

Superstructuralism

Richard Harland

The New Accent Series



Superstructuralism

THE NEW ACCENT SERIES

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When a man howls or shouts or threatens, we other animals understand him very well! Then his attention is not in that other world! But he barks in a way all his own – he speaks. And this has enabled him to invent what does not exist and to overlook what exists. As soon as he gives a thing a name he ceases to see the thing itself; he only hears the name that he gave it or sees it written. . . . For him, everything in the world is merely a pretext for talking to other men or for talking to himself.

Funeral oration, by Orfeo the dog on
Augusto the man, in Miguel de Unamuno's novel *Mist*

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General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

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flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

Introduction

'Superstructuralism'. I coin the term to cover the whole field of Structuralists, Semioticians, Althusserian Marxists, Foucaultians, Post-Structuralists, etc. 'Structuralism' alone has become too narrow a term for dealing with writers like Foucault, who violently resent being called Structuralists, or like Derrida, who define their position explicitly in opposition to Structuralists. The term 'Structuralism' is better reserved for writers such as Saussure, Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Greimas and Barthes (the Barthes of *Elements of Semiology* and *Mythologies* and *The Fashion System*), who share a characteristic way of thinking about *structures*. In relation to 'Structuralism', 'Superstructuralism' appears as '*super*-Structuralism', a larger intellectual phenomenon over and above Structuralism (taking 'super' in its strict Latinate meaning). 'Superstructuralism' in this sense serves to give us our bearings by reference to an already established terminology.

However, 'Superstructuralism' can also be read in another and more important sense, as '*superstructure*-alism'. For one of the things that Structuralists, Semioticians, Althusserian Marxists, Foucaultians and Post-Structuralists share is a certain characteristic way of thinking about *superstructures*. To put it roughly, the Superstructuralists invert our ordinary base-and-superstructure models until what we used to think of

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as superstructural actually takes precedence over what we used to think of as basic. In this respect, Superstructuralism represents what Foucault (in any case other than his own) would call an *epistêmê* – an underlying framework of approach and assumption. Even when Derrida refutes Lévi-Strauss or Baudrillard declares war on Foucault, the hostilities are still conducted over a common ground.

But this does not mean that there is a simple centralized unity to the Superstructuralist *epistêmê*. I do not want to suggest that Superstructuralism can be focused upon a single central text, or moment, or programme. To do Superstructuralism justice, we must grasp it as a complex multiplicity, as a whole with many parts. And, in looking for connections between the parts, we must be careful never to collapse them merely one into another.

The most obvious distinction to be drawn within Superstructuralism is the distinction between the Structuralists and the Post-Structuralists. The Structuralists, as I have described them, are those who share a characteristic way of thinking about structures: Structural Linguists like Saussure and Jakobson, Structural Anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss, and Structuralist Semioticians like Greimas and Barthes. (Most self-styled Semioticians can be classed as Structuralists from this point of view, with the notable exception of Julia Kristeva.) Of course, there is also a chronological progression from the earlier Structuralists, who work within specific disciplines, to the later Semioticians, who proclaim a single overarching study of culture as a whole. But the characteristic way of thinking about structures remains essentially the same, as does the characteristic scientific orientation. The Structuralists, in general, are concerned to *know* the (human) world – to uncover it through detailed observational analysis and to map it out under extended explicatory grids. Their stance is still the traditional scientific stance of Objectivity, their goal the traditional scientific goal of Truth.

The Post-Structuralists are a very different kettle of fish. The Post-Structuralists fall into three main groups: the *Tel Quel* group of Derrida, Kristeva and the later Barthes (the Barthes of *The Pleasure of the Text*, 'Change the Object Itself' and 'From Work to Text'); Deleuze and Guattari and the later Foucault (the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*,

Vol. 1); and (on his own) Baudrillard. Compared to the Structuralists, who possess a certain spirit of scientific co-operation (even to the extent of sacrificing coherence for comprehensiveness, like Eco in his *Theory of Semiotics*), these groups are fractious in the extreme, and make the most of their differences. None the less, they do share a characteristic new philosophical position (as we shall see in Part Three) – and this characteristic new philosophical position is not only incompatible with the concept of structure but also quite radically anti-scientific. In effect, the Post-Structuralists bend the philosophical implications of the Superstructuralist way of thinking about superstructures back round against the traditional stance of Objectivity and the traditional goal of Truth. And, with the destruction of Objectivity and Truth, scientific *knowledge* becomes less valuable than literary or political *activity*; and detailed observational analysis and extended explicatory grids are discarded in favour of instantaneous lightning-flashes of paradoxical illumination.

But this distinction between Structuralism and Post-Structuralism still fails to account for three major independent figures: Althusser, Lacan and the earlier Foucault (the Foucault of *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*). None of the three can be regarded as either simply a Structuralist or a Post-Structuralist. On the one hand, they do not share the Structuralist way of thinking about structures, they challenge Objectivity and Truth, and they introduce the characteristic Post-Structuralist themes of Politics, the Unconscious and History. But on the other hand, they do not share the characteristic new philosophical position of Post-Structuralism, which arrives only with Derrida's crucial new arguments in 1967, and which flourishes only under the new sensibility generated by the Paris student riots of May 1968. Althusser, Lacan and the earlier Foucault thus stand between the two main movements in Superstructuralism – yet they are too important to be given a merely transitional status. We must form a special category for them, and consider them as a movement – or three separate movements – in their own right.

In what follows, then, I shall be trying to give due attention to all these many kinds of Superstructuralism. But I shall at the same time be making certain exclusions. In the first place, I

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shall not be talking about 'Structuralism' as Jean Piaget understands the term, in a sense so extended that virtually every scientist or mathematician who thinks about structures can claim to be a Structuralist. 'Structuralism', as I have described it, is a species of 'Superstructuralism'; and not every way of thinking about structures belongs under 'Superstructuralism'. The Structuralists have their own special way of thinking about structures which relates to the fact that they also have their own special way of thinking about superstructures. And this special way of thinking about superstructures is fundamentally at odds with the creative and volitional way of thinking which Piaget himself promotes in his own structure-oriented psychology.

I shall also not be talking about the spread of Semiotics into the Anglo-Saxon world. The Anglo-Saxon Semioticians, with Sebeok as their editorial figurehead, undoubtedly do have a way of thinking about structures which is under the influence of the Structuralists' special way of thinking about structures. But this way of thinking still does not drive out certain underlying assumptions derived from Anglo-Saxon empiricism. It is here significant that the Anglo-Saxon Semioticians are equally under the influence of C. S. Peirce, whose version of semiotics ties in with a general philosophical position quite alien to the Superstructuralist *epistêmê*. In fact, it is probably fair to say that the influence of Superstructuralism upon the Anglo-Saxon Semioticians is mainly in the area of method and technique. Compared to the Structuralist Semioticians, the Anglo-Saxon Semioticians are largely indifferent to matters of philosophy; their interests are more practical, focusing upon various specific studies in various specific fields of communication. So although they certainly keep company with the Structuralist Semioticians for a while, their contributions are of little importance relative to the concerns of this book.

My third exclusion is an exclusion within Superstructuralism itself. I shall not be talking about the Structuralist and Post-Structuralist varieties of literary criticism. This does not mean that I consider literary criticism an insignificant or peripheral domain of Superstructuralism. On the contrary, it is plain that literary criticism has been the source for many crucial Superstructuralist theories, and a recurring reference point. But modern literary criticism has a rather special relation to its

subject-matter: that is, it relates primarily to modern literature, to the literature which springs (originally) from the French Symbolist movement of the late nineteenth century. And this literature is precisely such as to require and justify the Superstructuralist way of thinking.¹ It is thus hardly surprising that modern Anglo-Saxon literary criticism, beginning with the New Critics, developed something fairly similar to the Superstructuralist way of thinking long before the arrival of any direct Superstructuralist influence.

However, the example of modern Anglo-Saxon literary criticism also shows how this way of thinking can be quite narrowly confined to a purely literary subject-matter. For the Anglo-Saxon critics, starting with I. A. Richards, typically defined literary language in terms of an opposition to ordinary language – ordinary language as already defined by the Logical Positivists and their ilk. In other words, the Anglo-Saxon critics accepted a referential, denotational language as the norm, and tried to justify literature only as an exceptional case. But with Superstructuralism, the Superstructuralist way of thinking spreads out beyond literature and makes all language non-referential, non-denotational. It is in this wider spread of the Superstructuralist way of thinking that the Anglo-Saxon reader can best appreciate the full size of Superstructuralism's claims.

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Part One

The Superstructuralist way of thinking

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Preliminaries

Superstructuralism has its roots in the human sciences. Ultimately it derives from the way in which linguistics and social anthropology were first set up, in France, around the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, a new kind of fact – the human fact – swam into scientific ken, requiring the development of a new perspective. And this new perspective was no mere extension of the perspective of the natural sciences – though it took fifty years for the true magnitude of the divergence to emerge. Under this new perspective, the human sciences constituted themselves as *unnatural* sciences.

In Part One of this book, I shall be looking at a wide variety of Superstructuralist insights in many diverse fields of human science: in linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalytic theory, political economy and general Semiotics. And I shall be attempting to demonstrate that all these various insights are generated by a special kind of vision – a vision that inverts our ordinary base-and-superstructure models and sees what we used to think of as superstructural as having priority over what we used to think of as basic.

More specifically, I shall be dealing with the two primary forms of such inversion: on the one hand, a priority of Culture over Nature, and on the other hand, a priority of Society over the Individual. Ordinarily we assume that Culture is subsequent to Nature, superimposed upon Nature. But according to the Superstructuralists, Nature is itself only a cultural construct, and a particularly recent one at that. According to the Superstructuralists, Nature was added on to human reality by the seventeenth-century rise of the natural sciences. Similarly, we assume that Society is subsequent to the Individual, arranged between individuals. But according to the Superstructuralists, the Individual Self is only a relatively recent cultural construct, added on to human reality by the seventeenth-century rise of the bourgeois ethic of individualism.

This is a paradoxical way of thinking, and especially paradoxical in relation to Anglo-Saxon ways of thinking. For it is in Anglo-Saxon countries that the natural sciences and the ethic of individualism have been most strongly developed and most fondly taken to heart. And it is in the Anglo-Saxon countries

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that the assumed priority of Nature and the assumed priority of the Individual have passed over into a kind of plain man's down-to-earth 'common sense'. Anglo-Saxons have the feeling of having their feet very firmly planted when they plant them upon the seemingly solid ground of individual tastes and opinions, or upon the seemingly hard facts of material nature.

In looking at various characteristic Superstructuralist insights, I shall be showing how Superstructuralism refutes this kind of 'common sense'. Indeed, I shall be deliberately drawing attention to the paradoxicality of Superstructuralism in relation to Anglo-Saxon ways of thinking. Most previous Anglo-Saxon accounts have tried to make Superstructuralism accessible to the Anglo-Saxon reader by making it as far as possible familiar. No doubt this was a necessary approach when Superstructuralism was still an unknown commodity. But in the end, such an approach sells Superstructuralism short. In the end, Superstructuralism is important and exciting precisely *because of* the enormous gulf that separates it from Anglo-Saxon ways of thinking. Unfortunately, even the most ardent Anglo-Saxon supporters of Superstructuralism have not always made the leap across the gulf.

Saussure and the concept of 'langue'

(i)

Of all human sciences, linguistics holds a special and central place for Superstructuralists. Superstructuralists share in the common and characteristic view of the twentieth century, that man is to be defined by his outward language rather than by his inward powers of mind. For how could ideas exist in the mind without words? And how could powers of reasoning operate without sentences? Such arguments have long been familiar in the Anglo-Saxon world. Man, it is claimed, has a unique way of thinking essentially because he has a unique instrument with which to do his thinking.

But the Superstructuralist notion of this instrument is none the less very different to the usual Anglo-Saxon notion. The Superstructuralist notion is founded upon the concept of 'langue', as first advanced by Saussure. Saussure considered himself a scientist, and argued, for instance, that the down-to-earth reality of speech should take precedence over the idealized propriety of writing. But at the same time, he argued that 'langue' should take precedence over 'parole', i.e. that the system of language in general should take precedence over the sum total of all the actual utterances ever actually uttered. This is a most surprising argument from the point of view of the *natural sciences* – where the positive physical facts are the only appropriate evidence. But, as Saussure recognized, the positive

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physical facts are not sufficient to account for language *as language*, as signifying and bearing information.

The well-known chess analogy can help to illuminate Saussure's insight here. At first glance, it seems obvious that one should study chess in terms of the sum total of all the moves in all the games that have ever actually been played. But one will fail to account for chess *as a game* unless one also understands that every actual move is selected from a much larger range of possible moves. To study chess properly, one must look at the simultaneous system of principles for making moves, the simultaneous system which implicitly lies behind every move at every single moment of the game. And this system precedes any actual moves – at least in so far as the player must have it already internalized before he can even begin to play.

Similarly with language. The system of 'langue' precedes any actual utterances – at least in so far as the speaker must have it already internalized before he can even begin to speak. A speaker who knows how to speak only those words which he actually does speak can hardly be using language to signify or bear information. His utterance would be more in the nature of a bird-call. As modern information theory shows, the informational value of a given signal is directly proportional to the range of possible signals that have *not* been selected. To account for language properly, one must understand the simultaneous system of 'langue', the simultaneous system which implicitly lies behind every word at every single moment of utterance.

Of course, it is not only the speaker but also the listener who must have the system of 'langue' already internalized. 'Langue' must always be shared – and shared, ultimately, by a whole society. No single person can create new words and meanings. As Saussure puts it: '[langue] is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of the community'.¹

The special feature of this 'contract' is that no one ever gets the chance to evaluate it before signing. The individual absorbs language before he can think for himself: indeed, the absorption of language is the very condition of being able to think for himself. The individual can reject particular knowledges that