

Ways of Perceiving – Limits of Perception

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Glossary of Terminologies

Authenticity

To claim that a category is authentic is to argue that it is genuine, natural, true and pure. For example, it might be claimed that the culture of a particular place is authentic because its uncontaminated by tourism, or that a youth culture is pure and uncorrupted by consumer capitalism. In this sense, the concept of authenticity is closely related to the notion of *essentialism* in that authenticity implies immaculate origins. It follows then that the *anti-essentialism* of *poststructuralism* and *postmodernism* rejects the idea of the authentic as such, replacing it with the notion of 'authenticity claims'. That is, nothing is authentic in a metaphysical sense; rather, cultures construct certain places, activities, artifacts etc. as being authentic.

Deconstruction

To deconstruct is to take apart, to undo, in order to seek out and display the assumptions of a text. In particular, deconstruction involves the dismantling of hierarchical binary conceptual oppositions such as man/woman, black/white, reality/appearance, nature/culture, reason/madness etc. that serve to guarantee the status and power of truth-claims by excluding and devaluing the 'inferior' part of the binary.

Essentialism

The concept of essentialism, along with its partner anti-essentialism, derives its meaning from an understanding of the way language functions in relation to an independent object world (reality). Essentialism assumes that signs have stable meanings that derive from their equally stable referents in the real. The concept of essentialism refers to the argument that there are fixed truths to be found about identity categories so that there exists an essence of, for example, women, Australians, the working class, Asians, etc. Here words refer to fixed essences and thus identities are regarded as being stable entities.

Anti-essentialism

This concept alludes to the idea that words do not have referents in an independent object world that possesses essential or universal qualities. Rather all categories of knowledge are discursive constructions that change their meanings according to time, place and usage. In particular, there can be no truths, subjects or identities outside of

language, which does not itself have stable referents, and thus there are no stable truths or identities.

Canon

The idea of a canon refers to a body of work held to be the most important within a particular tradition. For example a list of 'great books' would include the work of Chaucer, Homer, Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot amongst others, while Bach, Beethoven and Mozart form the core of the European classical music canon. The whole idea of a canon as 'the good and the great' has been questioned on the grounds that there are no universal grounds for aesthetic judgments so that those which are employed can be understood as distinctions of taste and power associated with class-based groups.

Code

The customary usage of the term code refers to a set of signs that stand in for another set of signs and their meanings. Thus a code involves translation and concealment. Here the concept of code draws from the semiotic argument that the relations between signifiers and signified, or signs and their meanings, are arbitrary but temporarily 'fixed' by convention. A commonly cited illustration of this thesis concerns the organization and regulation of colours into the cultural code of traffic lights. Colours are classifications of gradations in the light spectrum that we name with signs such as red, green, amber and so fourth. However, there is no universal reason why the sign 'red' should refer to a specific colour, for the sign 'rojo' can designate the 'same' colour. Hence the relationship between sign and signal is arbitrary. Traffic lights deploy 'red' to signify 'stop' and 'green' to signify 'go'. This is the cultural code of traffic systems that temporarily fixes relationship between colours and meanings so that signs become naturalized codes.

Grand Narrative

This is a term used for an overarching story or metanarrative that claims universal validity as a foundational scheme that justifies and explains all facets of the human project. The power of modern grand narratives has been the subject of critique by poststructuralist and postmodern writers, most notably Lyotard. Here the postmodern condition involves a loss of faith in the foundational schemes that have justified the rational, scientific, technological and political projects of the modern world.

Hyperreality

Hyperreality is a concept deployed within some versions of postmodern thought signifying 'more real than real'. It refers to the manner by which simulations or artificial productions of 'real life' execute their own worlds to constitute reality. As such, hyperreality is a 'reality effect' by which the real is produced according to a model and appears to be more real than the real. Consequently, the distinction between the real and a representation collapses or implodes. For Jean Baudrillard,

postmodern culture is marked by an all-encompassing flow of fascinating simulations and images, a hyperreality in which we are overloaded with images and information.

Intertextuality

On one level the idea of intertextuality refers to the self-conscious citation of one text within another as an expression of enlarged cultural self-consciousness. Increased awareness of intertextuality is argued to be a sign of the postmodern condition.

Ideology

Ideology is grasped as ideas, meanings and practices which, while they purport to be universal truths, are maps of meaning that support the power of particular social classes. Ideology is not separate from the practical activities of life but provides people with rules of practical conduct and moral behavior rooted in day-to-day conditions. Though ideology can take the form of a coherent set of ideas it more often appears as the fragmented meanings of common sense inherent in a variety of representations. Within this paradigm common sense and popular culture become crucial sites of ideological conflict.

Multiple identities

This idea refers to the assumption of different and potentially contradictory identities at different times and places and which do not form a unified coherent self. That is, persons are best understood as being composed not of one but of several identities that are not integrated into a cohesive 'self'. In so far as we feel that we have a consistent identity from birth to death this is because we construct a unifying story or narrative of the self.

News

The production of news holds a strategic position in debates about the mass media for its presumed, and often feared, influence on public life. News is not a reflection of reality so much as 'the putting together of reality'. That is, news is not an unmediated 'window-on-the-world' but a selected and constructed representation constitutive of 'reality'.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a stream of thought identified with a number of different thinkers (amongst who are Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva), few of whom have actually adopted the term.

Structuralism has been concerned with the 'system of relations' of the underlying structure of sign systems and grammar that makes meaning possible.

Poststructuralism deconstructs the very notion of the stable structures of language that structuralism assumes. Meaning, it is argued cannot be confined to single words,

sentences or particular texts but is the outcome of relationships between texts, that is, intertextuality.

Postmodernism

The contemporary emergence of the concept of postmodernism is not simply an academic fashion but also, and more significantly, it marks a response to substantive changes in the organization and enactment of our social worlds.

Postmodern culture is often argued to be a more visual culture than previously encountered and is connected to a general aestheticization of everyday life.

Postmodern culture is marked by a self-conscious intertextuality, that is, citation of one text within another. For some critics (Baudrillard and Jameson), contemporary culture is constituted through a continual flow of images that establishes no connotational hierarchy. It is not only depthless and meaningless but also the modern distinctions between the real and the unreal, the public and the private, art and reality have broken down. This is a hyperreality in which we are overloaded with images and information.

Simulacrum

A simulacrum is an imitation or copy without an original (or referent) in which the simulation becomes more real than the real; indeed, the apparent reality of the simulation is the measure of the real. For Baudrillard, we live in a world where a series of modern distinctions – the real and the unreal, the public and the private, art and reality – have broken down, or been sucked into a ‘black hole’. In particular, for Baudrillard, television is the heart of a culture marked by an all-encompassing flow of fascinating simulations and facsimiles. The idea of a simulacrum has also been applied to Disneyland or Disney World, two of the most significant multimedia symbolic public spaces of the twenty-first century. Thus Disney presents a simulacrum of ‘Main Street USA’, where the American urban landscape takes on symbolic and imaginary form. In this copy of city life USA there are no guns, no homeless people, no drugs and no fear, which is thus a far cry from the streets of New York City. Disney world’s stimulating/simulated visual culture is the new model for public space whose principles are echoed in numerous shopping malls.