

## 1. CBQ REVIEW ESSAY:

### *Poststructuralism and Communication: A Review of the Literature, 1990-2001*

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It has been said poststructuralist theory subscribes to the simplistic belief that all communication is miscommunication. While it may be tempting to reduce the complexities of a most skeptical methodology to such an appealing sound bite, in actuality, poststructuralism is a broad and varied school of thought that has much to say about language, its use, the meanings created by it, and the power attached to it—all of which has proved to be of interest to a wide variety of humanities and social science scholars including communication researchers.

Poststructuralism was born as a response to structuralism, a philosophical school of thought subscribing to the notion that language creates—rather than reflects—meaning. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) developed a theory of semiotics that sought to account for the creation of meaning in spoken language by describing the relationship between signifiers and the meaning that they signified. Poststructuralists, led by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), seized upon de Saussure's sign theory and proceeded to deconstruct it by subjecting it to its own methodology. Sometimes characterized as hyperstructuralists or superstructuralists, the poststructuralists probed deeper than de Saussure and his followers. Was the relationship between signifier and signified so clear? Was the communication of meaning so unambiguous? Weren't there many possible interpretations of each signifier? Wasn't structuralism every bit as utopian in its rationality as the humanists who preceded them? And why did structuralism assign primacy to spoken language over written? These kind of questions, here aimed at the structuralists, could be and were raised by poststructuralists whenever they were confronted by a school of thought that imagined it had come upon a universal truth. If poststructuralism had nothing further to offer, communication scholars might be correct in assuming that poststructuralists do not view anything as capable of being effectively communicated.

In reality, poststructuralist theorists, in particular Michel Foucault (1926-1984), proved capable of offering insight that became quite useful to emerging communication theory. Foucault's work concentrated on relationships between discourse, power, and the creation of subject positions. Not concerned as much as other poststructuralists with the truth of a particular discourse, he preferred to analyze speech and writing in terms of their history or genesis—a so-called "archaeology of knowledge." Foucault's investigations served to demonstrate how political power was inextricably intertwined with communication and the development of knowledge. Although scorning the concept of an all-embracing theory that would explain reality, Foucault allowed that individual discourses might be understood within their individual social and political contexts.

Even in Derrida's deconstruction of "logocentrism" it would not be accurate to conclude

that meaningful communication is utterly impossible. Derrida does find that the gap between language's signifiers and the meaning that language intends to signify ultimately unbridgeable. Whenever one attempts to track a linguistic sign to its real meaning, he maintains, one finds instead a mere trace of another signifier that had existed previously. It may be said that establishment of meaning is indefinitely postponed, but not necessarily forever. Language is produced by the constant interaction between differences of spoken and written signs. Derrida calls the ongoing negotiating of difference between signs "arche-writing." It is this process that makes meaning theoretically possible even if it is concealed.

Poststructuralist philosophy has had an impact upon a broad range of social science and humanities disciplines. Its implications for communication were apparent from its inception, given its interest in language, signification, messages, and meaning. Poststructuralist philosophers addressed these issues as abstract concepts, although rarely venturing into the real world of communicational interaction. In addition, few communication researchers sought to reconcile poststructuralism with their own scholarship. (The articles of Denzin and Wetherell cited later are notable exceptions.) Many communication-related works, however, comment upon poststructuralism and indicate how they believe its findings relate to communication issues.

Poststructuralism has had a great impact upon the fields of psychoanalysis, cinema, art and art history, linguistics, literature, gender studies, contemporary culture, politics, aesthetics, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, and history. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary texts heavily influenced by poststructuralist thought have been produced by scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean Baudrillard. The following literature review of 16 important books, 4 book chapters, and 1 article on poststructuralism and communication, all published between 1990 and 2001, includes the most significant efforts to recast communication theory and practice in light of poststructuralist insights. In addition to poststructuralism and communication, the subject areas covered in this review that follows include aesthetics, computer networks, conversation analysis, critical theory, cultural studies, education, ethics, epistemology, feminist theory, history, literary criticism, mass communication, nonverbal communication, ontology, organizational communication, philosophical theory, postmodernism, pragmatism, reason, rhetoric, semantics, sociology, systems theory, and telematics. The authors cited have found ways to creatively address the impact—both positive and negative—of poststructuralist theory upon communicative processes in all of the above disciplines. Poststructuralism presents a challenge to all theories and systems that rest easily upon rational assumptions of generalized truths. After accepting poststructuralism's insights, however, it is still possible to arrive at solutions to communicative problems. Ross Abbinnett and Noëlle McAfee find Jürgen Habermas's poststructuralist notion of communicative reason to be a useful tool in fashioning an optimistic vision for social science problems; Patrice M. Buzzanell, Chris Weedon, and K. E. Supriya all see poststructuralist feminism as proposing methods of addressing sexual inequality in social and political discourses; and Stuart Hall cites French Marxist Louis Althusser with arriving at a middle ground that enables us to appreciate the differences highlighted in poststructuralism while still leaving room for fixed meaning and clear connection of ideas demanded by social science. If solutions are not yet to be found for all communicative problems, poststructuralism's insights might help frame the challenge that is presented to us. Norman K. Denzin finds this to be the case, and he points to the poststructuralist evolution of James Joyce's prose in asserting that a language which articulates social science truth in the face of poststructural reality can be discovered. Of all poststructuralism's theorists, Michel Foucault appears to have espoused ideas that prove most useful to authors dealing with issues of

communication. David C. Hoy, Mark Poster, Chris Weedon, and Sunh Hee Yoon (writing in Charles Ess's anthology) all find Foucault's wide-ranging insights useful. Foucault's notion of a subjectivity created through communication, and the manner in which power is wielded communicatively are cited as especially helpful in analyzing communication problems. Although at odds with many of poststructuralism's tenets, Jürgen Habermas's philosophy is seen by several authors to contain poststructuralist elements. Habermas is cited by Ross Abbinnett, Thomas McCarthy (Hoy's co-author), and Nöelle McAfee. His poststructuralist notion of communicative reason and his hope for a participatory, democratic state based on rational deliberation aided them in their analyses. The deconstruction of Derrida does not escape comment from many of the authors, but they tend to see the philosophy as brilliant technique, not applicable theory. Klaus Bruhn Jensen, in particular, finds poststructuralism especially unsuited for mass communication theorists because it remains firmly attached to the logos tradition despite all its effort to deconstruct it.

None of the authors are able to find Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy to be a useful tool in addressing the issues defined by their studies. Many of them, however, search for and find creative ways of using poststructuralist insights such as the importance of language in the creation of meaning; the constant interplay between signifier and signified; the creation of meaning by differences between signifieds; the continual deferral of actual meaning caused by constant difference (Derrida's "différance"); and the importance of power attached to language. The negativity/nihilism inherent in deconstruction can lead to apathy and inaction. Rather than accept this condition, the authors frequently choose to incorporate poststructuralist elements in the creation of hybrid philosophies that help address specific problems. Marxist playwright Peter Weiss has French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat propose a similar course of action in his *THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF JEAN-PAUL MARAT* (1965): "In the vast indifference, I invent a meaning. I don't watch unmoved. I intervene and say that this and this are wrong and I work to alter them. . . . The important thing is to turn yourself inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes." Success cannot be guaranteed, and the means must be subject to constant criticism, but the effort is admirable.

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**TRUTH AND SOCIAL SCIENCE: FROM HEGEL TO DECONSTRUCTION** by Ross Abbinnett (London: Sage, 1998—\$74.50/25.95, ISBN 0-8039-7592-9 hard, 0-8039-7593-7 paper, 200 pp.) attempts to demonstrate how the social science concepts of community, identity and subjectivity rely upon our understanding of what truth is. Because Abbinnett, cultural studies professor at Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK, views truth as an historical construct based upon what Hegel termed "ethical life," he considers it necessary to review the manner in which truth has been historically constructed through social relations and institutions. After establishing the basis for a Hegelian critique of social theory and discussing the manner in which the concept of structure has been the cause of individual action, the author turns his attention to the idea of autonomy. It is here in chapter 3, "The Idealism of Autonomy," that Abbinnett presents Jürgen Habermas's concept of a poststructuralist communicative reason as answer to the problem of reconciling the principles of critical morality with a sociological critique of community, ethics and identity. Abbinnett considers Habermas's ethics of communication to be a constructive adaptation of Kant's theory of practical reason to the communicative necessities of society. Because Habermas sees language as transforming human needs into shared social experience, it forms a "universal pragmatic" of communicative action (speech). Abbinnett considers this idea to constitute a theory of "rational transcendence" that is productive of an ethical truth by virtue of its

power to construct a social environment out of what had previously been a world of isolated, individual wants and desires. Abbinnett judges Habermas's concept of communicative rationality to be a radical limitation of the traditional belief in philosophy's legislative power. Because Habermas emphasizes the communicative nature of society, modern philosophy must be restricted to an interpretive, rather than a legislative, role. Abbinnett acknowledges Jean-Francois Lyotard's criticism of Habermas's work, indicating that any theory which subscribes to a communicative origin of society forces the theorist to look for consensus where there actually exists a diversity of discourses. Derrida also considers Habermas's work to be an idealistic attempt at establishing a rational totality capable of regulating justice and freedom. Abbinnett, however, attributes the views of Lyotard and Derrida to a misreading of Hegel's difference and universality within ethical life. Abbinnett believes that Habermas's concept of communicative reason succeeds in demonstrating that speech, subjective representation of social necessity, is essential to ethical life. Without recognition of the institutional environment within which the individual lives, ethics would dominate—rather than be influenced by—the individual.

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"The Promise and Practice of the New Career and Social Contract: Illusions Exposed and Suggestions for Reform," by Patrice M. Buzzanell, pp. 209-235, in **RETHINKING ORGANIZATIONAL AND MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION FROM FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES** edited by Patrice M. Buzzanell (Thousand Oaks: Sage "Foundations for Organization Science," 2000— \$62.95/26.95, ISBN 0-7619-1278-9 hard, 0-7619-1279-7 paper, 328 pp., bibliographical references) is the ninth chapter in a book that criticizes traditional organizational communication theory from a feminist perspective. This article maintains that the language of our "new" career and social contract works to the disadvantage of marginalized members of society even more than does the "old." In her analysis, Buzzanell examines discourse and thought regarding corporate current careers, employing organizational communication problematics (of rationality, voice, organization and organization-society relationships) as a tool. In addition, the author uses Chris Weedon's (cited later) poststructuralist feminist theory in order to develop career conceptualizations that address the problem. By adopting feminist post-structuralism as a methodology, Buzzanell is prompted to ask several questions: Who is served by each new career? How does this new career represent a reasonable response to the changing workplace? How can questioning alter the underlying distribution of power represented by the new career? Buzzanell argues for establishment of democratic communication processes in order to render corporations more responsive to worker concerns. She sees agency relationships and efficiency calculations as a facade preventing such democratization. Buzzanell calls for creation of careers that promote the values of relationship, collaboration, and long-term focus.

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"The Poststructural Crisis in the Social Sciences: Learning from James Joyce" by Norman K. Denzin, pp. 38-59, in **POSTMODERN REPRESENTATIONS: TRUTH, POWER AND MIMESIS IN THE HUMAN SCIENCES AND PUBLIC CULTURE** edited by Richard Harvey Brown (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995—\$49.95/22.50, ISBN 0-2520-2176-2 hard, 0-2520-6465-8 paper, 288 pp.) examines the "double crises of representation and legitimation" that face the social sciences today in a volume that focuses on demonstrating how truth is represented or misrepresented in modern methods of discourse. Denzin, professor of communications at the University of Illinois, asks how, in the face of poststructuralist criticism,

can researchers capture and interpret lived experience? If, according to both structuralist and poststructuralist theory, much of this experience is created by the researcher's language in the process of relating his or her findings, then there is a representational crisis. Given this problem of representation, how can research findings be generalized, or recognized as valid and reliable? Poststructuralism has, indeed, created serious problems for the social science researcher. Denzin limits his study to American qualitative research in the area of social theory history. He uses James Joyce's texts, *DUBLINERS*, *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*, *ULYSSES*, and *FINNEGAN'S WAKE*, to illustrate how language can communicate reality in a complete range of styles from the realistic to the poststructural. Each step along the way becomes more reflexive and interpretive, in the end leaving most readers lost within language and its mysteries. Denzin perceives a solution to the researcher's representational and legitimation dilemmas in Joyce's journey: the researcher must find a new poststructural language with which to communicate his or her work. This language must be subjective and sparing in its use of theoretical terminology. Like Joyce, the social scientist should "move forward by moving inward." Only then can social science find its new center, says the author, the place where truth based on experience resides.

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**THE PROMISE OF PRAGMATISM: MODERNISM AND THE CRISIS OF**

**KNOWLEDGE AND AUTHORITY** by John Patrick Diggins (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1994—\$29.95/22.00, ISBN 0-2261-4878-5 hard, 0-2261-4879-3 paper, 515 pp.) draws, in his discussion of philosophical pragmatism's history in America, interesting parallels between poststructuralism and the philosophy of Locke and Hume, upon which the founding fathers based their experiment in representative democracy. Both reject philosophy as a search for absolute truth, and respect the reality of power. The author asserts that the founders possessed a profound lack of faith in the ability of the citizenry to act rationally with a natural respect for law. The *FEDERALIST PAPERS* are presented as an effort to persuade readers that irrepressible passions effectively prevent reason and virtue from presiding over the citizenry and its rulers. These beliefs, Diggins maintains, are similar to poststructuralism's attack upon "logocentrism" and its attendant notion that language serves to merely carry out the mind's rational thoughts. The author also finds a deconstructionist-like distrust of language among the founding fathers: "When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language, his meaning, luminous as it must be, is rendered dim and doubtful by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated." (*FEDERALIST*, no. 37). Much of Diggins's book reads as a reaction to neopragmatist Richard Rorty's announcement of "the end of philosophy" in his 1979 address to the American Psychological Association. Rorty counseled philosophers to cease their failed pursuit of truth and look to language and literature in order to find a new vocabulary. The new philosophy would exist as a conversation without reference to anything beyond the language used to express it. Diggins includes Reinhold Niebuhr among those who presaged poststructuralism in his appreciation for language's inescapable ties to power and self-interest. In particular, the author cites Niebuhr's *THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY* (New York: Scribner, 1952) as a poststructuralist critique of America's rhetorical pretensions. Diggins believes that Habermas's defense of the Enlightenment reveals an ignorance of the founding fathers' skepticism. In addition, the author draws a clear distinction between Habermas's faith in achievement of consensus through speech and poststructuralists' deconstruction of language. Habermas's notion of communicative reason may be poststructuralist in the importance which it places upon language and its ability to create subjectivity, but his belief in the possibility of achieving an ideal communicative state is certainly

not. Diggins traces pragmatism's history from William James to Charles Sanders Peirce to John Dewey and Richard Rorty. The author points out that for Rorty pragmatism has become a matter of words and its future connected to textuality. In the end, Diggins finds such a prospect, devoid of discovery and wonder, rather debilitating.

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**PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON COMPUTER-MEDIATED COM-**

**MUNICATION** edited by Charles Ess (Albany: State University of New York Press "SUNY Series in Computer-Mediated Communication," 1996—\$21.50/20.95, ISBN 0-7914-2871-0 hard, 0-7914-2872-9 paper, 319 pp., bibliographical references and index) examines computer-mediated communication (CMC) from a variety of philosophical attitudes. This work is apparently the first to do so. The editor's intention is that the volume should serve as a textbook for courses dealing with the philosophical dimensions of the topic. As such, contributors explore CMC's relationship with phenomenology, semiotics, critical theory, postmodernism, and various ethical and political systems. Sunh-Hee Yoon (Sogang University, Seoul) reflects upon CMC's connection to poststructuralism in chapter 8, "Power Online: A Poststructuralist Perspective on Computer-Mediated Communication." Adopting Foucault's methodology, Yoon looks at the effects of computerization in South Korea. The author finds that Foucault's concept of power is particularly applicable in the Korean situation, because computerization has not occurred solely through the putative rational authority of administrative intervention but also by acceptance at the local level. Yoon describes a situation, however, where Korea's computerization has so far failed to establish any viable communication channels locally. Instead, the nation has installed a single, systematic database that is closed to the diverse voices of local residents, and computer education is restricted to technical training. In chapter 2, "Mediated Phosphor Dots: Toward a Post-Cartesian Model of Computer-Mediated Communication via the Semiotic Superhighway," Gary Shank (Northern Illinois University) and Donald Cunningham (Indiana University) maintain that poststructuralism (and all previous philosophical theory) is inadequate in attempting to explain the "multilogue" produced by the rapidly proliferating message threads that constitute communication on the Internet. They foresee the dawning of an "age of meaning" as opposed to the popular notion of an information age.

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**SEXUALITY AND BEING IN THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST UNIVERSE OF CLARICE**

**LISPECTOR: THE DIFFÉRANCE OF DESIRE** by Earl E. Fitz (Austin: University of Texas Press "Texas Pan American Series," 2001—\$55.00/24.95, ISBN 0-2927-2528-0 hard, 0-2927-2529-9 paper, 272 pp., bibliographical references and index) portrays Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector (1920-1977) as the first poststructuralist writer. Fitz, professor of Portuguese, Spanish, and comparative literature at Vanderbilt University, regards her debut novel, *PERTO DO CORAÇÃO SELVAGEM* (*NEAR TO THE WILD HEART*), published in 1944, as perfectly communicating poststructuralist thought two decades before poststructuralist philosophy was first articulated. As a "poststructuralist without portfolio," Lispector epitomizes Derrida's concept of "différance" in her use of a semantic tension that simultaneously communicates both an aspiration for, and a loss of, control, and unity. Fitz argues that Lispector's use of language creates an awareness of one's existence at the same time that it deconstructs it. The result is a depiction of the human need to order existence through perfect communication, and the continual failure to achieve this. Fitz sees a distinct advantage in Lispector's (conscious or unconscious) representation of poststructuralist philosophy in fiction: it humanizes the sterile condition

described by poststructuralist philosophers by permitting readers to feel the emotions derived from it. In chapter 3, "The Erotics of Being: Self, Other, and Language," Fitz maintains that Lispector's work is suffused with a psycholinguistic sexuality that is poststructuralist in its intensely destabilizing influence. This aspect of Lispector's work, Fitz states, is intimately related to Hélène Cixous's concept of "l'écriture féminine" and Julia Kristeva's semiotics. Although Lispector's work is not sexually explicit, the linguistic communication of desire is integral to it. Fitz acknowledges that Lispector is not a great storyteller. Rather, her accomplishments are related to the fact that she succeeds in creating self-conscious narratives, frequently autobiographical, replete with the anxiety and uncertainty that represents "life as language." Already widely perceived as Brazil's most influential woman writer, Lispector will be appreciated on a still wider scale if Fitz's analysis is well received. The book includes a complete listing of Lispector's novels, short stories, crônicas (chronicles), and juvenile literature.

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"Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates" by Stuart Hall, pp. 11-34, in **CULTURAL STUDIES AND COMMUNICATIONS** edited by James Curran, David Morley and Valerie Walkerdine (London: Arnold, 1996—\$59.95, ISBN 0-3406-5268-3, 371 pp., bibliographical references and index) is the first chapter in a volume that aims to demonstrate how a range of cultural studies approaches can be applied to various media and communications issues. Sociology professor Stuart Hall (Open University) discusses how French Marxist Louis Althusser found a solution to the creation of meaning without completely contradicting Derrida's poststructuralist concepts of perpetual difference and deferral. Hall refers to Althusser's break with orthodox Marxism. The break is attributed to the fact that Althusser came to appreciate the existence of social differences and contradictions that defied explanation by Marxist science. Althusser, however, did not permit himself to embrace perpetual difference wholeheartedly. Rather than become an adherent of Derridean deconstruction, he found a middle ground—one that allowed for both difference and unity. Hall maintains that without a degree of arbitrary fixing—or "articulation"—of signification, there can be no meaning at all. There can be no ideology, Hall argues, without fixing meaning by establishing a clear connection of ideas. The author cites Althusser's *FOR MARX* (London: Penguin Press, 1969), especially the essay "On Contradiction and Overdetermination," as accomplishing this articulation of unity and difference in its discussion of different ways of viewing the Marxist principle of determination.

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**CRITIQUE OF VIOLENCE: BETWEEN POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND CRITICAL THEORY** by Beatrice Hanssen (London: Routledge "Warwick Studies in European Philosophy," 2000—\$80.00/25.95, ISBN 0-4152-2339-3 hard, 0-4152-2340-7 paper, 320 pp., bibliographical references and index) examines violence and its language in order to attempt mediation between competing philosophies. Focusing on the point at which discussion becomes dispute, Hanssen appropriates verbal communication models in order to bridge the gap between poststructuralism and critical theory. In the past such models were largely restricted to use in political theory. For her purposes, Hanssen elects to view the contentious field of critical theory as a vital, spirited debate rather than a static statement of competing methodologies. In chapter 4, "The Violence of Language," Hanssen argues that the post-structural conception of discursive violence necessarily implies an attack on the liberal notion of free speech. Universal consensus based on free discussion, Hanssen maintains, is impossible for any poststructuralist-influenced political entity

where (as political theorist Chantal Mouffe has stated) “dissensus” on political principles would be the rule. Although crediting poststructuralism with sensitizing us to ulterior motives/hidden agendas in the political arena, Hanssen warns that poststructuralists must discover how to transform their structural logic into a social one. She also echoes those who have seen poststructuralism’s principal failure as its inability to prevent followers from attempting to establish the philosophy as a new “counterlaw.”

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**CRITICAL THEORY** by David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Oxford, England: Blackwell “Great Debates in Philosophy,” 1994—out of print, ISBN 1-5578-6172-2, 280 pp., index) debate the state of critical theory in light of the modern loss of faith in the viability of communicative reason as a universal concept. Philosophy professors Hoy (University of California, Santa Cruz) and McCarthy (Northwestern) cite French poststructuralists as contributing to the decline of communicative reason by stressing the contingent nature of what we call reason, and attacking the Western tradition of “logocentrism.” In section 4.3, “Anticipations of Poststructuralism,” Hoy traces the historical rise of critical theory and its occasional anarchic/nihilistic manifestations in poststructuralism by citing the contributions of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno. He sees all three as attempting to refute any rigid philosophy that is obsessed with replacing falsity with absolute truth. Hoy argues that Horkheimer and Adorno adhered to a skeptical sort of dialectic methodology that very much resembles poststructuralist deconstruction of structuralist theory. In both cases, there is the belief that between the lines of any statement of principle there can be found hidden messages that serve to negate the original assertion. Poststructuralism’s dissection of structuralist language theory is thus seen as anticipated by the adherents of the Early Frankfurt School of philosophy. The debate between the authors concludes with Hoy declaring himself in favor of Michel Foucault’s historicist approach to critical theory, and McCarthy leaning more toward a universal conception of communicative reason based on the work of Jürgen Habermas.

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**THE SOCIAL SEMIOTICS OF MASS COMMUNICATION** by Klaus Bruhn Jensen (London: Sage, 1995—out of print, ISBN 0-8039-7810-3 paper, 228 pp., bibliographical references and index) addresses the relative neglect of semiosis in the humanities by advocating a pragmatic approach to the importance of signs in society. Jensen finds that communication studies have emphasized signs themselves rather than examining their influence and usefulness in social practices. The subject of mass media as a source of meaning needs to be examined, according to the author. Jensen views poststructuralism as presenting a valid revision of western philosophy’s logos tradition by demonstrating the impossibility of treating language as unambiguous. At the same time, Jensen subscribes to Marshall McLuhan’s call for a de-emphasis of mass communication theory based on verbal language rather than mass media. Poststructuralism is an unsatisfactory option for mass communication theorists because, despite its criticism of the logos tradition, it fails to transcend it. Jensen sees poststructuralism as a methodology that leads inexorably to terminal skepticism and inaction by advocating “epistemological doodling, anti-realistic ecstasy and narrative laissez-faire.” These terms are defined respectively as the documentation of the impossibility of knowing things, celebration of the lack of meaning, and rejoicing at the existence of an infinite number of realities. In effect, according to post-structuralism, “all communication is miscommunication.” Jensen argues for adoption of a more positive approach in Charles Sanders Peirce’s pragmatism as the basis for a communication theory



that opens up new lines of inquiry.

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**HABERMAS, KRISTEVA, AND CITIZENSHIP** by Noëlle McAfee (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000—\$42.50/18.95, ISBN 0-8014-3706-7 hard, 0-8014-8670-X paper, 240 pp., bibliographical references and index) attempts to reconcile Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of subjectivity with Jürgen Habermas's model of a deliberative democracy in order to arrive at a hopeful vision of the political future. McAfee likens Kristeva's notion of subjectivity to that of Periclean Greece where the self was perceived as one with the polity. Kristeva's self is in open communication with all that surrounds him or her. Language, although a disruptive medium to Kristeva, enables the individual to establish relationships with others. Although McAfee finds Habermas's more autonomous view of subjectivity less attractive than Kristeva's, she favors his view of citizenship. Habermas's notion of a deliberative democracy facilitates the type of public interest and decision-making the author believes is needed. McAfee points out that even though he conceives of subjectivity as being developed through poststructuralist communicative action, the product of this development is described by Habermas as an autonomous self, using transparent language as a tool with which to reason. McAfee prefers Kristeva's open system. By combining Kristeva's version of subjectivity with Habermas's conception of the political state, McAfee provides the basis for a more democratic politics. As she explains in the preface, her experience in the political arena has convinced her that without such a political transformation the public is fated to repeatedly act against its own self-interest. McAfee sees this marriage of Kristeva's and Habermas's ideologies as an effective response to those who maintain that poststructuralism renders all political action impossible. Even in the face of Jacques Derrida's theory of decon-struction, McAfee asserts, we can still "dance politically."

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**COMMUNICATION: THE POWER OF LOCATION: ESSAYS ON ADESPOTIC AESTHETICS** by Luciano Nanni (New York: Peter Lang "Semiotics & the Human Sciences, vol. 19," 2000—\$48.95, ISBN 0-8204-4544-4, 197 pp., bibliographical references and index) argues that the communication model ("mono-semantic" signification in semiotics) is not adequate for the understanding of artwork, because it functions only on the conceptual or denotative level. Instead, polysemic or multiple signification (taking into consideration, for example, the physical, chemical, mental and symbolic levels of meaning) communicates effectively on a much broader scale. In essay 6, "Aesthetics and Semiotics: The Poststructuralist Ribaltone," Nanni takes to task both structuralist and poststructuralist philosophy for betrayal and overthrow (ribaltone) of an essential artistic duty—communicating proper understanding of aesthetic essence. Nanni finds that structuralism emphasizes the work and its author while poststructuralism stresses the work and the audience, but neither considers the importance of location. Nanni uses the analogy of a boat to demonstrate his theory: without considering the location of the sea and its attendant properties, one cannot effectively communicate the meaning of the boat, the boat builder, the boatman, and the relationship that unites them.

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**THE MODE OF INFORMATION: POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND SOCIAL CONTEXT** by Mark Poster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990—\$53.00/21.00, ISBN 0-2266-7595-5 hard, 0-2266-7596-3 paper, 179 pp., bibliographical references and index) is a seminal work that examines how electronic communication differs from conventional speech and

writing and considers the implications for critical social theory. In particular, Poster argues for use of poststructuralist theory as a method of promoting new research in electronic communication. Poster finds most appropriate the poststructuralist contention that subjectivity is created by communication acts and structures. At the same time, Poster views electronic communication as subverting the authority of poststructuralism by causing the theory to adjust its interpretive mechanism to new realities. In demonstrating how poststructuralist theories can be used to inform our understanding of society, Poster discusses “Baudrillard and TV Ads” (chapter 2), “Foucault and Databases” (chapter 3), “Derrida and Electronic Writing” (chapter 4), and “Lyotard and Computer Science” (chapter 5). In each section Poster discusses the degree to which poststructuralist theory can help us appreciate the fundamental social changes being created in the new age of information. Poster poses his most significant question at the end: What is the nature of community in the age of electronic communication?

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**LANGUAGE AND SPACE: THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST TURN IN THE**

**PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE** by Ewa Rewers (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang “Literary and Cultural Theory, vol. 4,” 1999—\$35.95, ISBN 0-8204-4304-2, 169 pp., bibliographical references) argues for the necessity of dismantling traditional philosophical associations between language/space and history/space because she accepts the poststructuralist viewpoint that we now find ourselves living in an age dominated by space. Of the two relationships, Rewers considers the former to be most difficult, because the concept of *logos* is central to our cultural reality. Nevertheless, Rewers maintains, the complex relationships of text/environment, speech/*chora*, and *logos*/logosphere must be deconstructed in order to achieve freedom of communication within a humanistically determined space. In chapter II, “Place and Chora as the Epistemological Metaphors of Language, Conversation and Speech,” Rewers views Plato’s concept of *chora*, or receptacle, as housing the contradictions existing between textual and abstract space. It is this “ontological indefiniteness” of the concept *chora* that infiltrates and subverts the rule of *logos*, because *logos*’s domination during the history of Western thought depended upon the ability to clearly define language and discourse. Rewers discusses Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist interpretations of the *chora* in which the term was used to represent a host of poststructuralist conceptions (all anathema to rational discourse). She concludes that the concept serves as an appropriate metaphor for dialogue on space, communication, and philosophy.

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**SEMANTICS AND THE BODY: MEANING FROM FREGE TO THE POSTMODERN** by Horst Ruthrof (Toronto: University of Toronto Press “Toronto Studies in Semiotics,”

1997—\$60.00/24.95, ISBN 0-8020-4151-5 hard, 0-8020-7993-8 paper, 321 pp., bibliographical references and index) argues for a corporeal semantics that includes tactile, visual, and nonverbal interpretations of the world in order to avoid a system of sterile syntax. Without corporeal signification, Ruthrof, professor of philosophy at Murdoch University (Perth, Australia), finds language meaningless. In chapter 4, “Meaning and Poststructuralism,” Ruthrof depicts poststructuralists Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida as linguistic philosophers who work to elaborate signification and expand possible meanings. Ruthrof finds that both Lyotard and

Derrida allow for nonverbal signification of the body in the communication of meaning. Both look beyond syntactic processes. Although they reject use of transcendental signifieds, Ruthrof asserts, Lyotard and Derrida accept procedural use of transcendental inquiry. In the end, Ruthrof finds that Derrida's concept of "différance" supports a corporeal semantics in which the body is an unstable, dislocated entity—a factor, nonetheless, in the process that seeks to create meaning. Ruthrof regards admission of the nonverbal into linguistic schema essential to the creation of meaning. Because poststructuralism allows this, Ruthrof considers it an ally against schools of pure semantics and syntax that treat language as an empty grid devoid of meaning.

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**LITERATURE AS COMMUNICATION: THE FOUNDATIONS OF MEDIATING**

**CRITICISM** by Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: John Benjamins "Pragmatics & Beyond, new series, no. 78," 2000—\$95.00/34.95, ISBN 1-5561-9838-8 hard, 1-5561-9839-6 paper, 348 pp., bibliographical references and indexes) seeks to arrive at a theory of mediating criticism that will help readers appreciate a literary work produced in an earlier historical period or by a member of an alien culture. To this end, Sell considers poststructuralism a mixed blessing: on the one hand, the theory emphasizes the importance of historical contextualization and acknowledges people's capacity for moving from one sociocultural formation to another; on the other hand, some poststructuralists seriously minimize the possibility of communication across periods of sociocultural difference, because they conceive of the author as mere writer-workers who passively channel society's culture and language. Sell's mediating criticism is based on a triangular communication structure in which two parties are in communication regarding a third entity. The third entity can include one or both of the communicative parties or can be unconnected with them (literature). Sell also sees communicative behavior as unpredictable, connected to personality and social change, and based on good faith and fellowship. However, Sell acknowledges that in one sense poststructuralists may have an advantage, because human individuality is the widest possible variable. Consequently, a methodology or theory that discounts or devalues it might be more likely to arrive at meaningful discovery than one that faces humanity head-on.

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"Judgment and the Problem of Agency/Accountability: A Postcolonialist Critique of Poststructuralist Theory" by K. E. Supriya, pp. 42-62, in **JUDGMENT CALLS: RHETORIC, POLITICS AND INDETERMINACY** edited by John M. Sloop and James P. McDaniel (Boulder, CO: Westview Press "Polemics Series," 1998—price unavailable, ISBN 0-8133-9097-4, 263 pp., bibliographical references and index) Supriya argues for a revival of humanism in transcultural decision-making in a volume that challenges theorists in rhetoric and communication to make crucial judgments in the face of postmodernist and poststructuralist mistrust of the judgmental process. Supriya regards poststructural criticism of ethical judgment as Eurocentric. Poststructural perversity, Supriya maintains, permits Europe to exploit developing nations while simultaneously disavowing responsibility for it. Poststructuralism facilitates this process by radically decentering the concepts of agency and accountability. Because poststructuralists regard actions as social constructs beyond individual control, no one can be held accountable for domination and subordination of another. Supriya finds this notion clearly unacceptable. In response, she calls for establishment of a "critical ethical humanism" that can speak to questions of human judgment. Supriya cites Chris Weedon's work on feminist poststructuralism (cited next) as one in which a similar solution is arrived at with regard to the question of agency. Women may become agents of either compliance or change with regard to social power depending

on the subject positions that they adopt in social discourse. Supriya demands a similar right of choice for postcolonial populations.

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**FEMINIST PRACTICE AND POSTSTRUCTURALIST THEORY** by Chris Weedon (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1997 [2nd ed.]—\$28.95, ISBN 0-6311-9825-3, 195 pp., bibliographical references and index) views poststructuralism as a useful method of conceptualizing the relationship among language, social institutions, and individual consciousness. Emphasis is placed upon how power is exercised, and possibilities for change are presented. Weedon finds psychoanalytic theory of importance for its challenge to discourses that assume the presence of a unified, rational subject as well as to theories of innate, biologically determined sexuality. In particular, Weedon considers Julia Kristeva's interpretation of psychoanalytic theory to be of greatest interest because it presents subjectivity as a work in process and does not locate feminine aspects of language within the woman's libido. Weedon finds Foucault's theory of language and social power, with its focus on institutional effects of discourse and insistence on historical specificity, to be most useful to feminist poststructuralists. Texts are seen as constructions—not reflections of—meaning. Weedon considers most important the manner in which texts construct meanings and subject positions for the reader, the contradictions inherent in the process and the resulting political implications. Readers are cautioned not to ignore gender, race, and class as political concerns when focusing on femininity.

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**TELLING WOMEN'S LIVES: NARRATIVE INQUIRIES IN THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION** edited by Kathleen Weiler and Sue Middleton (Buckingham, England: Open University Press "Feminist Educational Thinking," 1999—price unavailable, ISBN 0-3352-0174-1, 166 pp., bibliographical references and index) focuses on the history of women in education in a variety of settings. The editors see this book as an updated extension of **WOMEN WHO TAUGHT** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), edited by Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald. The essays in the earlier work, however, were written in the 1970s and 1980s and, therefore, did not reflect the influence of poststructuralist theory prevalent in the 1990s. The contributors to this volume operate under the Foucauldian assumption that gender is an unstable and shifting concept being continually recreated through language and their essays are presented as inquiries rather discoveries of any final truth. The essay on radical school reformer Kate Haley, by Kate Rousmaniere (Miami University), is illustrative of the manner in which this volume reworks traditional accounts of women educators' lives. Haley's life is found to be more "complicated and conflicted" than was previously thought. Politics, education and labor issues, and the women's social reform movement interacted with her personal characteristics to inform her communication style, presenting the researcher with a more dynamic and interesting portrait than earlier accounts had rendered.

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"Positioning and Interpretive Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue" by Margaret Wetherell, pp. 387-412, in **DISCOURSE & SOCIETY** 9 (1998—price unavailable, ISSN 0957-9265, quarterly) argues against conversation analysis as a technical discipline, proposing instead a post-structuralist-influenced technique that takes into account the wide variety of conversationalists' psychological states, identities, and subject positions. Wetherell is responding to Emanuel Schegloff's "Whose Text? Whose Context?" *Discourse &*

*Society* 8 (1997): 165-187. Wetherell accuses Schegloff of attempting to create his own “gold standard” for conversation analysis in which conversationalists’ discourse is subjected to empirical examination. Wetherell bases her own analysis upon the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe who, as poststructuralists do, stress the importance of the context of the event under discussion and the subject positions adopted by the communicators. The article re-examines the same conversation analyzed by Schegloff—a group discussion concerning the sexual activities of a teenager in a British boys’ school. Wetherell acknowledges that poststructuralist analysis has rarely been applied to conversation. In addition, she grants that the work of Laclau and Mouffe is aimed at advancing political projects. Nevertheless, she maintains that a variety discourse analysis that takes into account interaction between poststructuralism and conversation is the most productive. Wetherell cites advances made by cultural anthropologists and ethnographers of communication to support her contention.

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**CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTS: POSTMODERN THEORY AND THE PRAGMATICS OF THE “OUTSIDE”** by Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press “Theory Out of Bounds, vol. 13,” 1998—\$44.95, ISBN 0-8166-3018-6, 175 pp., bibliographical references and index)

asserts, in his assessment of the philosophical attacks that inevitably follow the wide acceptance of any philosophy, “Nothing fails like success.” Wolfe proceeds to examine the manner in which theorists are attempting to solve current philosophy’s crucial problem: having effectively demolished the objective authority upon which political projects have been traditionally based by asserting the contingent nature of knowledge, upon what does one base his/her own progressive proposals? In chapter 2, “Systems Theory,” Wolfe discusses Habermas’s notion of an ideal form of speech by which differences can be resolved through social consensus. The author refutes the possibility of such an idealized form of communication by citing the criticism of social antagonist theorists Slavoj Zizek and Niklas Luhmann, who maintain that hypothesizing an ideal communication situation might actually result in blocking communication and rendering invisible the existence of real paradox. In chapter 3, “Poststructuralism: Foucault with Deleuze,” Wolfe discusses the branch of poststructuralism that dismisses language as incapable of communicating the forces that have produced modern man. Instead, it is prescribed that the relationships of power are a more fruitful field for investigation. Poststructuralists who are more concerned with deconstruction of language, the author contends, are in error by not granting the possibility of describing differentiation outside of the limitations of structuralism. Wolfe proceeds to champion Kenneth Burke’s “comic perspective” on the relationship between ongoing critique and political practice. This approach encourages actors to continually criticize their own actions, exposing error in the process.