

Culture and the real / Catherine Belsey; □
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WHAT'S REAL?

Butler, Fish, Lyotard

THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO

I can date very precisely the moment in 1985 when I first recognized the specificity of the postmodern. My sympathies were fully enlisted by Cecilia, the downtrodden wife at the centre of Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. I was relishing her pleasure in the black-and-white adventure story showing at her local picture house, when to my astonishment and delight, as well as hers, Tom Baxter, the romantic lead in the movie she was watching, came down off the screen to join Cecilia in the audience.

Much of the film is taken up with the fictional Tom's difficulties in the 'real' world. His money is movie money and restaurants won't accept it; violence, he finds out for the first time, can be painful; when he kisses Cecilia, he waits in vain for the fade-out and is not sure what to do next. He is not, Cecilia at last reluctantly acknowledges, real. But he is not simply Cecilia's fantasy either. The other black-and-white characters argue about how their film can go on without him, begging the projectionist not to switch it off and extinguish them; one presses her nose against the glass wall of the screen, complaining that she cannot get out. The actor who plays Tom arrives to coax him back

where he belongs, on the other side of the screen, for fear the wayward behaviour of his character will damage the actor's career. Inside the imaginary world of Woody Allen's movie, the comedy depends on a story that crosses the common-sense dividing line between fact and fiction. This is the line actualized by the presence of the screen itself, 'behind' which, as it naively seems, fictional characters conduct their thrilling, passionate or tragic lives, oblivious of the audience who have paid to watch them do so.

WALTER MITTY

There was a time when Hollywood knew the difference between fact and fiction, the story's 'reality' and dreams. In 1947, for example, Danny Kaye charmed cinema audiences as Walter Mitty, the irrepressible day-dreamer, who escapes from suburban life and an overbearing mother into fantasies, where he plays the hero of a succession of narratives derived from the pulp fiction he proofreads in his day-job. His imagined roles include Mitty the Kid, the fastest gun in the West, and Gayelord Mitty, the Mississippi gentleman-gambler, but my own personal favourite is Wing Commander Mitty of the RAF, in leather helmet and goggles, all self-deprecating heroics and right-ohs, his jaw a grim straight line as he brings down another Messerschmitt (*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, dir. Norman Z. McLeod). Walter's fantasies are dearly marked, in accordance with Hollywood convention, by a series of dissolves.

With hindsight, we might want to deconstruct this apparent antithesis between imagination and reality.¹ In 'real' life, the shy, unassuming Walter Mitty gets involved in an adventure concerning an heiress and looted jewels, and reluctantly becomes the hero of yet another pulp genre. Oddly enough, the romantic heroine has already featured in his fantasies before he meets her, so that Walter reacts with a double-take when he sees her for the first time in reality. And the boring events which provoke the make-believe - his mother's endless shopping lists, a bridge game - also reappear in it, though transformed by their glamorous context.

But all this can easily be naturalized in a classic realist story: if Walter is genuinely caught up in a crime narrative where the villains

include Boris Karloff, this only goes to show that life is stranger than fiction; true love, we know, always fulfils a prior dream; all fantasies reinterpret the everyday. The film is knowing about its own ironies, if in a softer way than the original short story by James Thurber.² Officially, the plot sets up a binary opposition between the actual and the imagined. On the surface, at least, we know what the story is asking us to take for real.

FICTION AND REALITY

In making this distinction, it confirms centuries of Western tradition: sanity, rationality, responsibility, the characteristics of the citizen entitled to play a part in society, and accountable before the law, are synonymous with the ability to tell the difference between reality and delusion. Only saints and psychopaths take their voices and visions for truth. The cinema screen that divides the brightly lit world of the fiction decisively from the audience in the darkened movie theatre marks that common-sense distinction between fact and fiction. Fiction isn't real.

Or rather, it wasn't. Our postmodern condition has made reality into an issue. What, we now ask, is real, and what a culturally induced illusion? Is there a difference between the two? Or is reality itself a product of our minds, either a subjective construct or the effect of culture? Recent cultural theory has contested the conventional view that human behaviour is predominantly natural, and that Western capitalist society in particular is the supreme realization of nature. Cultural criticism has successfully challenged the common-sense assumption that our social arrangements and values constitute the expression of a universal, foundational humanity. Indeed, we have also relativized common sense itself.

Ironically, however, this radicalism has been so influential (or, more likely, so fully a symptom of its cultural moment) that it has become fashionable to see human beings as entirely culturally constructed. Can we be sure, as Jean Baudrillard asks, where Disneyland ends and the 'real' America begins? Disneyland is part of American culture — but so is American culture. And Baudrillard concludes, 'it is Disneyland that is authentic here' (1988: 104).

In American theory, in particular, a thoroughgoing constructivism or culturalism is currently paramount. Historicism prevails in literary criticism. In the work of Stephen Greenblatt reality is understood to be synonymous with the cultural conception of reality, and this in turn is historically relative. For Judith Buder, whose work has so influenced thinking about gender, as well as for Stanley Fish in literary theory, culture is - or might as well be - all there is. From this point of view, while what we can know is entirely culturally relative, what exists becomes reducible, either explicitly or implicitly, to what can be said to exist. In other words, epistemology subsumes or occludes ontology.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM

European poststructuralism, by contrast, generally works harder. Starting from the insight of Ferdinand de Saussure that because words do not have exact equivalents from one language to another, meanings cannot be said to exist outside language itself, poststructuralist theory also affirms the relativity of what it is possible for us to know as subjects in and of the language we learn. At the same time, however, poststructuralism refuses to incorporate what exists into what we know exists, leaving open the possibility of a terrain of unmapped alterity which Jacques Lacan calls 'the real'. In contrast to the nonchalance of the culturalists, but without reverting to the foundationalism that has dominated Western thought since Plato, poststructuralism holds on to a structural uncertainty which I call 'the anxiety of the real'.

'The real', Jacques Lacan affirms, 'is **what** does not depend on my idea of it' (Fink 1995: 142). True to Saussure, Lacan makes a distinction between meaning, which we **learn** from language itself, and the world that language purports to describe. We have no evidence that the meanings we know **match the world** they seem to map. In consequence,

One can only think of language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic.

(Lacan 1988a: 262)

Truth, in consequence, is always an enigma. Lacan's real is not to be confused with reality, which is what we do know, because culture defines it for us. The real is what is there, but undefined, uncountable, perhaps, within the frameworks of our knowledge. It is there as such, but not there-for-a-subject.

In Lacan's account, the meanings that give us our sense of reality are always acquired from outside. We learn to mean from other people, from a language that exists before we are born into it or, in Lacan's terms, from the irreducible Otherness of the symbolic order. As the subjects we become by means of our subjection to the symbolic order, we gain access to social reality, but we leave behind the real of the human organism in its continuity with its surroundings. From now on language will always come between us and direct contact with the real. But the loss **will** be made good in the end: we shall rejoin the real in death, which we **can** name, but not know. Death separates us decisively from subjectivity **and** its experience, including the experience of reality.

Because it cannot **normally be brought within the symbolic order** of language and culture, the **real is there, but precisely not there-for-a-subject**, not accessible to **human beings who are subject to the** intervention of language. Psychoanalysis, **however, can bring to light** the missed encounter with a **real** so **unbearable** that it **cannot** be named. Freud recounts the case of a **father who, in Lacan's** interpretation, woke up rather than continue to **dream the appeal** of his **dead** son, 'Father, can't you see **I'm burning?**' (Lacan 1979: 58-60). The dead child in this appalling ('atrocious') vision 'designates' a realm beyond reality, which is one of cruel loss (Lacan 1973a: 58). This loss is real, organic, but language **cannot do it justice**. Lacan comments that no one can say what it is to lose a **child, unless the father as father, in the bond with his child that he cannot name** as a conscious being in the symbolic order, in culture, in **the** reality we (think we) know. The dream comes close, **but even there the real** is evaded.

On the basis of this moment **and** others in Lacan's work, Slavoj Žižek constructs a philosophy of the real as absent, non-existent, seeing human beings as irreparably damaged by this absence. Žižek's traumatized people are at the mercy of a consequent social antagonism, which cannot be erased or wished away by dictators on the

one hand, or well-meaning social democrats on the other. Žižek's political philosophy is original and persuasive, but ultimately it is not as consistent with psychoanalysis as he claims. I shall have more to say about Žižek in due course, but what matters for the moment is that Lacan's real, though not there-for-a-subject, lost, in other words, to the organism-in-culture that speaking beings become, continues to exist and will, in the end, reclaim us.

FICTION v. THEORY

By distinguishing between reality and the real, the known and the unknowable, poststructuralism acknowledges the relativity of what we can be sure of, without resorting to the position of the culturalists, who make what exists depend, in effect, on our idea of what exists. Recent cinema, oddly enough, shows more affinity with poststructuralism here than with the simpler world of academic theory. Since *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, any number of films have put exploratory pressure, in different ways and to varying degrees, on the fine line between illusion and reality.³ Peter Greenaway's *The Baby of Minton* (1993) shows the action of the fictional play get out of hand, to the point where the actors in the play 'really' die. In *Pleasantville* (dir. Gary Ross, 1998) the crossover works the odder way: two people from our present move through the television screen into the black-and-white world of a 1950s sitcom. Maurizio Nichetti's *The Icicle Thief* (*Ladri di Saponetti*, 1989) has modern commercials invading a television showing of the director's nostalgic monochrome tragedy set in the 1940s. The consequent slippage between parallel worlds leads to a happy and colourful consumerist ending for the fictional characters in the neo-realist, black-and-white film-within-the-film, while the director is caught behind the television screen, unable to get out. *Swimming Pool* (dir. François Ozon, 2003) unexpectedly prisms apart fiction and the film's reality in the last reel. But when did the fiction begin, we are left to wonder, and how much of the action does it include?

The novel, too, has taken on some of these issues. Julian Barnes, for instance, plays confidently with the paradoxes of postmodernity. In *England, England* (1998) a tycoon buys the Isle of Wight off the

south coast of England, and turns it into a theme-park 'England' for tourists. Not only does England, England, as the island is known, gradually displace England itself; unnervingly, the actors hired to impersonate the legendary icons of English culture begin to inhabit their roles, disrupting the smooth running of the commercial project in the process. The 'smugglers' start smuggling, to the detriment of the island economy; Dr Johnson falls into deep depression and ceases to entertain the tourists; and Robin Hood and his Merry Band refuse to obey the rules and outlaw themselves from the whole venture.

But since the visual juxtaposition of the imagined with what the fiction presents as reality is inevitably more scandalous, because more immediate, cinema always seems to have the edge. In *Last Action Hero* (dir. John McTiernan, 1993) Arnold Schwarzenegger plays Arnold Schwarzenegger playing the fictional Hollywood hero, Jack Slater. Jack crosses the line into the world of his own audience, where the bad guys can win. Gradually, the entire cast of fictional characters turns up in an actual New York, including the villains. Here Jack is in 'real' danger for the first time, when the fictional villains realize that if they kill Arnie, they will necessarily destroy the character he plays. But the fictitious Jack rescues the 'real' Arnold Schwarzenegger from assassination at the premiere of *Jack Slater IV*, and saves himself, as fictional character, from extinction.

Oddly enough, it is Jack who seems sympathetic: Arnold Schwarzenegger 'himself' is presented ironically as smug and insensitive, preoccupied by publicity and self-promotion. In an unexplained and distinctly uncanny moment, Jack tells the actor that he never liked him anyway: 'You've brought me nothing but pain.' Moreover, Jack is the one who looks 'real': Arnie, dressed up for the occasion, appears fake in the way that offstage actors often do.

In other words, these movies, including *Last Action Hero*, do not ask us to make the easy constructivist assumption that there is no difference between illusion and reality. Instead, they problematize that difference, call it into question, sometimes wittily, sometimes to disturbing effect. What should we make of this? Should we see these films as cinema at play, a sophisticated form of self-referentiality, postmodern metafiction? Probably. But that does not eliminate the possibility that it is also a cultural symptom, indicating an increasing

uncertainty about the borderline between fiction and fact, between the lives we imagine and the simulacra we live, and a corresponding anxiety about the implications of that uncertainty.

THE 'UNCANNY'

Last Action Hero reaches a high point for me when Ian McKellen, as Death, comes out of the cinema where he has been appearing in Ingmar Bergman's film, *The Seventh Seal*, into the streets of New York City, but refuses to intervene on Jack's behalf and kill the villains, because he doesn't 'do ficshn'.⁴ Six years later, in David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999) the distinction between fact and fiction has become in a more threatening way a matter of life and death. *eXistenZ* shows a group of people introduced to a new computer game, which is plugged into the body to achieve the maximum effect of virtual reality. After a series of hair-raising virtual adventures, including the virtual death of one of them, the participants step out of their game characters and discuss how far they enjoyed their roles. Suddenly, the central figures produce guns and kill the author of the game. Is this 'real', or virtual, we wonder. As they turn their weapons on another player, he begs, 'Tell me the truth. Are we still in the game?' And with that the movie ends. There is no way of knowing whether 'we' are still in the game.

The last reel of *eXistenZ* displays, no doubt knowingly, all the characteristics of the fully Freudian uncanny. Uncanny effects are often produced, Freud says, 'when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality' (Freud 1985b: 367). The point about the uncanny in stories, where it occurs, Freud insists, much more commonly than in life, is that it depends on breaking the laws of genre. Supernatural events, he argues, are not in themselves uncanny: magic, apparitions, spectres and secret powers do not disturb us when they appear in fairy tales, where we expect them, or, for that matter, in Shakespeare. But their occurrence in what seems like realism, when the Gothic invades the mimetic, produces a degree of unease. The uncanny obscures the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world of the fiction is based

(374). At the beginning of *eXistenZ* those presuppositions seem clear enough; by the end we have no way of telling whether the guns are real or virtual, and whether the damage they can inflict is final or merely for the duration of the game. But within the fiction the question is, in the full sense of the term, vital.

ANXIETY

For Freud the uncanny marks the return of the repressed or the culturally unsurmounted. Hollywood has often made capital out of the uncertain line between fiction and reality. The self-referential jokes of the Marx Brothers, or of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby in a succession of *Road* movies, indicate the comic potential of an appeal to the audience's knowledge that what they are watching is fiction, not reality. But these allusions invite us to feel *more* knowing, not less. By contrast, the films I have identified as postmodern promote uncertainty, a frisson of unease, as they call into question the presuppositions they seem to inscribe. Is it possible that this uncanny quality marks an unresolved cultural anxiety about our identity as subjects of culture?

Culture is the element we inhabit as speaking beings; it is what makes us subjects. Culture consists of a society's entire range of signifying practices - rituals, stories, forms of entertainment, lifestyles, sports, norms, beliefs, prohibitions and values. In our own globalized society it includes art and opera, fashion, film, television, travel and computer games. Culture resides in the meanings of those practices, the meanings we learn. The subject is what speaks, or, more precisely, what signifies, and subjects learn in culture to reproduce or to challenge the meanings inscribed in the signifying practices of the society that shapes them. If subjectivity is an effect of culture, of the inscription of culture in signifying practice, there is no place for human beings outside culture.

Culture, therefore, is all we know. In that sense, we are always in culture - always in the game. And if so, there is nothing we can be sure of, even when it's vital. Culture is what we know - or think we do. In practice, we can never be certain of it, because it is known in language (or in its equally symbolic surrogates, logical notation

or mathematical equations). Knowledge exists at the level of the symbol, and there is no way of showing that any specific set of symbols maps the world accurately. Our mastery of the world depends on our ability to map it, to recognize the difference between fact and fiction, but we cannot do so with absolute confidence.

Is any anxiety we feel about the unknown real merely residual, a vestige of foundationalism in the postmodern condition, a longing to return to the tradition of Western thought since Plato, which insists on the distinction between appearance and reality? Are these metacine-matic movies registering a change in that world picture, but grudgingly, harking back to an epoch that believed we could know when we were not in the game? Culturalists would say so. The theoretical assault on foundationalism has been so successful that it has produced its binary opposite, a thoroughgoing constructivism that celebrates culture as all-embracing. From this perspective there is only culture, and unease about this is pointless, merely nostalgic, literally groundless.

This culturalist insouciance seems to me inviting, but ultimately reductionist. If my anxiety remains in place, it does so not, I hasten to stress, as the prelude to an assault on the postmodern, and on poststructuralism as its philosophy, in the mode of Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris. On the contrary, I don't want truth back. Whose truth was it, anyway? What I want to hold on to is my unease, on the grounds that the banishment of anxiety is not sanity, paradoxically, so much as psychosis. Genuine madness is being certain you're always in the game.

Conversely, if there is anything beyond the reach of our knowledge, not just for the moment, out of ignorance, but unknowable in principle, we can never be sure when we might reach the limits of the game, or when our cultural knowledges might fail us. If anything resists the sovereignty of the symbolic order, we always risk the uncanny possibility of an encounter that exceeds what culture permits us to define.

JUDITH BUTLER

In 1990 Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* electrified cultural critics all over the world. Butler's brilliant insight was that speech-act theory

could be harnessed for feminism and queer studies to demonstrate the performativity of sexual identity. She countered essentialism and identity politics with sexuality as theatre, a display of 'corporeal style' (1999: 177), in which parody and the masquerade demonstrated the constructed character of gender as impersonation. Sexual disposition was not an origin but an effect of repeated social performances, none more 'natural' than any other. And just as gender is constituted by repeated acts, the idea of 'an essential sex' is culturally produced to mask gender's contingent character (180).

The conventional feminist distinction between biological sex and cultural gender was regressive, Butler argued, leading to a naturalization of gender characteristics rooted in the body. For her, by *contrast*, sex and gender were one and the same (10-11); what passed for nature was in practice a product of culture; nature was incorporated into culture. Butler's anti-foundational feminism, and her opposition to heterosexual hegemony, which I wholeheartedly share, are secured by overriding the anxiety about the limits of culture that I have suggested is evident in culture itself.

Her denaturalization of sexual identity brought Butler close to Michel Foucault, whose broadly poststructuralist work had historicized and thus relativized not only homophobia, but also homosexuality itself. This invested her position with a kind of familiarity which lent it authority. And Foucault in turn brought her close to poststructuralism. But the French tradition inherited a more complex account of the relation between the human organism and the culture in which it becomes a signifying subject. Much of *Gender Trouble* is therefore devoted to a critique of French psychoanalysis and Foucault himself, in versions that it is sometimes hard to recognize. As Antony Easthope puts it, 'too often I feel that Butler's copy of Lacan is not the one I've been reading, but another by an author of the same name' (2002: 90). Oddly enough, however, in the Preface to the second edition of the book in 1999, Butler says that her theories were a 'cultural translation' of poststructuralism itself (1999: viii-ix). I can see no way of accounting for this claim.

Gender Trouble stressed the regulatory character of culture: heterosexuality was a discursive regime, and the possibilities for resistance were limited. But subversion could be read, in Butler's account, as

a matter of choice, as if, because it was purely cultural, sexual identity could be improvised from moment to moment, 'enacted' at will:

The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural' past, *nor* to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.

(Butler 1999:119)

At such moments **Gender Trouble** sounds remarkably close to the American dream. In practice, norms are not so easily subverted, however, and this reading had to be corrected, along with the impression that physiology was reducible to mere discourse. Three years later, in **Bodies that Matter**, Butler insists on performativity rather than performance; the emphasis on theatricality is much reduced in the analysis (though it returns in the style of the writing); and the politics is less Utopian, an issue of rearticulation and resignification.

Accordingly, in a rewriting of Foucault's "'reverse" discourse', where the identification of a group of people as 'deviant' paradoxically affords them a place to speak from (Foucault 1979: 101), she urges that words used as terms of abuse ('queer', for example) can be reappropriated with pride (Butler 1993: 223-42). Buder concedes a 'materiality' which accounts for the questions that properly concern the biological sciences, or for our ability to specify 'hormonal and chemical composition, illness, age; weight, metabolism, life and death' (66). Bodies are still 'produced' by culture, however, and sex is 'materialized' by regulatory norms, as the result of a process of 'forcible reiteration', the repetition of the cultural script (1-2). 'Sex' itself is to be construed 'no longer as a bodily given on which die construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies' (2-3).

I am not at all sure how we are to understand the materialization of sex or bodies, but it is clear that there is no space in Buder's account for die anxieties that recur in popular cinema or poststructuralist theory about die limits of the cultural game. On die contrary, in her version of die story it has no limits. The question for Buder is not what exists, but what we know. What lies beyond diis features in her dieory only as a requirement on knowledge, a demand to be

named, pressing to be dieorized or explained in language. Anydiing that is not diere-for-a-subject might as well not be diere at all.

To secure her conflation of sex and gender, Judidi Buder makes culture constitutive. Speech acts bring into being what diey name, and 'Performativity is die discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed' (1994: 33; cf. 1993: 11). Culture, the inscription of meanings, modifies die materiality diat motivates it. There is nodiing diat cannot be mapped in laguage, because for Buder language is ultimately referential. 'Materiality, in her intensely difficult prose, turns out to be the referent of language, and is approached dirough die signified, which it never fully escapes (1993: 68-9).

Seduced by die vocabulary of signifier and signified, we might easily miss die absence here «f Saussure's altogedier more modest account of signification. In Saussurean dieory language is differential, not referential; die world is outside die sign, which is no longer the sign of somediing; die signified (meaning) offers no approach to a referent. This is not to say, of course, diat meanings are not lived. But it does leave open die possibility of a domain of meaning-less alterity.

PSYCHOANALYSIS

According to Lacan's version of Freud, social.reality offers gratifications, including sexual gratifications. But because language is irreducibly Other than die organism that we also are, the satisfactions available to die speaking being never quite match die wants they are intended to meet. When the litde human animal becomes a symbolizing subject, somediing is left out of what language permits it to say. Its demands, in other words, belong to the alien language, not to die organism, and die gap between the two constitutes die location of unconscious desire. Desire, dien, subsists in ways that are not culturally scripted, not the result of habit or die repetition of speech acts. Desire, unfortunately for us, is never quite 'performed' in our speech acts, but continues to make its disruptive presence felt in diem for diat very reason.

Psychoanalysis sees human beings as driven by determinations diat bear a more complex relation to culture. The drives are psychic

representatives of instincts. They thus participate in both culture and the real. The 'person' in psychoanalysis does not consist of ideas that materialize a body, and still less a mind and a body. Instead, we are speaking beings, divided between a real organism that inhabits an organic world and a subject that makes demands in symbols so irreducibly Other that they leave in place a memory of loss, which *continues to insist* as unconscious desire.

From this perspective, the real, culture's *difference*, without which the term has no meaning, is that silent or silenced exteriority which is also inside us, and which we cannot symbolize, delimit, specify or know, even when we can name it 'the real'. That term invests it with a substantial but remarkably indeterminate character. We shall, however, revert to the real in the end, in death. Death doesn't do fiction, but eliminates the body and the speaking subject, with all it thinks it knows. Death puts an end to the cultural game for each of us.

The real is *not* nature, the terrain that Western science has set out since the seventeenth century to map and master, and which Terry Eagleton invokes to counter culturalism in his book, *The Idea of Culture* (2000). Nor is the real a fact - of the kind bluff common sense might invoke to crush speculation. Still less is it the truth, a foundation on which to base new laws or dogmas, or an alternative reality with which to contrast appearances. On the contrary, the real is a question, not an answer.

Though the gods also belong to the real, it has nothing whatever to do with the supernatural, a realm devised to comfort or scare us, and variously explained or mystified by theologians and visionaries. Obstinate, brutally there, the real is not a content, nevertheless. What we don't know, individually or culturally, might be anything, or not much. Though it exists as a difference, there is no meaning in the real. Indifferent to description, it exceeds representation and brings language to an impasse. If we experience it, we do so as a gap, or alternatively as a limit, the point at which culture fails us. The real is what our knowledge, individually or collectively, both must and cannot accommodate.

STANLEY FISH

In 1989, a year before *Gender Trouble* appeared, Stanley Fish published a new collection of essays, one of which featured a character called 'rhetorical man'. This figure, who recognizes that the world is pervaded by language, is an actor who uses words both to manipulate reality and to fabricate himself; his identity is essentially histrionic, performative (Fish 1989: 471-502, esp. 483-4). Fish shares Butler's attribution of primacy to language, but his much more accessible prose throws the issues into clearer relief*.

He explicitly rejects the Saussurean view that meaning resides in language, redefining this as the altogether improbable conviction that meaning is timeless, independent of context, and derived from mechanical features (4, 7). Fish's preferred alternative assigns meaning to ideas, in accordance with the tradition of Western idealism dating from the moment when Descartes identified being with thought in the 'I think' that proves 'I am'. Fish sees meaning as whatever the speaker has in mind. And since, as he acknowledges, we have no access to this, it follows that meaning must be purely contextual, a matter of what a member of a specific 'interpretive community' takes it to be in consequence of his or her conventionally induced beliefs. Truth and falsehood exist as relative terms, the effect of a specific point of view. Meanwhile, discursive change transforms the objects of knowledge, and the world of things comes into line with the world of ideas. An interpretive community represents a political grouping to the degree that it excludes dissent, since to disagree is to align oneself with another community. And so, in summary, 'all facts', as well as all values, 'are social and political constructs' (19-20, 26).

Since he avoids difficult questions about sex, Fish has no need to define a concept of 'materiality', and in consequence, he generally appears a more thoroughgoing cultural constructivist than Butler. On the other hand, since his theory is altogether less ambitious, he can occasionally allow for a distinction between what we know and what exists. Thus, in a discussion of the disputed historicity of a displaced African slave, Fish concedes, 'either Kunta Kinte was real or he was not'. But the point, from Fish's perspective, is not whether he existed

or not. It is that the procedures for establishing what is real are conventional, and whatever these procedures produce will have the status of a fact (55-6).

CULTURAL DETERMINISM

Both Fish and Butler make large claims for the sovereignty of human culture over the world of things. Reality is more or less what we make it; material objects are shaped by language; identity is cultural and performative. But cultural determinism cuts both ways. If what we are is culturally scripted, we cannot be the source of our own beliefs, actions, selves. On the contrary, we are the helpless products of determinations that exist in our communities. Fish affirms that we have no freedom of opinion, and that the only alternative views open to us are those of another interpretive community; Butler sees the sole way to influence change as repetition of the cultural script with a difference. Neither has grounds for confidence that things will change much, or that change will be for the better if they do.

Stanley Fish argues that if you want to resist, you have to move out and find another more sympathetic community. Judith Butler remains committed to resistance, but can see no adequate way of theorizing the possibility. The radical credentials of cultural constructivism do less than justice, it seems, to the distinctly liberal views of its main proponents.

THE REAL OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

In *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 1998) Truman himself is the only person who does not know that he is the star of a television serial. Born on the set, Truman supposes that Seahaven, domed, climate-controlled, safe, socially predictable, is all there is. This leaves him at the mercy of a world he does not even know is scripted. But driven by dissatisfaction and desire, in front of a worldwide TV audience represented in the movie by characters whose consecutive responses to the show the camera makes familiar to us, Truman tries to leave town and travel. His efforts to escape are repeatedly

frustrated, until he sails as far as the horizon and finds an exit button. The way out is a black rectangle against the plaster sky, the unknown, perhaps the void. *The Truman Show* juxtaposes the imaginary world of Seahaven with the reality of the audience watching the true man's struggles to escape the fiction he believes in, and with a third term, a black hole, the real.

The real provokes anxiety precisely to the degree that it is not ours to control. Fish brackets the real: it is not his concern. Butler denies its independence, but in doing so, in my view, she impoverishes the politics of gender. Sexual difference belongs to the real, to the extent that it generates anxiety as difference, while resisting symbolization. Sexual difference cannot be reduced to a distinction between this and that, or to decisive criteria for assigning bodies to one side or another of a single binary axis. Babies are not always born unequivocally male or female. Olympic athletes have to be classified before they can be entered for either men's or women's events, but no infallible test has yet been produced to settle the question in marginal cases. Sometimes the evidence of anatomy conflicts with that of hormones or chromosomes. No single indicator seems to be final.

Judith Butler's preferred term is 'sex', which points to an essence, and her case is designed to contest the appeal to the biological 'facts' of a single binary opposition as the ground of identity. But sexual difference is not an essence, and can hardly constitute a ground. Difference is a relationship, a space between things, not a thing in itself, not even a fact. And everything we know indicates that it is by no means binary.

Lived in history, of course, sexual difference remains a condition for cultural politics to reckon with, though not necessarily as a determining one, and certainly not as natural, where nature is viewed as either prescriptive or inert. What we make of sexual difference, whether as oppression or diversity, we make in culture. But it doesn't follow that we make it up, or that we can by means of performatives make away with it. The relation between the subject and the real organism that we also — and inextricably — are renders feminist and queer politics no less imperative: just more difficult, and therefore more demanding.

LYOTARD

In the text of a seminar first published in 1987, Jean-François Lyotard addresses the question, 'Can Thought Go On Without a Body?'. He concludes that it cannot, and not just because, if language constitutes the software of human thinking, the body provides the hardware without which diis software cannot operate. We should recognize in addition, he claims, something specific about human thought-processes, including creative processes, which distinguishes them from the logical, binary, data-sorting, problem-solving efforts of memory performed by computers. Lyotard sees human thinking, by contrast, as analogical, lateral, intuitive, inventive. And this is so because we are driven to an uncomfortable, difficult engagement with what has not been thought previously, impelled by a force beyond pleasure, by a sense of 'lack': 'we think in a world of inscriptions already there. Call this culture if you like. And if we think, diis is because there's still something missing in this plenitude' (Lyotard 1991: 20).

According to Lyotard, surely the most Lacanian of philosophers, culture itself is always lacking. And the paradigm instance of this insufficiency is sexual difference, die evidence that we are all empirically incomplete. Sexual difference entails something that each *of us* is not, does not know, cannot experience. Neither machines nor people can fully think this difference, let alone resolve it:

Not only calculation, but even analogy cannot do away with the remainder left by this difference. This difference makes thought go on endlessly and won't allow itself to be thought.

(Lyotard 1991: 23)

RESISTANCE

Sexual difference in Lyotard's argument is not die origin of dinking, but an instance of its condition, and to revert to Lacan's terms (as Lyotard himself is willing on odier occasions to do), diat condition is ultimately intelligible as culture's own unconscious awareness of the lost real. We might even want to say that die absence of die real

is the motive for culture - and for the resistance to culture's regulatory norms. This motive is recurrently figured in Western thought as the darkness of Plato's cave, St Augustine's restlessness, fear in Hobbes, Freud's civilized discontent or Lacan's unconscious desire, the causes of change.

In Judith Buder's case, what looked at first Like the dream of freedom turned out in practice to be a form of determinism. For Fish, culturalism presents a world mat looks all too Like Truman's Seahaven: safe, but repetitive. Cultural constructivism reckons without the real, however, and die something missing in culture itself which makes diought go on endlessly. The sense of an alterity beyond culture, pushing and pulling it out of shape, permits us to escape the cultural determinism and die cycle of repetition. Our relation to the world is capable of change: tilings can be other than they are. The gap between culture and the real is a cause of dissatisfaction which impels us to want more.

If so, current cultural theory confronts the question of the status and the limits of culture itself. On diat depends our conception of human beings and dieir relation not only to die sexual possibilities, but also to the political obligations, of the world we inhabit.