to the seductive and ambiguous capabilities of the signifier. We understand the world in relation to the way it is represented to us. We are not necessarily at the mercy of any one representation: although there is no understanding independent of the signifier, there is always more than one account of reality in circulation, and we are thus able to place ourselves outside what society presents as obvious.

Poststructuralism offers the reader an overt awareness of the complex and unstable positions offered by specific modes of address, and a recognition that all texts – including advertisements, news stories, religious exhortations and internet chat, as well as fiction – may be enlisting us in both more and less than we bargained for.

If so, poststructuralism, often presented by its detractors as an arcane, jargon-ridden mumbo-jumbo that has no purchase on the world, turns out to have a good deal more to say about life than might have seemed likely at first glance.

FURTHER READING

Barthes, Roland (1993) *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, London: Vintage.
First published in French in 1957, this book has now become part of what we take for granted, but without losing any of its wit and charm.

Barthes, Roland (1990a) *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, London: Penguin.
Demonstrates the intertextual derivation of our most intimate experiences.

Belsey, Catherine (2002a) *Critical Practice*, London: Routledge.
Makes the case for reading literary texts in the light of French theory, specifically the work of Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

Belsey, Catherine (2002b) *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Does exactly what it says on the cover. It does not confine itself to the implications of poststructuralism for critical theory, but attends to its radical political implications, with particular reference to Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard.

Belsey, Catherine (2005) *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism*, London: Routledge.
Considers the implications of Lacan's account of culture for the process of interpreting texts, including film, visual art and fiction.

Derrida, Jacques (1998) *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford, CA; Stanford University Press.
As approachable as any Derrida, this short book foregrounds the concern with language that first made Derrida famous.

5
HISTORICISM

SIMON MALPAS

Defined in the most straightforward terms, one might say that historicist criticism of literature and culture explores how the meaning of a text, idea or artefact is produced by way of its relation to the wider historical context in which it is created or experienced. For historicism, all meaning is therefore historically determined. In other words, nothing means 'naturally', eternally or universally; rather, meaning emerges from the languages, beliefs, practices, institutions and desires of particular historically located cultures.

To students who have had much experience of critical, literary or cultural theory, this will probably appear to be a pretty straightforward and even commonsense claim. Nowadays, the critical approaches that lie at the basis of historicism have become some of the most prevalent techniques of reading in the humanities: they are frequently taken for granted in contemporary books and articles, are often introduced at the very beginning of degree programmes, and students tend to be expected to take notice of them (albeit usually implicitly) when they write essays. This was not always the case, however, but is rather, to a large extent, the outcome of the success of two key historicist movements in literary and cultural studies that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s and have come to dominate the humanities in the years since then: the predominantly American 'new historicism' and the mainly British '**cultural materialism**'. The aim of this chapter is to explore these two forms of contemporary historicist theory, to introduce the key theoretical tenets upon which they are based, to outline their shared premises and the points at which they differ, and to illustrate the ways in which they might be put to work in the processes of writing criticism. Before this, though, it will be useful to develop the very brief definition of historicism given in the last paragraph in some more detail so as to think through what historicism generally might entail, and to explore what its consequences might be for criticism.

A key difficulty in providing a brief introduction to historicism is that, in the words of Stephen Greenblatt, one of the founding and most well-respected exponents of the movement commonly referred to as 'new historicism', 'it's no doctrine at all' (Greenblatt 1989: 1), or, as the British critic Alan Sinfield puts it, it 'is not . . . a single approach but a bundle of preoccupations diversely elaborated' (Sinfield 1992: 7). If new historicism, a particular branch of historicist theory which will be introduced later, is 'a bundle of preoccupations' with 'no doctrine', then historicism as an entire **genre** of thought and writing whose exponents can be traced at least as far back as the eighteenth century is even more diverse.