

Simple Postmodern Concepts Made Complex!
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Deconstruction:

“A Careful Reading” J. Hillis Miller

Deconstruction is a school of philosophy that originated in France in the 1960s that has had enormous impact on criticism/analysis and upends the Western metaphysical tradition. One of the chief proponents is Jacques Derrida (1972) who wrote, “I was quite explicit about the fact that nothing of what I said had a destructive meaning. ... The word deconstruction has nothing to do with destruction. That is to say, it is simply a question of (and this is a necessity of criticism in the classical sense of the word) being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation of the language we use—and that is not destruction” (p. 271). Others who are associated with this movement (although many would contest the labels applied to them) are Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Frederic Jameson, Douglas Kellner, Paul De Man, and Jean-Francois Lyotard (among many others). These philosophers often echo Derrida who continually points out the difference between being and its representation in reason by recourse to the term “*differance*” which connotes both difference and to defer. Deconstruction represents a complex response to a variety of theoretical and philosophical movements of the 20th century, most notably Husserlian phenomenology, Saussurean and French structuralism, and Freudian psychoanalysis.

Students may use deconstruction with any “text” (written artifact, music, performance, media, fiction, nonfiction, painting, textbook, event, film, etc.) in the following ways:

1. **Problematize**: To make the text problematic on multiple levels by exposing internal contradictions, omissions, ambiguities, and injustices.
2. **Question**: Raise concerns and questions that cause the reader/viewer/listener to re-evaluate the premise of the text.
3. **Interrupt**: Reveal the sedimented perceptors and deeply held prejudices in the text and force the reader/viewer/listener to pause and reconsider these assumptions.
4. **Contextualize**: Critically evaluate and analyze arguments from the perspective of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, ability, language, age, etc.
5. **Challenge**: Demand a reevaluation of hidden and overt assumptions in the representation of the text in light of status quo social arrangement.
6. **Historicize**: Locate the text in a historical, socio-political, cultural, etymological, and theological context.

7. **Expose:** Delineate asymmetries of power relations and the impact of asymmetries on individuals, cultures, and societies.
8. **Engage:** Foreground the aesthetic representations of the text and in the text in order to release the imagination and envision alternate possibilities/readings of the sub-texts/unconscious responses.
9. **Trouble:** Create intellectual and emotional dissonance and discomfort for the purpose of further investigation for justice and compassion.
10. **Evoke:** Elicit Emotional and intellectual reactions that cause the reader/viewer/listener to ponder/think/act

For further information please read Chapter 9 of “Understanding Curriculum” by William Pinar, William Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter Taubman (Peter Lang Publisher, 1995).

What is Postmodernism?

Eclectic: Many styles, multiplicity, and interdisciplinary practices are encouraged. The parts and whole interact in a profound and dynamic harmony even in apparent chaos and dysfunction. Bifurcations are rejected in favor of a holistic yin/yang philosophy. Inclusion of marginalized and silenced voices—particularly from racial, gendered, sexual, socio-economic, linguistic, religious, and cultural perspectives including multiple voices persons of various ages, abilities, languages, and locations.

Equilibrium: While uncertainty is not comfortable, a citizen-based democracy is built on participation, which is the very expression of permanent discomfort. Modern, corporate, and rational systems depend on the citizens desire for inner comfort and predictability. Postmodern equilibrium is the acceptance of permanent psychic discomfort as the best understanding of consciousness.

Environmental: Interactive with many environments. A cosmology that unites inside and outside, nature and the body, human and non-human, etc. in a concern for a physically and psychically nurturing milieu that challenges degradation and promotes sustainability.

Evocative: Presents multiple views without silencing investigation of issues related to sexuality, violence, racism, economics, popular culture, death, poverty, etc. A support for multiplicity of historical interpretation. An exploration of the political and unconscious. An acceptance of “essential tension” in interpretation.

Energetic: Like Einstein's concentrations of energy, we are constantly changing and shifting. We do not stand on solid ground but shifting sands. Thus, ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity best describe the world. New perspectives constantly emerge. Deconstruction of the status quo leads to the "surging chaos of the unexpressed" (p. 2 of art/science Cleveland Museum of Art).

(A) Esthetic: through art, architecture, music, literature and various artifacts of traditional culture, popular culture, resistant culture, and indigenous culture we come to new "landscapes of learning" that "release the imagination" and move us to equity and social justice (Maxine Greene).

Eschatological: Every present is conditioned by the past and every present is pregnant with future possibilities. The "already" and the "not yet" create a world of possibilities (Ernst Bloch) and hope (Jurgan Moltmann). The past, present, and future are dynamically interconnected rather than segmented on a linear timeline. "There is no such thing as was because the past is" (Faulkner).

Engaging: The individual participant shapes the outcome of the study. "The observer changes the actual state of the experiment and as we increase the accuracy of one element of a measurable quantity we decrease the certainty with which we can measure the other quantities."(Heisenberg) We participate in the (re) creation of works of art (Dewey and Picasso). Maxine Greene writes, "Art can be brought to life when human beings engage them imaginatively,"

Existential: Situated/contextual learning grounded in existence prior to essence. To overcome malaise is to be awake and alive (Thoreau/Greene/ Orr)...totally free and totally responsible.

Expressive: Visual forms are analogous to affective responses that evoke feelings. Responsiveness leads to the process of transformation.

Evolving: A continual process of dialogue and interaction between apparent opposites rather than static bifurcations. Deconstruction leads to a continual process of examining the assumptions on which we ground our interpretations.

Experimental: Willing to try new styles and different approaches. Influences from sensory and unconscious experiences lead to new imaginative realities. Multiple forms of representation are encouraged and supported. Alternate forms of assessment and evaluation are explored. Willingness to risk and improvise.

anti-Entropy: An open systems cosmology rather than a closed system cosmology. There is an interaction across boundaries. "Boarder crossings" (Giroux/McLaren/Lather) overcome the debilitating effect of closed systems. "Post-Formal" approaches that are generative and overcome entropy.

Entertaining: Playful, ironic, kaleidoscopic, self-critical. It catches you off guard. Willing to engage the ironic, celebrate the ambiguity, and investigate the absurd. Sensitive to the subtleties of difference. Use metaphor and irony to express a prophetic vision and evoke community action.