

Tzvetan Todorov
Valentin Volosbinov
Hayden White
Raymond Williams
W.K. Wimsatt
Monique Wittig
Virginia Woolf
A.A. Zhdanov

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Chinua Achebe
Theodor Adorno
Louis Althusser
Gloria Anzaldúa
Gaston Bachelard
Mikhail Bakhtin
Roland Barthes
Jean Baudrillard
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Catherine Belsey
Walter Benjamin
Homi K. Bhabha
Harold Bloom
Pierre Bourdieu
Bertolt Brecht
Nancy Chodorow
Noam Chomsky
Hélène Cixous
Jonathan Culler
Mary Daly
Guy Debord
Gilles Deleuze
Paul de Man
Jacques Derrida
Jonathan Dollimore
Terry Eagleton
Umberto Eco
William Empson
Frantz Fanon
Stanley Fish
John Fiske



GUIDE TO MODERN LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORISTS

edited by

Stuart Sim

The A–Z Guide to Modern Literary and Cultural Theorists

Edited by
Stuart Sim



PRENTICE HALL

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Introduction

The fields of literary and cultural theory continue to expand and change in restless fashion: new names come into prominence, debates shift direction, concerns subtly alter, such that it is increasingly difficult for both students and teachers to keep track of developments. This book sets out to map these fields as they appear in the mid 1990s by providing a series of concise essays (100 in all) on leading theorists, an A–Z series that encompasses not just established figures but also, crucially, up-and-coming figures whose influence will undoubtedly increase over the next few years. Thus one can find in these pages essays on Paul Gilroy, Meaghan Morris and John Fiske as well as on Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams and Jacques Derrida. Every effort has been made to cover the spectrum of modern literary and cultural theory so that all the main areas of current concern are represented, with feminist, black, and Third World theorists, for example, constituting a highly significant bloc in the volume's 100 entries.

Where theorists are best known for their work in collaboration with others – Wimsatt/Beardsley, Deleuze/Guattari, and Gilbert/Gubar, for example – they are treated in a joint entry.

It might be wondered why such nineteenth-century figures as Marx and Nietzsche feature in our list of significant moderns. We have taken the conscious decision to reach as far back as these two on the grounds that their ideas inform so many current theoretical debates that they can hardly be omitted in any serious survey. Indeed, they line up with Saussure and Freud as arguably the four great sources for modern literary and cultural theory: a quartet whose ideas continue to reverberate throughout the work of even the most recent theorists (as the entries will show), and who therefore stake an equal claim on our attention. Taken collectively, the essays in this volume constitute a tribute to the richness and diversity of literary and cultural theory today, and an indispensable aid in coming to grips with their complexity and many levels of interconnection.

How to use the guide

Each entry is designed to give the essential information about the theorist in question, and is formatted as follows:

Introduction

1. theorist's name and dates;
2. discussion of academic and cultural background;
3. exposition of main ideas;
4. consideration of cultural impact;
5. main published works;
6. further reading (up to six selected texts);
7. glossary of technical terms (if required).

A line marks the division between each section of individual entries. When cross-references are made to other entries, theorists' names will be picked out in bold type. The heart of each entry is Section 3, which aims to provide a quick and easy-to-follow rundown of the theorist's ideas, not neglecting to draw attention to any weak or problematical aspects of these. Section 2 will vary in length from theorist to theorist – some people lead more interesting lives than others, and some people's lives have more relevance to an understanding of their work than is the case with others (Simone de Beauvoir being a prime example) – as will Section 4. Section 5 will list all the main works by which the theorist is known in their most accessible editions (that is, in translation where the original work is not in English); while Section 6 will suggest further reading on the theorist up to six titles maximum. Technical terms are in general defined in the course of each entry, but where this has been felt to hold up the progress of the argument they can be found in the glossary at the conclusion of said entry.

The collective goal of the volume's several contributors has been to provide concise and – as far as possible – jargon-free introductions to all the chosen theorists, and to direct readers to more specialist work should they choose to delve more deeply into the literature in future.

Stuart Sim.

List of Contributors

David Amigoni
University of Sunderland

Frank Beardow
University of Sunderland

Pieter Bekker
Leeds Metropolitan University

Kay Boardman
University of Central Lancashire

Fred Botting
Lancaster University

Donna Brody
Essex University

Peter Dempsey
University of Sunderland

Antony Easthope
Manchester Metropolitan University

Sarah Gamble
University of Sunderland

Elspeth Graham
Liverpool John Moores University

Maggie Humm
University of East London

Kathleen Kerr
University of Sunderland

Barry Lewis
University of Stavanger

Anthony McGowan
Open University

Kate McGowan
Manchester Metropolitan University

George McKay
University of Central Lancashire

Paul Marris
University of Sunderland

David Owen
University of Central Lancashire

Noel Parker
University of Surrey

Mike Peters
Leeds Metropolitan University

Carl Plasa
University of Wales College of Cardiff

Joanna Price
Liverpool John Moores University

Brian Rosebury
University of Central Lancashire

Michael Rossington
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Stuart Sim
University of Sunderland

Tamsin Spargo
Liverpool John Moores University

John Storey
University of Sunderland

John Strachan
University of Sunderland

Richard Terry
University of Sunderland

List of Contributors

Sue Thornham
University of Sunderland

Joss West-Burnham
Manchester Metropolitan University

Caroline Ukoumunne
Manchester Metropolitan University

Patrick Williams
Nottingham Trent University

David Amigoni, Frank Beardow, Peter Dempsey, Sarah Gamble, Kathleen Kerr, Paul Marris, Stuart Sim, John Storey, John Strachan and Sue Thornham are all members of the Raman Selden Centre for the Study of Cultural and Textual Theory, in the School of Arts, Design and Communications at the University of Sunderland.

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A

Achebe, Chinua (1930–)

Achebe is one of the most prominent of African writers, political theorists and political activists. He was born in Ogidi village in Eastern Nigeria, and educated at Government College, Umuahia and University College, Ibadan, which was affiliated to the University of London. Achebe has been employed as a lecturer at numerous universities, both in Nigeria and abroad. During the Nigerian Civil War he acted as a spokesman on behalf of Biafra, and in this capacity he made a number of visits to America, Europe and various African states. At present he is the Dean of Humanities in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

Achebe's works include five novels, three critical works and a sizeable collection of short stories, poems and essays. *Things Fall Apart*, his most acclaimed novel, has sold over three million copies to date. His enduring appeal is probably his ability to fuse the political concerns of the newly emergent African nations with a commitment to forging and creating a new African aesthetic within the framework of the modern novel in English.

The intercultural exchanges Achebe experienced while he was growing up, and the precarious position of democracy in the modern African states, are issues which are rigorously explored in his work. The question of power has also been integral to all his novels; he raises many questions as to the use and abuse of power in both the public and private spheres. He also appears to have an abiding interest in the transitionary period between the demise of traditional society and the advent of colonialism. Consequently, his novels are characterized by the exploration of religious, political and cultural conflicts. Like many post-colonial writers, Achebe is also concerned with the role of the writer in the modern African state, the function of the English language in African literatures, and the problems to which that writing in a borrowed lingua franca gives rise. He asks whether it is ever possible for African writers who use foreign languages to engage in political or literary dissent, which can institute challenges to the metropolitan institutions which simultaneously include and exclude them.

The question of the use of the English language by African writers is also explored in his critical writings, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) and *Hopes and Impediments* (1988). Both these texts are seminal in a reconstruction of many of the issues which have been hotly debated in the field of African literature. In his essay 'The novelist as teacher', first published in 1965, Achebe states that as an African writer, his primary purpose was to enable his society to regain belief in itself, and put away the years of 'denigration and self abasement'. The years of colonial rule had so denigrated the African peoples that their histories as constructed within the discourse of colonialism had become 'one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them'.

It is clear from Achebe's early work that he is concerned with the reconstruction of an African identity, which is a crucial step in the process of the creation of a national identity and the building of a nation-state. The role of the writer in a post-colonial state is made extremely complex by the fact that the modern writer cannot commune with his people in the same way as a traditional artist. The writer in a modern African state is, in Achebe's view, essentially an individualist, produced by particular historical circumstances. Consequently, he has stated:

In the very different wide open, multicultural and highly volatile condition known as modern Nigeria, for example, can a writer ever begin to know who his community is, let alone devise strategies for relating to it? If I write my novels in a country in which most citizens are illiterate, who then is my community? If I write in English in a country in which English may still be called a foreign language, or in any case is spoken only by a minority, what use is my writing?

Achebe has always problematized his use of the English language, yet his final justification for writing in English has been a somewhat fatalistic acceptance of the 'unassailable logic' of its convenience. His major concerns are, thus; the role of the artist in a society which is riven with a diversity of conflicts, the notion of rewriting an Afrocentric history, and the creation of linguistic tools which would be best suited to this enterprise.

These ideas are important for an understanding of *Things Fall Apart*, one of the first great post-colonial novels. In this text Achebe rewrites African history, offering a new version of African identity from the position of a colonial subject. He critiques the images of Africa which were delineated by philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, and specifically attacks the constructions of Africa which were posited in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mr Johnson*. Whereas the characters in both these colonial novels are, fundamentally, savages who exist in the twilight zone between barbarity and civilization, Achebe's characters are multidimensional constructs, who are endowed with humanity.

Achebe also unsettles the dialectics that characterize Europe's relationship with Africa. To some extent he seems to have worked within the paradigms of the Negritude movement – where Africa and Africans are understood in terms of a supposed female disposition towards emotion and sensuality, and Europe is often explained in terms of the patriarchal qualities of logic and reason. Achebe challenges the binary construct on which these assumptions are based in the form of Okonkwo, the protagonist – and, to a certain extent, the tragic hero – of *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo symbolizes the warring factions of the male and female principles, which are the axis on which Achebe's mythical re-creation of the Ibo culture revolves. Okonkwo – and, by implication, the Ibo culture which produces him – is unable to reconcile these opposing elements, and this leads finally to the self-destruction of both.

The textual form of the novel reiterates the political ideas inherent throughout Achebe's work. He attempts to construct a new English which is at once familiar and alienating, the novel making a conscious effort to re-create the speech patterns of the Ibo community. Achebe also utilizes Ibo words, and this serves as a constant reminder to the reader that the novel is produced in a significantly different cultural context. This is underlined by the interweaving of Ibo proverbs, idioms and imagery with the narrative. Consequently, in common with Achebe's later novels, *Things Fall Apart* forces the reader constantly to question the ways and means by which language constructs particular types of realities.

The radical changes and political turmoil which have gone hand in hand with decolonization is also charted in Achebe's writing. *A Man of the People* is a satirical attack on the failure of leadership in African countries, which superbly captures the disillusionment of the petty-bourgeois class with the 'spoils' of decolonization. The text is an important landmark in that it pre-empted the dissolution of Nigeria's First Republic, which gave way to military rule. *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe's latest novel, also explores similar issues; it is a text which encapsulates his commitment to the political role of the writer as storyteller and critic in the post-colonial state.

It is difficult to assess the cultural impact of Achebe's work, since the work of African writers has not become fully established in the canon of English literature. The fact that he writes in English has also meant that his work has been reclaimed, when it is taught, under a liberal humanist, universalist banner. The problems inherent in this are obvious – the texts simply cannot be explored within their historical, cultural and political contexts. Nevertheless, he has made an invaluable contribution to the field of post-colonial studies, and echoes of his ideas are to be found in numerous African literary texts.

Main works

Things Fall Apart, London: Heinemann, 1958.

A Man of the People, London: Heinemann, 1966.

Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays, London: Heinemann, 1975.

Anthills of the Savannah, London: Heinemann, 1987.

The African Trilogy, London: Picador, 1988a.

Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, London: Heinemann, 1988b.

Further reading

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Ehling, H.G. (ed.). *Critical Approaches to Anthills of the Savannah*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991.

Gikandi, S., *Reading Achebe*, Currey London: A6 1991.

Innes, C.L., *Chinua Achebe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Innes, C.L. and Bernth, Lindfors *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, Washington DC: Three Continents Press 1978.

Killam, G.D., *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*, London: Heinemann, 1977.

Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund (1903–69)

Theodor W. Adorno, one of the most influential thinkers associated with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, was also among the most difficult to comprehend. Indeed, as Fredric **Jameson** notes, his work everywhere asserts that the value of modernity – its art and its thought – lies in its denial of habitual response, in its reawakening of ‘numb thinking and deadened perception to a raw, wholly unfamiliar real world’ (Jameson, 1971). Adorno was born into the Jewish bourgeoisie at a time when it was still a stable force in Europe, and his early education was privileged: he studied piano with Bernard Schles and, at the age of just 12, classical German philosophy with the philosopher, culture critic and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer. In fact, this combination of musical and philosophical training came to inform

his thinking over the course of his lifetime. After graduating from the Kaiser Wilhelm Gymnasium in Frankfurt in 1921, Adorno entered the Wolfgang Goethe University, where he studied philosophy, sociology, psychology and music, emerging three years later with a doctorate, which he wrote, under the direction of Hans Cornelius, on Edmund Husserl. Among the most important people influencing his thinking, besides Siegfried Kracauer, were Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin. Of these three he came to collaborate most intimately with Horkheimer, specifically in the studies undertaken as part of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.

Adorno's professional fate was closely linked to that of the Institute of Social Research, later the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Established in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany, as an independent body associated with the University of Frankfurt, it began as an orthodox Marxist organization (closely associated with the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow) committed to an inductive method of research. But under the directorship of Horkheimer it developed an interdisciplinary orientation; thus the singularly materialist approach to research came to include an analysis of the relationship between the political/economic motion of society, the psychic development of the individual and cultural changes. Adorno's work as a philosopher and musicologist had an enormous influence on the economists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and political scientists working at the Institute. When the school was forced to leave Germany for New York in 1933, he was already one of its most prominent members.

Horkheimer believed that traditional philosophical concerns had become redundant; that the revival of the discipline would require addressing different questions better served by the social sciences. Adorno, on the other hand, thought that the forms of different philosophies were closely connected to objective structures in society, and that the revival of philosophy would require an *immanent critique*; to this end he devoted much of his time to analyzing the concept of truth. However, despite this fundamental difference, in 1947 they published a work, conceived jointly during the reign of Nazism, called *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. This is a volume of 'united fragments' which attempts to address the question of increased barbarism in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. In this book Adorno and Horkheimer argue that reason is the hegemonic force that objectifies and hence reifies nature in its effort to totalize in the interests of the subject: what begins as a resistance to the seductions of myth becomes rationalization, and hence itself a new myth. The mastery of nature implicit in this dialectical movement extends to human beings, who become objects available for exploitation. Fascism stands at the centre of this dialectical progression,

first using reason to dislodge oppressive myth for the purpose of liberating nature, and then using liberated nature as a totalizing concept which rationalizes the objectifying, reifying process.

Of all the Western Marxists, Adorno, in both the style and the content of his work, found it difficult to affirm the utopian hope of human redemption and an emancipated future. The horror of Auschwitz haunted his writing of the 1940s and 1950s: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz,' he said, 'is barbaric' (1981). To have survived the Holocaust was a mark of the cold subjectivity that could prescribe the Final Solution in the first place. He was highly critical of what he called *identity thinking*, or the kind of thinking that assumes the identity of subjects and objects, the existence of the Absolute Idea (Hegel), and refuses the idiosyncratic nature of particulars by too easily subsuming them under the general. Although identity thinking functions pragmatically by providing the means by which particulars are brought under universals, and concepts are referred to objects, the capitalist mode of production prevents concepts linking with the *ideal* existence of objects. Hence identity thinking is a false or *reified* thinking. For Adorno, the purpose of a critical theory is to provide the means for unmasking the distorted social reality that emerges when conceptual thought is taken as corresponding unproblematically with an objective world.

One extremely influential book on the development of Adorno's thought was Walter Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which drew correspondences between art and philosophy by proposing that the truth-content of both was to be found in the complete immersion in the tiniest details of subject matter, which in the case of philosophy is language. Thus both these thinkers reject the assumption that everything about the object is covered by its concept, that every object is easily classified as part of a whole. To counteract this way of thinking, Adorno proposes *non-identity thinking* or *negative dialectics*, which examines the relations between the object and its concept in order to discover discrepancies and reveal hidden potentialities. Viewing the object from different angles allows the inner history to emerge in its 'truth' as part of a *constellation* of concepts which are themselves in motion. *Negative Dialectics* closes with: 'the micrological view cracks the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes its identity, the delusion that it is but a specimen' (1973).

Adorno is unique in that he is the only Western Marxist who focused extensively on music (the majority of his writing was in the area of musicology, and most of this work remains untranslated) in his cultural criticism, and then used his knowledge of musical composition in his theoretical speculations. In 1925 Adorno began studying with Alban Berg in Vienna, where he learned an appreciation for Schoenberg, in