

john lechte



key contemporary concepts

from abjection to zeno's paradox

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John Lechte



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For Gill
and my father,
John S. Lechte
(1921–2002)

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Thanks also to my students and colleagues at Macquarie for responding – without always knowing it – to a number of entries in this collection.

A Note on the Text

Entries contain etymological and historical information about the concept, where this is relevant. The current meanings of the concept are given, along with an exposition and discussion of the term, with particular attention being paid to the use of the concept in the work of classical or contemporary thinkers or theorists. While I have endeavoured to be rigorous in referencing where this would be of help to the reader, mentions of very well known ideas in the work of classic authors (e.g., Plato, Kant) have not always been referenced. The overall aim is to give the reader a sense of the meaning and significance (especially current) of each concept, not to give a reading of the work(s) of specific authors.

Concepts which appear in entries other than their own are marked with an asterisk to facilitate cross-referencing. Asterisks are only to be found when the full concept appears. One term of a dual entry such as sacred (see sacred-profane), or difference (difference-individuality) is not asterisked, but the complete title appears in the list at the end of the entry.

KEY CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTS

Key Contemporary Concepts offers a map of where we are now as a society and culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. From cybernetics to quantum theory, from ideology to power, from aesthetics to mimesis, from the sacred to work, this book is a guide to the present and the future, as it plumbs the depths of terms across the disciplines: social theory, art theory, politics, biology, cultural studies, religion and philosophy. This is the book for anyone who wants to gain an insight into the current scientific and intellectual state of society – a book that is ideal for the student and for academics who need to brush up on the latest in areas other than their own.

Each entry provides a history and current meaning of the concept in question. It then outlines its place in the work of a key author, while also offering an interpretation of the term's significance, both current and classical. Concepts are organised clearly in alphabetical order, and essential references are given for further research.

Not since Raymond Williams's *Keywords* has such an ambitious pedagogical and intellectual project been achieved with the same rigour, insight

and breadth of knowledge. Specialist dictionaries are useful in their way; but how do concepts relate to each other across disciplinary boundaries? How do they work from an interdisciplinary perspective? *Key Concepts* shows us how.

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Introduction

THE COLLECTION'S RATIONALE AND STATUS

It is a truism to say that, during the twentieth century, knowledge and ideas, in both the humanities and social sciences, have expanded exponentially. Consequently, any selection of concepts deriving from this expansion will surely be skewed. My task is to provide the rationale governing the entries to be found in this collection. Before I embark on this, I would like to clarify the status of a collection of concepts such as this.

The book follows in the footsteps of my *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity* (1994) in which I aimed to engage with the work of thinkers within the framework of movements in modern thought. Rather than simply presenting an exegesis of an *oeuvre*, I endeavoured also to engage with that *oeuvre*: I pointed to difficulties and offered an interpretation, which it was then up to readers to accept or reject in light of their own research and interests. I had a clear framework to provide a sense of direction for my reading: in the first instance, French structuralism and its critics.

In a similar vein, I present here concepts that are becoming increasingly visible in light of developments in information science and philosophy. The concept of 'cyberspace' is particularly significant. In effect, many of the concepts have a link to (my version of) what drives contemporary reality: that is why 'image', 'icon', 'simulacrum', 'difference' and 'individuality' are included. This is the age of media (if not of the 'spectacle') and of the crisis of identity that accompanies it.

If it is true that humans only become fully conscious of their reality when they have concepts through which this reality is articulated, then certain concepts will assume a fundamental importance in enabling an understanding of the so-called present moment in history. Looked at in this way, 'contemporary concepts' are the vocabulary through which the experience of an epoch might be spoken and expressed.

While, no doubt, we should not proceed by linking concepts to context in a dogmatic or simplistic manner – thus opening the door to fashion for determining what concepts are relevant and illuminating – we should recall that concepts do not arise in a social and philosophical vacuum. Of importance here is the fact that, in a work of limited scope such as this – a work that makes no claim to be an exhaustive dictionary – choices must

be made: the concepts included presuppose many that are excluded. Thus, 'code' is included while 'instinct' is excluded; for, in light of the structuralist revolution, together with the understanding of information technology as being based on the digital code, there is a call for a deeper understanding of the former concept, while, 'instinct' has come to have a far less visible role in explaining human experience, if not for explaining animal behaviour.

Does this mean that concepts arise and decline in light of historical developments, and that what was seen to be significant at one historical moment will become irrelevant at the next? The answer is decidedly in the negative – first, because no researcher is in a position to choose concepts simply according to circumstances and relevance. The judgement of history is always retrospective. Secondly, and more importantly, it is not just the concept that is at issue, but also its interpretation. Concepts such as 'truth', the 'sacred' and 'justice' are not new; what is new is the range of possibilities of interpretation to which they have given rise. To grasp recent interpretations of these and other similarly enduring terms, however, often entails recourse to previous interpretations. 'Ideology' is a concept which illustrates this: beginning in the eighteenth century as the study of ideas, it became a synonym for doctrine (whether in a religious or political sense) and worldview and was finally understood in the 1960s and 1970s as a form of practice.

The concepts presented here are social, less because they are part of a (putative) social theory canon, and more because they are vehicles for illuminating our social present.

PREVIOUS WORK

To propose a book of concepts, those most relevant to the present moment, evokes Raymond Williams's project of the middle 1970s. Partly in the manner of the lexicologist, Williams, in his *Key Words* (1976), successfully distilled the sense of the fundamental terms of the decades after the Second World War. His list included words with important social and cultural overtones, words in common parlance which needed investigation and clarification ('family', 'image', 'native', 'nature'), including those of a more technical orientation with a strong Marxist flavour (bourgeois, capitalism, communism, class, dialectic, materialism, revolution), as well as those related to social life (civilisation, society, status), and a few directly related to Williams's own background and training in literary criticism (fiction, literature). The success of Williams's book is testimony to the fact that he tapped into a real desire for understanding. For a generation his text has been a crucial reference point for the humanities: for social scientists, literary critics and lay people who want help to find their way round modern social and cultural reality, and, latterly, around the theoretical terrain of Cultural Studies, a terrain that also offers itself as a key to knowing society.

Despite all this, *Key Words*, in retrospect, is of another era, and not simply because of the kinds of terms it included. Some of these (for example

'image', 'alienation') also appear in this volume. Nor is it of another era because Cultural Studies has now matured as an area of study (whatever has been said about its philosophical underpinnings). Rather, *Key Words* speaks to a different audience to that of today – first, because the ideological agenda which gave the work its impetus (humanist Marxism) is no longer so relevant: the communist wall has come down; 'man' has been decentred. Second, the scope of Williams's terms is severely limited as we head into the twenty-first century: key terms on the information society are truly multidisciplinary, deriving as much from mathematics, biology and philosophy as from sociology or cultural studies. To limit ourselves to the latter two fields is to fail to meet the needs of the moment.

Some concepts here will reiterate those of Williams, but they will be treated in a vastly different way. Instead of the etymological approach of the lexicologist, I focus on the historical and current *significance* (not exactly the same as their meaning) of the concepts in question. We will see that 'alienation' as the failure of the worker to recognise her/himself in her/his product, no longer carries the weight it once did, and now has much more to do with the ubiquity of the image and the decline of imaginary capacities; other concepts, such as 'fractal' and 'clone', which are well out of the range of Williams's lexicon, evoke contemporary experience and so are included in this collection.

STYLE OF APPROACH

There are many ways in which a reference book such as this can be written and organised. Some adopt the assiduous approach, including an entry on every important concept or term in a given subject or discipline. The model here is the lexicologist's language dictionary, even if the result is more circumscribed. Here the aim is breadth. At the other end of the scale, still in the assiduous realm, is the approach that aims for depth. Articles are long, but impeccably chosen in order to be representative of a given field. There is no question of self-indulgence in the choices made. This type of work models itself on the encyclopedia, even if, once again, the result is more limited. A third approach, I call the whimsical reference approach. As an example, we can point to Jacques Attali's *Dictionnaire du XXI^e siècle* (Dictionary of the XXIst century) (1998). Attali retains, as he says, a nucleus of traditional concepts, but also indulges himself. Thus we find an entry for '*Adolécran*' (*écran* = screen) (a young person whose world revolves around television, film, computer games, the internet, etc.), and '*nanotechnologie*': 'marriage between physics and information technology'. Entries for numerous terms (e.g. love) are aphoristic and humorous, rather than serious and scholarly.

'Style of approach', then, boils down to the kind of terms chosen, to the nature of the explanations given, and to how these are presented. Unlike Attali, I have avoided the appearance of using terms that *predict*. I have avoided assuming, for example, that the world faces a population crisis in the twenty-first century, and that, *therefore*, we need to understand the

rudiments of human sexuality and reproduction. Similarly, I have not made the twenty-first century the object of speculation, as is sometimes done in the media and science fiction. My approach is rather to offer a selection of concepts which relate to life as we find it now, at the start of the twenty-first century. And my argument is that if we do not 'catch up on' the terminology of our own time, we will be unprepared for the new era. In effect, the present work's *raison d'être* is the current 'disjuncture' between understanding and reality.

Although I shy away from the whimsical approach this does not mean that I am offering a work only for specialists. For while specialists – in philosophy, for example – might find entries which seem to be written just for them, my aim is both to explain concepts which have a profound relevance for a wide variety of readers, and to provide the basis for the interested reader to do more research on his or her own behalf. I hope, indeed, that the reader's appetite for learning in the broadest sense will be stimulated. To enable learning is a goal to which Heidegger aspired. Why not all of us?

My style is to engage with each of the concepts explained and analysed. In effect, I attempt to draw out the real and possible implications that seem to derive from the subject area that the concept opens up. If, for instance, 'cyberspace' has no centre, is a non-totalising multiplicity of endless connections and is not owned by anyone – if it allows the complete anonymity of participants who take on a 'virtual' rather than an 'actual' identity, in what sense does this spell a loss or gain for human freedom and interaction? Maybe virtual reality is a *reality*. For, indeed, society as a totality is virtual, while localised instances of it are actual. Does it matter that the technology that makes virtual cyberspace possible is digital (and therefore entirely formal, based as it is on a system of differences)? These are some of the questions that arise regarding cyberspace; to answer them definitively is impossible.

AN AGE OF CYBERSPACE?

In many ways the evolution of photography mirrors the changes that have occurred over the last century with regard to the relationship between reality and processes of reproduction and representation. Or at least the changes that have occurred in photography give us an insight into a world many see as nothing but a simulacrum* (a representation which ultimately refers only to itself). Photography was once entirely dependent on the analogical process of exterior light hitting an interior photosensitive surface, with the effect that the image produced could not but be believed in: the photo of the man falling from the building was thus a true event because the analogical photographic image did not lie. Even the techniques of photographic trickery performed with the analogical technique were in the main equivalent to a *trompe-l'oeil*: that is, a true appreciation derived from the tell-tale give-away sign (a seam, a suture, a discontinuity) that revealed the image as a fake. With digital technology, by contrast, a fabricated photographic image is now 'almost impossible to

detect' (Mitchell 1994: 164). If we have now tumbled to the air-brush that aimed to wipe Trotsky from the stage of history, it is also arguable that

[a]n interlude of false innocence has passed. Today, as we enter the post-photographic era, we must face once again the ineradicable fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real, and the tragic elusiveness of the Cartesian dream. We have indeed learned to fix shadows, but not to secure their meanings or to stabilize their truth values; they still flicker on the walls of Plato's cave. (Mitchell 1994: 225)

'Ontological' (to do with the study of being) is indeed the term I would use, after Mitchell, to describe the field where we encounter the dilemma that the digital construction of images raises. Like Plato's cave, digital photography (and perhaps digital technology in general) forces a rethink of the relationship between the image and what is imaged – between the representation and what is represented. After nearly two centuries of stability, the status of the human capacity to know and to represent is again in question.

One tendency, in vogue today, urges us to solve the problem by giving it up. Accept, this view says, that there is only hyperreality, the reality of the techniques of reproduction itself. There is no longer any 'real' to which representations in general, and images in particular, refer. Or again, if we must wander around in Plato's cave once again, we should now accept the shadows on the wall as (a) reality and not be fussed, as we once were, by the difference between shadow and sunlit truth, between appearance and reality, image and simulacrum or semblance, or between true reality and false image. Even more radically, it is sometimes argued that it is not even a question of accepting the shadow, semblance or appearance as the (good-enough) reality or truth, but of disengaging altogether from this terminology and philosophical problematic. Even to plump for the shadow or the simulacrum, against the idea of a true and authentic image, is to remain caught in Plato's web – as the West has been for more than two millennia. And some (perhaps I am one of them) say that we will remain beholden to Plato on this issue well into the third millennium.

The vicissitudes of representation and the philosophical framework that sustains it are thus at the heart of issues that key concepts invoke for us at the end of the twentieth century. This is part of our ineradicable environment, as it were: the air we breathe.

Not only philosophy but changes in science have contributed to the intellectual and cultural environment of the last century. In particular, thermodynamics* and theories of chance* have set up paradigms. Here, the dynamic of order and chaos comes to the fore, and time* is seen as essentially irreversible, unrepeatable, once and for all. This is interpreted as a result of the second law of thermodynamics, which says that in the spontaneous movements of energy, the molecules involved break down into random distributions (disorder or chaos). This breakdown makes processes irreversible. The idea of randomness as the emergence of disorder seems to have spilled over into many different areas. Thus, entirely in keeping with this logic, history, we say, never repeats itself; it is irreversible, and the measurement of time is serial rather than cyclical. In other respects, the irreversibility (the fact of disorder) of time seems to

imply that punctual death is our lot as humans. Perhaps none have put it better than the French philosopher of science, Michel Serres, when he says: 'Order is only a rarity where disorder is the norm' (Serres 1977:10). And Serres elaborates: 'Disorder is almost always there. That is to say: cloud or sea, storm or wind, mélange and throng, chaos and tumult' (ibid.). Disorder (therefore death) is the most probable thing in this world. Life is order; life is rare and fragile.

After thermodynamics comes complexity theory, where disorder begins to throw up a hitherto invisible order, an order manifest in fractal geometry, if we take chaos theory into account. The concepts presented here attempt to mirror this change.

We should note, however, that the foregoing depends on a scientific and wholly secular view. Religions of all denominations and cultures have invested as much in the idea of an afterlife as they have in the things of this world. The afterlife, then, would be a supplementary *order*: it is death brought to order, as it were. Of course, science as we generally understand it in the West is essentially unable to support this view. For science, unpredictable death becomes chaos – the most probable outcome, if we wish to make predictions. What science tells us regarding chance is that it is not on our side; it is not on the side of life, or order. The (scientific) theory of probability, then, will tell us that there is no point buying a ticket in the million dollar lottery because, objectively, the chances of winning, if there are millions of other contestants, are minuscule. How much more so is the chance that someone might live for ever? Objectively, the lottery is chaos. Hence the saying of the disillusioned: 'life's a lottery'. At the beginning of the new millennium we are challenged to consider whether this is so. We are challenged to recall what religion and the imaginary capacities which underpinned it once were. It is not a question of saying that science is wrong, but of pointing out that there may be something more which science needs to take into account. If I believe in *fortuna*, I might intuit that luck is on my side. I will win the lottery! The religious person, for his or her part, says: I believe that I will have eternal life. I will live again; I will live a second time.

Irreversible time and imaginary repetition (the same returning) – these notions confront us, now, at the beginning of the century. Certain concepts in this anthology allude to this relation and the issues it raises. Concepts such as: 'imaginary', 'image', 'imagination', 'sacred–profane', 'identification', 'love', '*logos–mythos*', along with other concepts which, initially, may seem to have little to do with the play between science and the imaginary, concepts such as 'eros-eroticism', 'community', 'communication', and 'transcendence'.

The emergence of virtual technologies – in biology as much as in information science – opens up the possibility that, if reality (nature) is fundamentally code-like, or based in patterns of chaos, radical disorder will progressively be on the retreat. For, in what now seems to many to be a bizarre conflation, virtual, cyber- reality would also be part of reality. If we were to discover that order was in fact at the heart of all apparent disorder – if the most recalcitrant (scientifically speaking) aspects of

nature were patterned and ordered – this would seem to imply that rather than order being a rarity, disorder – the unpredictable – would everywhere and at every time be the most improbable. But because this order is always invisible, as a species, humanity would still have something more to know. It does not mean either that a spiritual or religious longing would in any way be assuaged. However, without having some insight into and knowledge about these kinds of developments and the issues that come in their wake, it will be impossible for people to participate in their own destiny. Concepts relating to virtual technologies are therefore included here: ‘analogue’, ‘clone’, ‘complexity’, ‘cyberspace’, ‘digital’, ‘fractal’, ‘fuzzy logic’, ‘virus’. These are concepts that call on us to think.

INTERPRETATION

In this collection of concepts, there are terms from the social sciences, philosophy, information science, music and even from physics (‘quantum’) and biology (‘clone’). While I speak as a social theorist and philosopher, I do not pretend to speak as musician or biologist. What justification can there be for me to explain concepts in music and physics? The question is worth posing in light of a recent controversy in France concerning the appropriation by philosophers and others of concepts originating in physics and mathematics (see Sokal and Bricmont 1998). My task is not to present nuclear physics’s version of ‘quantum’, or the biological version of ‘clone’, but to explain how such concepts have been used in non-biological contexts and with what effect. It is my further task to assist the reader in deciding whether greater insight has been facilitated or impeded by such borrowings. In total, such concepts would not number more than two or three; I therefore consider my approach completely legitimate.

Many of the concepts included here derive from my own experience of what has become important in contemporary thought and culture. To some extent, the collection is bound to reflect my own conscious and unconscious predilections. Does this matter? I think not. For to recognise this, readers must begin to come to grips with their own predilections, a fact that I take to be the first step on the path to realising the Oracle’s call to ‘know thyself’, a call that is surely fundamental to thought itself.

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ABJECTION Among the earlier meanings of abjection are 'wretchedness' and extreme debasement.

This term would not, in all probability, have become popular in art and psychoanalytic circles, were it not for the publication of *Powers of Horror* by Julia Kristeva in 1982. In that work, Kristeva outlines a psychoanalytic theory of the subject where there is a pre-symbolic phase characterised by strong feelings of horror and revulsion in relation to certain objects, people and situations. What is abject is decidedly not desired; it thus has a strongly negative status attached to it. It is what an identity rejects because it instils horror. And yet this rejection of the abject thing is, Kristeva suggests, formative of the ego, if we accept with her that abjection characterises the elementary ego struggling for autonomy. For abjection is also the means through which the child separates from the mother, as it is also the first intimation of the interdiction against incest.

Above all, abjection is a dimension of human experience that is based in affect, rather than reason. It is a negative *feeling*, not a rational law. An individual's dislikes in food will have an abject basis. For some, rancid butter induces the revulsion of abjection. Who one is can be partly defined

by such dislikes (and corresponding likes). Such then is the psychoanalytical meaning of abjection.

On a socio-cultural level, feelings of horror can be evoked in purification rituals, rituals which are enacted so as to avoid defilement, and which are intricately tied to the sacred. In other words, abjection is at play when a Jew feels revulsion for pork, or a Hindu for killing a sacred cow. Prohibition and transgression – pollution and purification – are, then, tied to abjection. The one who commits an act of defilement feels wretched and worthless; that is, he or she will feel they are nothing. And they may be seen to be so by others.

In studying the sacred in non-state societies, or in societies with a weak state, Mary Douglas (1969) found that those things which were sacred and the subject of an interdiction or taboo were also things that were essentially ambiguous because they were on the border between different states or processes. Thus nail clippings, hair, faeces, tears and menstrual blood, often deemed to be polluting and subject to taboos, all invoke the borders of the body: they are neither wholly inside nor outside. Our feeling of revulsion when we come into contact with the said objects (except under specially defined circumstances) keeps taboos in place.

Cadavers, because they also have an ambiguous status, being neither the dead person nor not the dead person, are subject to some of the severest taboos, as are sexual practices. In the latter situation, the borders of the body of another may only be violated, and the prevailing taboo on sexual activity transgressed, under special conditions, such as marriage or during fertility rites. To transgress a taboo produces revulsion and a feeling of abjection.

While some feminists have reservations about the viability of abjection as a term for describing psychological development (Kristeva talks about the negative feelings of daughters for their mothers as an aspect of separation, and mentions symbolic 'matricide'), others have welcomed it as a way of showing, after the predominance of Cartesianism, that the body is a fundamental element in human relations, including the area of thought. The idea that humans also think with their bodies is one implication of the study of abjection.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, artists began eliciting feelings of revulsion by presenting base objects as a way of making a statement. A number of works are composed wholly or partially of faeces, both human and animal. In other cases, graphic portrayals of internal bodily organs feature in the work of these artists of abjection. The intended effect, we can assume, is to provoke horror and thus regenerate an affective relation to art in place of a relation that had become too cerebral.

Abjection also shows its face in public in the moral domain, or rather, in the domain of amorality as seen in various forms of corruption. To the extent that corruption is abject, it is a betrayal of trust. When a judge in the legal system secretly engages in criminal behaviour,

this is abject in a way in which a known criminal's criminal behaviour is not. For the judge has betrayed the trust that makes him or her 'above suspicion'. All secret, corrupt behaviour is abject, whereas open defiance is not. Hypocrisy, therefore, is a manifestation of abjection.

Within the moral frame, a friend who stabs you in the back, science (which is supposed to save life) producing weapons of mass destruction, a politician on the take, all exemplify abjection, and we ask ourselves whether, in the present age, abjection is more prevalent in the moral sphere than previously, and if it is, what can be done about it. The implication deriving from Kristeva's work is that there are two kinds of strategy: one is to strengthen the symbolic order, so that a moral and political framework is clear and unambiguous – in some cases this may entail a more active state; the other strategy is to bring about a revived order of ritual, in order that ambiguity in social life might be reduced.

Douglas, Mary (1969) *Purity and Danger*, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kristeva, Julia (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press.

See BODY; SACRED-PROFANE

AESTHETICS Aesthetics, or aesthetic, is often used as a synonym for art in general. But then we might ask what art is. The origin of the word is helpful here. In ancient Greek, *aisthesis* (the root of 'aesthetic') means 'feeling' and corresponds to the German, *Gefühl*, a term